Contemporary Hollywood And The Attention Economy

Caitlin Falco
Bucknell University, cmf017@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses/135

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dadmin@bucknell.edu.
CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD AND THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

by

Caitlin M. Falco

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council
For University Honors in English Concentration in Film/Media Studies

March 31, 2013

Approved by:

________________________
Adviser: Eric Faden

________________________
Co-Adviser: David Kristjanson-Gural

________________________
Honor’s Council Member: John Westbrook
Acknowledgements

Sitting here at the end of this year-long process is somewhat bittersweet. Yes, it had blood (fifty pages practically guarantees a paper cut or two), sweat, and (I’m not ashamed to admit) tears. But, it was also the most personally challenging experience of my academic career pushing the very boundaries of my intelligence, my abilities, and (at times) my sanity. Firstly, I’d like to thank Professor Kristjanson-Gural for agreeing to be my second reader as well as for offering guidance in the early stages, when my thesis was still in its most abstract form. Secondly, I’d like to thank two of the most significant people in this process—the man who inspired me to take on this challenge and the man who helped me to complete it.

“Give it a try.” Those were the innocuous words that started it all. He raised me. So, he’s always known what I was capable of even when I didn’t know myself. I like to believe that, when he first said those words last spring, he knew that this experience would be as gratifying as it was. He’s always known that I like to challenge myself. I get bored easily. And, as much as I complain about the things that challenge me, it’s these same things that fuel my drive, feed my ambition, and underlie my achievements. He knows this, and he’s never let me settle out of laziness, out of apathy, or out of fear. This thesis was no exception. If my grandfather hadn’t inspired me to embrace this opportunity, this past year would have been a very different year.

While a subtle sense of risk and adventure permeates the beginning of this experience, the process itself was much less glamorous. Involving countless nights of typing frenzies, a shameful number of candy bars, and an excessive amount of caffeine,
these past two semesters were long, arduous, and intensive. With a process like this, moments of doubt, weakness, and uncertainty are unavoidable. You experience moments of true panic, and moments when you have no idea what you’ve done, where you are, or even where you’re going in terms of your thesis. Moments when it seems easier to throw in the towel, and call this whole thing a “mistake.”

I remember the day I sat in his office and informed him that I wanted to write an honors thesis. His response: “Are you sure you want to do this?” He knew. He knew about the blood, sweat, and tears that I so brashly and naively disregarded. He knew, and he warned. Yet, he agreed. He agreed to guide, to assist, to inspire, and to reassure. But, what I didn’t know was that he, too, would pour over countless revisions pointing out my tendency to excessively use one word in a single page or my habit of inserting preachy judgments about the use of CGI into a paragraph that never even broached that particular topic. He, too, would partake in early morning meetings sometimes with the sole purpose of easing my caffeine-fueled anxiety over deadlines and my looming defense. He, too, would laugh with me over this “mistake” and help me to turn it into an experience…an opportunity. So, Professor Eric Faden, too, deserves acknowledgement and my most sincere gratitude.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements iv
List of Figures vii
Abstract viii
Introduction 1
Classical Hollywood 6
Contemporary Hollywood 22
The Attention Economy 37
Conclusion 59
Works Cited 65
List of Figures

Figure 1: Symmetry in *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) 14

Figure 2: T-Zone of the frame 15

Figure 3: Frontality and A Medium Shot 15

Figure 4: Shot-reverse shot 17

Figure 5: Eyeline-match in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) 17

Figure 6: *Entertainment Weekly* 24

Figure 7: Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) 37

Figure 8: Split screen in *Timecode* (2000) 39

Figure 9: Locating numbers in the mise-en-scene of the film becomes a game for the viewer 40

Figure 10: Warhol’s *Campbell Soup Cans* (1962) 43

Figure 11: One of Warhol’s Marilyn Prints (1962) 44

Figure 12: Andy Serkis and his CGI counterpart, Gollum 51

Figure 13: Sony Ericsson product placement in *Casino Royale* (2006) 52

Figure 14: Sony Vaio product placement in *Casino Royale* (2006) 52
Abstract

This thesis had two goals: to explore the transformation of Hollywood from the 1930s to present, and to investigate how Contemporary Hollywood functions in a growing attention economy. Evident in the types of films that it produces as well as its evolving industrial structure, Contemporary Hollywood significantly differs from the Classical Hollywood of the 1930s. New digital technologies like surround sound and computer-generated imagery (CGI) have allowed studios to create a different type of film like the blockbuster and to have more extensive control over their films.

Additionally, growing exhibition and distribution platforms have also fundamentally altered the industrial landscape of Hollywood. In order to combat this more egalitarian distribution system, Contemporary Hollywood has turned to conglomeratization. But, what has caused such a radical shift in the form and function of Contemporary Hollywood and its films? This thesis argues that Hollywood is failing to thrive in this new media landscape—not because of changing technologies—but because of a changing consumer. Richard Lanham theorizes that we are living in a growing attention economy, where human attention is the most valuable commodity in such an information-saturated society. For the current consumer, there is near-constant media over-stimulation: he or she is exposed to any number of screens (mobile phones, laptops, tablets, televisions, etc.) at any given time. Because we can access anything from anywhere at anytime, we’ve become somewhat schizophrenic and impatient in terms of the media that we consume in our lives.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Hollywood. The term itself is somewhat glamorous, but its implications are historical, multifaceted, and still culturally relevant. Yet, the Hollywood that prevails today differs from the one that reigned seventy years ago. The 1940s and the 1950s, a Golden Age of cinema, brought tremendous growth and financial profit to young Hollywood. From there, it grew stronger and larger. By spreading its influence over American culture, engulfing new technologies into its controlled system of production, and digging its roots into America’s economic, cultural, and social fabric, Hollywood became an entity—an enigma. However, even the most powerful eventually fall. Multiplying digital technologies, growing media accessibility, and more democratic production, exhibition, and distribution practices have begun to crack the foundation that Hollywood has so effortlessly rested on for the past few decades. Hollywood’s reaction was swift and drastic but, perhaps, not entirely successful. This thesis will explore Hollywood’s transformation and ultimately attempt to explain why Hollywood is scrambling to adapt to a new digital landscape.

The next chapter examines Classical Hollywood from a filmmaking, an industrial, and an economic perspective. It begins by defining Classical Hollywood. Using the works of theorists like Thomas Schatz and David Bordwell, the thesis discusses the stylistic and industrial origins of the term “classical.” Next, the thesis delves into Hollywood’s classic film blueprint by describing the formulaic narrative as well as the role of space and time in film. From there, the thesis explores classical film’s style with
particular emphasize on framing and continuity editing—both tools meant to conceal the film-making process. All of these things combine to create a standard classical film.

After defining and describing the films of Classical Hollywood, the thesis discusses Classical Hollywood’s institutional history. Thomas Schatz’s work is particularly useful in my description of the “studio system,” and its impact on the types of films produced during this era. It’s here that we begin to understand that Hollywood films show very little concern for artistic innovation or filmic integrity. Rather, they are the products of a system—an industrial system with economic incentives and financial motives.

The chapter ends by addressing the end of Classical Hollywood’s reign of the entertainment landscape by discussing the factors that led to the downfall of Classical Hollywood. New technologies like the television, historical events like the Vietnam War, political moves like the Paramount Decree, and steadily declining audiences are all responsible for the fundamental shift in Hollywood’s focus and goals. Contemporary Hollywood is very different from Classical Hollywood, and it’s important to understand the reasons behind this shift.

Chapter 3 opens by distinguishing between “New Hollywood” and Contemporary Hollywood.” Although many theorists utilize the term “New Hollywood” to classify anything after the 1960s, this thesis argues that these terms mean two entirely different things. “New Hollywood” is from the 1960s to the 1990s and deals with obstacles like dwindling theater attendance, the youth culture of the 1970s, and the introduction of the VCR and cable. Most significantly, New Hollywood was a reaction to the Paramount
Decree—a political move that forced studios to sell their exhibition branches. The unforeseen financial profits that stemmed this Decree would inspire and fund many of Hollywood’s new film-making and promotional practices that would be developed during the period of Contemporary Hollywood. “Contemporary Hollywood,” on the other hand, is from the 1990s to present and deals with an even more intimidating and expansive digital landscape with the development of DVDs and the Internet. Another important component of Contemporary Hollywood is the conglomerization of the studios. No longer simply film studios, the major corporations are extending themselves into other media sectors like television stations and websites.

The next part of chapter deals with the Blockbuster, Hollywood’s tour de force. Stemming from the financial profits of the Paramount Decree, the blockbuster epitomizes Hollywood’s response to alterations in its industrial structure, growing digital technologies, and changing audiences. First, the thesis defines the blockbuster through theorists like Geoff King. Secondly, it explains how growing digital technologies in the production, exhibition, and distribution sectors have impacted the blockbuster and the film-making process as a whole. The thesis particularly emphasizes the changes in the distribution sector because these represent a greater shift in America’s cultural landscape. Using the example of the multiplying screens, the thesis looks into how the theatrical screen is exploding into multiple smaller screens—a metaphor for the constant and egalitarian accessibility of media content—as well as Hollywood’s response to this overwhelming and uncontrollable phenomenon. Finally, I examine the repercussions of these new technologies, the blockbuster, and the multiplying screens—most notably, a
shortening attention span. Fundamentally, instant gratification and media addiction are creating a schizophrenic, attention-deprived society.

The fourth chapter connects Hollywood to Richard Lanham’s theory of the attention economy—the idea that attention is the valuable commodity in such an information-heavy culture. Beginning with a brief description of Lanham and his work as well as a brief introduction of Hollywood’s experimentation with shortening attention spans through the manipulation of multiple screens, this thesis eventually describes Lanham’s attention economy in relation to a newly media-saturated world, where text is becoming obsolete. The thesis then transitions into a brief description of Lanham’s rules of the attention economy, inspired by the works of Andy Warhol.

However, most importantly, the thesis designated a significant amount of time explaining how these rules apply to Contemporary Hollywood—the crux of my argument. Essentially, Hollywood is the way it is because Lanham’s theory of the attention economy has become an actuality. Finally, the thesis ends with a discussion of future research. For example, more time could have spent using Barry Salt’s film analysis strategies to even more thoroughly emphasize the differences between Classical Hollywood films and Contemporary Hollywood films. Additionally, it would be interesting to explore the history and motivation behind the studio’s conglomeratization in more depth. Lastly, Lanham’s ideas of the attention economy revolve around text and its communicatory powers. It would be interesting to explore how his beliefs could extend to the screen, emblematic of the new type of communication possible in the digital age. Do style and rhetoric still function the same way? Does the screen—capable of
combining image, sound, and text—have an advantage over text in their information-saturated society? All of these suggestions could be explore in more depth and detail in future research.
Chapter 2: Classical Hollywood

Introduction

Hollywood films are meticulously micro-managed products of a highly political industry. Equal parts art, ideology, and commerciality, Hollywood films rely heavily on exhibition and distribution methods because it is through cinemas (and later VHS tapes, DVDs, and online streaming) that studios—the major players in this highly oligarchic industry—recover much of the financial losses they suffered during production. From the vertically integrated studios of the 1930s to the conglomerate empires of present time, the studios have refined the art of manufacturing movies, adapting their work processes, investments, and resources to match new technologies, historical events, and a growing culture. The development of sound, tumultuous periods of war, a changing youth culture, and expanding viewing technologies like VHS and the internet have changed Hollywood’s fundamental economic, political, and production structure. In its exploration of Contemporary Hollywood, this thesis will examine how the modern blockbuster reflects a growing attention economy.

But it’s important to remember that while Hollywood films are cultural mirrors reflecting these historical, social, and political points in America’s story, they are also active players in shaping this culture. Hollywood is a remarkably resilient entity that absorbs cultural events and new technologies into its fabric, using these forces to influence the greater viewing audience. VHS tapes and DVDs became instruments of financial gain that could be tapped decades after the initial release; the internet became
one of the most far-reaching and powerful promotional tools in existence. This thesis will examine just how new technologies, in both production and distribution, have given life to such a schizophrenic society.

Hollywood’s reign over the film industry spans decades and boasts an expansive film repertoire. So, while cinema was “born,” for all intensive purposes, in the 1890s with the development of technologies like the camera, this thesis will focus on Hollywood’s early life—the 1930s. Beginning in 1930, the arrival of sound catapulted Hollywood to “the peak of its narrative and commercial efficiency” attracting “eighty-three cents of every U.S. dollar spent on recreation” (Ray 25-26). With such massive potential for profit, it wasn’t long before several film studios rose above the rest: MGM, Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO.

Vertically integrated, these studios would come to control everything from the film’s script to the movie theaters that would exhibit the film, creating an oligarchic empire over film production, exhibition, and distribution. Because they had such intense and unchallenged control over the film industry, these major studios would help Hollywood weave itself into the cultural fabric of American life, creating an ideology that would not easily be overturned. Because of the extensive reach and influence of the studios, Hollywood would quickly evolve into a lucrative machine, becoming the most dominant media force in history. Robert Ray, an English professor at the University of Florida, who specializes in film studies, criticism, and history, argues that “movies have provided their audiences with some of the most compelling, most abiding representations of the mental and physical conditions of [their] lives;” its growing power has given
Hollywood a large degree of ideological sway over these representations no longer merely reflecting culture but, rather, impacting it as well (Ray 21).

David Bordwell, a leading film theorist and historian on Classical Hollywood, provides an extraordinarily comprehensive look at Classical Hollywood in his book, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. For Bordwell, Classical Hollywood represents traits such as the attention to the “formal harmony” evident in meticulously-staged shots; the pre-occupation with “self-effacing craftsmanship” which saturates the entire film-making process as the director decides everything from the position of a chair to the final cut of the film; and the “respect for tradition” illustrated in the faithful adherence to Hollywood’s stylistic guidelines as well as the focus on traditional activities and values of American society (3-4).

**What is “classical” Hollywood?**

The term *classical* embodies Hollywood’s historical function as the dominant film style, but it also conveys certain aesthetic qualities (Bordwell 4). Bordwell argues that films of this era are fundamentally formulaic in nature, adhering to a prescribed set of narrative and stylistic guidelines. He states it most simply when he says that “those norms constitute a determinate set of assumptions about how a movie should behave, about what stories it properly tells and how it should tell them, about the range and functions of film technique, and about the activities of the spectator” (xiv).

According to Ray, all of the major studios were controlled by either the Morgan or Rockefeller interests—one of the primary reasons behind the clearly homogenized
product of Classical Hollywood, where slight variations are made to a set of basic patterns (30). Not only did this allow Hollywood to streamline their production process, releasing approximately 500 films a year, but it also explains the ideological undertones of an American cinema meant to appeal to commercial American audiences (30).

Thomas Schatz’s definition of Classical Hollywood connects Bordwell’s and Ray’s points by contextualizing them within a social and cultural landscape claiming that it was “a period when various social, industrial, technological, economic, and aesthetic forces struck a delicate balance” resulting in “a consistent system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and…a body of work with a uniform style” (8-9). The studio system as a whole is responsible for creating and maintaining these forces in equilibrium making the “studio era” and “Classical Hollywood” practically synonymous terms (9).

However, internal factors like growing cinematic technologies, developing stylistic innovations, and changing production, distribution, and consumption conditions forced Hollywood to modify its basic film strategies (Ray 28). In fact, external forces like diversifying media technologies and the increasing popularity of other forms of entertainment would catalyze many components of the shift from Classical Hollywood to Contemporary Hollywood (Ray 28). Despite the effect of these influences, Classical Hollywood had consistently assimilated any new formal, technological, ideological devices—even those once considered radical departures—into this dominant film style (Ray 17). Through describing these norms, this thesis establishes the parameters of Classical Hollywood cinema, loosely defining the stylistic and narrative elements of these
films. To demonstrate the ubiquity of Hollywood’s code, each of the following three sections will include a brief scene analysis from three randomly chosen films from the 1930s and 1940s.

**Hollywood’s Narrative Formula**

In any Hollywood film, narrative—the “transmission of story information”—reigns supreme (Bordwell 24). Every single conscious cinematic choice remains subordinate to the narration in that lighting should be unobtrusive, the focus of the shot should be centered, and cuts should fall in the natural lapses between action and dialogue (Ray 32). The narrative is the motivation, the impetus, the “basic attribute of film form” (Bordwell 3). According to Bordwell, there is a notable formula to Hollywood films. It is highly self-conscious in that it chooses what and how information is presented to the spectator. Narration is knowledgeable—an omnipresent onlooker observing all and every character and subplot. How much the narration shares with the spectator depends on its willingness to communicate. The narrative “justifies its story material and the plot’s presentation of that story material” through the process of motivation, which will be examined more thoroughly in the following plot dissection (Bordwell 19).

Despite slight generic variations, every Classical Hollywood film employs a narrative structure—a literal plot formula. Any and every film begins with the protagonist, surrounded by second—more minor—characters. Defined by certain motifs or motivated by certain goals, these characters create psychological causality in the pursuits of their goals, and the continuous “characteristic progression” of classical film is set rolling.
absent of any “jars…waits…[or] delays” (Bordwell 16-18). Shortly into the film, the protagonist encounters a problem or, as Bordwell would say, unearths a desire, which produces a goal. It should be noted that the plot of any film is commonly interwoven with various smaller independent subplots, most characteristically a budding romance or a sympathetic villain; it is the combination of these intersecting narratives that allows the film to unify itself (Bordwell 19). Throughout the course of the film, this problem escalates until it comes to a dramatic climax. While these climaxes are the epitome of action and suspense in any film, they are fundamentally uninteresting in that the protagonist inevitably overcomes the problem or reaches his goal. After the climax, the film resolves itself—literally tying up loose ends into a neat, completely unambiguous, ending.

Looking at one of the quintessential films of Classical Hollywood, The Third Man (1949), will highlight the predictable nature of many of the films produced during this period. The film starts with the protagonist, Holly Martins, arriving in Vienna at the request of his friend, Harry Lime. Yet, he soon discovers that Lime was killed prior to his arrival; essentially, he has been presented with “the problem.” He spends the rest of the film interacting with various secondary characters trying to discover what really happened to his childhood friend; this element of mystery is common in the film noir genre. Additionally, he meets Anna Schmidt—Harry’s girlfriend; she and Martin precariously walk the line of love interests, but the film noir genre is notorious for containing femme fatales as opposed to the more traditional Hollywood damsel.
Nonetheless, the film ends with a shootout and a dead antagonist, demonstrating a clear victory for the protagonist and the most unambiguous end for a villain—death.

The persistence of this formula in Hollywood films is in its universality—“comprehensive and unambiguous…it possess a fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class nation” (Bordwell 3). Crucially, the film must end without even the slightest trace of ambiguity. The narration, whether through repetition of plot points or narrative-based music, provides and explains all the necessary information to the viewer, eliminating any potential alternative explanations. Ray argues that there is an implicit “contract” with the audience in that viewers can trust that they will always be shown the ideal and optimum vantage point to the narrative unfolding on the screen (33). Essentially, they will always be presented with the necessary information at the right time in the right sequence.

A film’s narrative is usually two things; most Hollywood films should and do fulfill the first requirement, but Hollywood films must adhere to the second rule, or else their very classification as a Hollywood film is called into question. Firstly, the narrative should be “‘realistic’ in [the]…Aristotelian sense,” and, secondly, the film must engage in “invisible storytelling” (Bordwell 3).

Bordwell’s first rule—that a film be “realistic”—hints at the paradoxical experience of the viewer. Any movie-going experience requires a “delicate balance of faith and disavowal;” viewers know that the on-screen events are not real, yet they become absorbed by them as if they were, in fact, completely genuine (Ray 36). Many would contemplate how such a demonstrable anomaly could exist. According to Ray,
“belief in an illusion rests on identification with some element of the illusion” (38). Viewer identification can occur on one level with the hero or heroine, but it can also occur, more powerfully, with “the film’s whole diegesis…that nonexistent, fictional space fabricated out of temporal and spatial fragments, which came to seem more rich, interesting, and fully constituted than the actual, material space of the audience’s own lives” (38). When the viewer invests so intimately in the on-screen action, the “verity” of the on-screen events becomes less significant. Classical Hollywood movies rarely interfered with this delicate illusion simply because disrupting the viewer experience in such a way often threatened the very success of the film. Secondly, according to Bordwell, a film must “strive to conceal its artifice through techniques of continuity and ‘invisible storytelling’” (3). Ray argues that the most important aspects of this type of storytelling are the mise en scene and editing (38). These subtle film techniques will be reviewed shortly.

Time also plays a role in a film’s unambiguous presentation of events. Hollywood films last approximately two hours give or take thirty minutes, highlighting only the most necessary events. Through cutting, classical film subtly and unobtrusively skips the unimportant intervals in-between plot points in the story. As the viewer attempts to integrate the film’s past, present, and future (made evident by the characters’ psychological causality), the film ultimately controls when the spectator is granted pieces of information, timing these revelations so precisely that the desired narration becomes indisputable.
The Rules of the Frame

Space in the classical film acts in a similar way—as a “vehicle for narrative” (Bordwell 50). Fundamentally, the film shows the spectator only what it wants the viewer to incorporate into his or her developing schema of the film; by highlighting the most important elements of scene in the shot layouts, the film can essentially direct the viewer’s attention and manipulate his or her perception of the narration. While a shot doesn’t strive for precise symmetry, it achieves overall balance, insistently focusing on the characters and actions of interest. Ray would say that this tendency for centering is a result of the film’s mise en scene, where all components of film production—lighting, character blocking, camera angle, and framing—all attempt to keep “the ongoing narrative…as the main object of interest in the foreground and center of the frame” (38). For example, a T-zone is where the “human body is made the center of the narrative and graphic interest” (Bordwell 51).

Reframing is when the camera tilts or pans in accordance to figure movement. Frame cuts from one location to another reinforce the importance of the center zone (Bordwell 51). Furthermore, specific lenses, like the telephoto lens, are used to keep central figures in focus, a mechanism that naturally draws the viewers’ eyes to the designated character or narrative point. Lighting illuminates the characters’ personalities.
Sound perspective emphasizes important dialogue and audio cues, ensuring that the spectator hears and sees all the pertinent information and action.

Painstakingly maintained through over-the-shoulder shot reverse shot, frontality—forward-facing bodies—is expected in classical film. Bordwell poignantly claims that “centering, balancing, frontality, and depth...encourage us to read the filmic space as story space...these strategies...personalize space...[and] dramatize individuality” (54). In the 1932 film *Trouble in Paradise*, the protagonist, Gaston Monescu, and one of his potential love interests, Lily, constantly occupy the center of the frame—the “T-zone”—for scenes depicting their initial meeting (i.e., when he takes her jacket, when Lily speaks on the phone, when they are at the dinner table, etc.).

Emphasizing frontality and centering, their bodies remain forward facing, angled toward the camera. With such meticulous framing, the audience’s attention should never waver, even for a second, from the on-screen narrative. The type of shot also caters to the human actors and narrative progression of the film. Close-ups provide a character portrait, often revealing the specific emotions crucial to spectator understanding. Medium shots,
the most common type of shots, preserve facial expression and body postures. Essentially, “the space of a film is meant to orient the viewer to fully understand it...placing...the spectator in an ideal position of intelligibility” (Bordwell 54).

**Hollywood’s Classic Style: Continuity Editing**

The editing of classical film also fortifies the power of film’s narrative with one basic premise: “the cut[s] are exclusively dramatic or psychological” (Bordwell 56). In short, continuity editing propels the story forward. Continuity editing constructs, reinforces, and maintains the story space throughout the film by maintaining the film’s temporal and spatial dimensions (Ray 38). This spatial and temporal unity can be achieved in two ways: matching shots by visual and auditory connections, continuing action, or even character glances or by adhering to the 180 degree system (Ray 38-39). While the scene itself presents itself “objectively,” changes in camera angles reinforce the film reality, emphasizing things that should be noted and remembered (Bordwell 56). Maintaining the 180-Degree or axis-of-action principle guarantees that the spectator is always on the same story of the story action. Not only does this principle allow the filmmaker to keep a constant screen direction, but it also allows him to break down the total film space of a scene into smaller units (Ray 39).

This axis can be maintained through several editing techniques including shot/reverse shot—a series of shots alternating a view of one endpoint with a view of the other—as well as directional continuity—the imaginary boundary becomes a vector of movement (maintaining the 180 degree principle across separate spaces). A scene from
the 1939 film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* demonstrates the principle of shot-reverse-shot. In this scene, newly appointed senator, Jefferson Smith (the protagonist), and Senator Joseph Harrison Paine discuss Smith’s father, while on the train to Washington D.C. The sequence begins with a shot looking over Paine’s shoulder facing Smith, the speaker. The next shot reverses the layout with an over-the-shoulder view of Paine from behind Smith, who is now speaking. Not only does the camera never cross the 180 Degree Axis line—always remaining on the same side of the action—but also by adhering to this technique of continuity editing, the film encourages the audience to view this conversation as one linear, continuous action.

Other types of editing are embedded into the very plot of the film: eyeline-match uses character glances to link shots and point-of-view cutting shows characters looking at something and then shows the spectator what the character is looking at. Both these editing
techniques demonstrate how powerfully the story controls multiple aspects of classical film and form the foundation of the “illusionist fantasy/identification situation” (Ray 39). Essentially, Ray claims that this ‘suturing’ procedure, where one shot completes the previous, ensures that the viewer does not become conscious of the multitude of biased choices made within the film (39). Additionally, it hides the tremendously labor-intensive process of film production as cinematographers, lighting designers, and post-production editors become unnoticeable in the film’s final product.

These paradigms of narration, space, and time have resulted in a “standardized” classical film, according to Bordwell; this classical film style “both sustained and was sustained by the development of a specific mode of film production” (6 & 84). Ray argues that “American Cinema was one of the most potent ideological tools ever constructed” because the viewers, unaware of the biased choices that went into films, had not choice but to acquiesce to the film’s mythological and ideological “truth” (55).

Classical Hollywood’s hovering presence extends beyond the films themselves into their exhibition and distribution methods. Inversely, these methods play a large role in determining what types of films are made. The 1930s saw the peak of Classical Hollywood and, correlatively, the maturity of the Hollywood studio system (Schatz 4). In his book, The Genius of the System, Thomas Schatz, a professor at the University of Texas who specializes in the history of the Hollywood “studio system,” emphasizes films made during this period were not simply artistic products of human expression, but rather “a melding of institutional forces” (6). A film’s style was intricately intertwined with “the
studio’s production operations and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy” (Schatz 6).

For Schatz, the five major studios were major players in the film industry, each developing “a distinctive production and market strategy relative to the number, size, and location of its theaters” (11). Fundamentally, Classical Hollywood films embodied a specific studio style and economic layout rather than any single person’s cinematic tendencies. Schatz describes how Universal was better known for horror movies that retold the tales of Dracula and Frankenstein, while Warner Bros. characteristic style involved Jimmy Cage and a heavy dose of the gangster genre (6-7). Essentially, each studio had “equally distinctive styles and signature movements, involving different stars and story types and a different ‘way of seeing’ in both a technical and an ideological sense” (Schatz 6).

The Fall of Classical Hollywood?

Do these deeply embedded norms of the Classical Hollywood period still exist in films produced in the here and now? Does Contemporary Hollywood honor the same narrative and stylistic codes so highly revered in the past? Or, is Contemporary Hollywood breaking out of this ideological shell? If so, is it by choice? Just as films have changed over the past several decades, so has the film’s industrial landscape. While sound technology refreshed Hollywood films by opening up expansive new possibilities like the musical genre, massive historical events like World War II and the Vietnam War depleted cinema audiences.
Even more significantly, the late 1940 saw the passing of the Paramount Decree. Essentially, this 1948 Supreme Court decision forced the five major studios to dismantle their exhibition sectors by selling their theaters. Although this took time to implement, the Paramount Decree was a startling blow to the major studios—already burdened by steadily declining audiences. By experimenting with the types of films that they made, the studios scrambled to recover profit lost due to the Paramount Decree. For example, they tried to emulate the avant-garde French New Wave to please the growing youth culture; and, it was during this experimental period that directors like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas got their starts.

Eventually, Hollywood would stumble upon a type of film so massive and spectacular that it would hold universal appeal—the blockbuster. And it is at this point that the Paramount Decree turned out to be a blessing in disguise. No longer having to sustain the overhead costs of theaters, Hollywood was able to finance bigger and more spectacular films, like the blockbuster. Hollywood believed that these spectacles would reignite theatrical attendance and that they were the most potent response to new technologies like cable and the VCR in the late 70s, which moved the cultural act of watching movies into the domestic sphere. Yet, it wouldn’t be long before the studios absorbed these technologies into their distribution centers (through rentals and VHS tapes), utilizing the convenience and popularity of these devices to make additional revenues from their films.

The 1990s, on the other hand, presented a unique challenge to the studios in the form of the internet. Studios could no longer control where and how viewers watched
their films due to accessibility, ease, and convenience of this new technology. It was
during these next two decades that Hollywood would perfect the blockbuster—the only
way to counter such democratic exhibition methods. And this sets the stage for
Hollywood’s Goliath—the blockbuster—born to challenge the ubiquitous and
deceivingly unimposing presence of these new technologies.
Chapter 3: Contemporary Hollywood

Contemporary or “New” Hollywood?

This thesis argues that “New Hollywood” and “Contemporary Hollywood” are two slightly different entities. “New Hollywood” dealt with the dwindling theater attendance and the rebellious youth culture of the 1970s as well as the invention of the VCR and cable of the 1980s. Theorists like Geoff King, a professor of Film and TV Studies at Brunel University London, argues that we are in the time of “New Hollywood”—a period of time that encompasses films made from the 1970s to present time, which demonstrates a shift in the stylistic and narrative elements of these films. However, much of his research focuses on the relationship between industrial and cultural dimensions of Contemporary Hollywood as well as the interaction of spectacle and narrative in the Hollywood blockbuster. “Contemporary Hollywood,” the 1990s to present, sees Hollywood’s successful integration into the home through DVD rentals, cable, videos-on-demand, and the internet. It also sees the pinnacle of the blockbuster—arguably, the most recognized (albeit resource-draining) type of movie produced by the studios today.

This section will examine some of the ways that Classical Hollywood has transformed into the beast of Contemporary Hollywood. Most notably, it will discuss two primary characteristics of Contemporary Hollywood: the Blockbuster and new digital technologies. In response, “New Hollywood” entered the territory of the blockbuster. But, it’s important to remember that Hollywood was experimenting with this type of movie—
a movie that discarded the once-esteemed sacredness of narrative. It was a period of learning and industrial uncertainty as Hollywood frantically tried to draw people back into theaters or, at least, tried to establish a presence in the home.

In the films of Contemporary Hollywood, spectacle and style have undermined narrative; technology has overtaken substance. But, even more significantly than the stylistic evolution of film is the dramatic shift in the industrial context of “Contemporary Hollywood.” Major studios have grown into conglomerate giants, exercising both vertical and horizontal control over the greater media landscapes. For instance, Comcast originally started as an internet service and cable provider. However, in 2011, it eventually bought Universal Studios. While their purchase seems innocuous enough, Comcast’s extensive list of property holdings becomes overtly contrived when one realizes that Comcast doesn’t just produce content. It also has control over the exhibition of this content through its properties like NBC television channels and Hulu, a video-on-demand site. As a result, Comcast Corporation can control what, when, how, and where its copyrighted material is shown, manipulating releases, air time, and streaming accessibility to generate the most lucrative profits.

Such wide-ranging influence and control becomes significant when films need to be publicized, reviewed, and distributed; through these other venues of viewership, a studio can continue to make profit from films long after they transition out of movie theaters. An example of this kind of perpetual profitability is evident in Time Warner’s *Lord of the Ring* trilogy. Not only did these film enjoy an initial theatrical success, but Time Warner has made considerable profits from these films simply by re-releasing them
on extended DVD formats and special edition Blu-rays. Furthermore, these films are repeatedly shown on television networks like HBO and TNT—both holdings of Time Warner. Additionally, another Time Warner holding—the magazine, *Entertainment Weekly*—faithfully promotes each of *The Lord of the Rings* films on its cover, consistent with each film’s release date. Like other successful franchises, this set of films came from already-existing material that already had a consumer fan-base and it spawned multiple merchandising additions like video games. *Lord of the Rings* demonstrates that studios can benefit from a continual revenue stream even after their films exit theaters.

A brief survey of the tumultuous history of film ended the last section, discussing historical interludes like the wars that impacted film; internal technological interventions like sound that revolutionized the process of filmmaking; and outside inventions like the VCR that altered the very industrial foundation of Hollywood. This section starts with the claim that Hollywood succeeded in incorporating, rather than combatting, these forces into its own growing internal structure. But, technology is a constantly evolving entity itself. The Contemporary Hollywood of the 1990s still struggles with things like DVDs and the internet. Yet, rather than drown under the sheer oceanic might of these powers, Hollywood adapted its filmmaking practice and rearranged its industrial structure to survive in this new context.
“New” Hollywood’s Changing Industrial Landscape

King stressed that the early 1970s—the years leading up to New Hollywood—saw the most severe drop-off in theatrical attendance since the birth of cinema with a mere 17 million attending weekly showings. Such a dramatic decline especially from the 1940s when 90 million people were going to the theaters weekly was due to things like the television and a changing social and cultural landscape. The postwar years saw a tremendous boom in prosperity as increasingly prosperous Americans began partaking in other, more refined and upscale, recreational activities (24). Along with this social promotion came a population shift into the suburbs around the 1950s—away from the large urban theaters, which had drawn in a great deal of income in the earlier decades (24). Lastly, the “baby-boom” created a generation of young parents, less likely and less able to carry on weekly cinema attendance (25). While Hollywood embodies American ideology and its films act as cultural and social mirrors, it’s important to note that these social and cultural forces also play a significant and active role in shaping this industry, precisely because these entities are so intimately intertwined.

Industrially, New Hollywood’s vertically integrated structure became fragmented as major studios lost control of the exhibition branch of their films. Theaters became privately owned and new technologies like the television and VCR threatened the once-unique experienced offered by movie theaters. King states that weekly cinema attendance dropped from 90 million in 1946 to a mere 27 million by the year 2000 (24). However, despite radical changes to the industrial landscape of Hollywood, the major studios have
flourished in the past few decades for several reasons. The major studios were forced to expel their exhibition wings, but they retained full control over their distribution sectors.

No longer burdened by the overhead costs of cinemas, the major studios made profitable gains, especially with the introduction of overseas markets—a lucrative and successful audience for American films (King 60). Enjoying considerable (and, more importantly, stable) financial gain from their distribution branches, the major studios are able to act as bankers of the film world (King 62). Shielded from some of the unpredictable financial fluctuations of the film industry—especially with the hit-or-miss nature of many blockbusters, studio control over distribution grants the major players the creative and financial freedom to take these risks and develop these large spectacles (King 62). Equivalently, they are even able to dabble in independent film-making, gathering the favor of more niche audiences and enjoying the occasional success of an indie film.

The History of the Blockbuster

According to Stephen Neale—an English professor at the University of Exeter who has written several books on genre and Contemporary Hollywood—there are several factors that have brought the blockbuster into existence. First, the Supreme Court ordered that the major studios divest their exhibition branches. No longer able to block-book their films—to force theaters to show less appealing films by collectively selling them—in selected theaters and locations, studios couldn’t rely on the profits gained from the exhibition of all of their films and would, therefore, be unable to sustain high production
costs. Consequentially, they would be forced to funnel their energy and financial resources into fewer more spectacular films—like the blockbuster—rather than a greater number of smaller films (Neale as cited in Stringer 49). Secondly, as emphasized above, the studios had to find ways to draw audiences back into theaters despite shifts into the suburbs and the growing popularity of the television (Neale as cited in Stringer 49-50). These factors constitute the immediate catalysts that ignited the blockbuster mode of production.

Initially overwhelmed by these new developments, the Hollywood blockbuster epitomizes Hollywood’s response to these changes in industry, technology, and audience. The blockbuster has always existed in Hollywood Cinema even since the days of Casablanca and Gone with the Wind. However, the studios didn’t realize how enormously profitable blockbusters could be until the 1975 release of Jaws. Jaws was significant for two reasons. It was the first movie that spawned merchandise and it was the first movie to undergo a wide-release, to be released into nationwide theaters simultaneously. Essentially, instead of prioritizing a certain theater chain or urban locations, wide-release means that a film is released into every theater nationwide. This type of release is advantageous because studios could benefit from a large, initial nationwide profit while avoiding negative reviews and the unpredictability of word-of-mouth publicity. Furthermore, Jaws demonstrated that consumers could and would invest in clothing, toys, games, posters, music, collectibles, and other memorabilia even without actually seeing the film.
Although Hollywood realized blockbuster potential with *Jaws*, it’s important to understand that Hollywood had not perfected the formula for producing such a successful moneymaker. For example, 20th Century Fox reluctantly placed George Lucas’s film, *Star Wars* (1977) into theaters, truly believing it to be a movie flop. Not realizing the massive potential of franchises quite yet, they were startled by the huge fan-base that sprung from this movie. The studios were, quite simply, unversed in predicting the success of these new things called blockbusters. For many years, Contemporary Hollywood would experiment with varying levels of narrative and spectacles, expanding types of merchandise, and alternative marketing tactics before they would find a surefire, albeit predictable, blockbuster formula.

By the 2000s, however, Hollywood had perfected the blockbuster formula. Individual blockbusters from the 1970s-1990s like *Blow Out, The Sting*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* of the 70s had transitioned into trilogy blockbusters like *Transformers, Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Harry Potter*. The next few sections will discuss the blockbuster formula in more detail as well as explore the economic implications of Hollywood franchises.

**What Exactly Is A Blockbuster?**

In describing the blockbuster film, King states that they expend massive amounts of money; they become canvases for the newest special effects technologies; they are politically and ideologically conservative; and, they are heavily advertised, often long before they are released in theaters (50). Blockbusters are unique in that most of their
publicity is generated before they are ever released into theaters. The very function of studio conglomeration is to provide studios with access to a wide range and diverse arsenal of marketing resources so that they can build a presence for their upcoming blockbusters. Moving far beyond simple trailers, a blockbuster builds a presence that can be seen everywhere from giant posters of the film on billboards to small miniature figures of the characters sold at fast food restaurants. In fact, very little marketing occurs after theatrical release; often, by then, the movie’s hype simply can travel through gossip and by word-of-mouth.

As a result of the postwar drop in theatrical attendance, Hollywood designed blockbusters to be universally appealing, attracting large, global audiences from diverse demographics (51). Naturally, blockbusters—due to sheer size and scale—require more of the studio’s resources, a possible explanation for the stark decrease in the number of films produced. For instance, the 1940s-1950s saw approximately 350-400 released each year; today, up to 200 films are produced each year by the major studios (King 51). Clearly, the Hollywood’s industrial success relies heavily on a few finely executed blockbusters, “event” movies, as King would call them (52).

Blockbusters are “event” movies—like *The Avengers* or *Avatar*—that embody spectacle and grandeur, with lives that extend far beyond their theatrical release. A great deal of money, time, and energy goes into the advertising of these movies. The blockbuster draws its life force from already-existing books, television shows, or previous movies. Wyatt describes a certain marketable trait called “sequelization,” which not only considers legitimate movie sequels (e.g., *Jaws* and *Jaws 2*), but also spin-offs
like *The Mummy* and *The Mummy 2*—adapted from Spielberg’s Indiana Jones series, emphasizing an extremely tight hold over media consolidation (Wyatt 66).

**The Dawn of Digital Technologies**

Besides conglomeration, another weapon in Hollywood’s arsenal of media control was the growing use of digital technologies in the production, exhibition, and distribution of films. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the introduction of new production technologies like the digital camera and 5.1 surround sound capabilities, another attempt at drawing consumers away from their home televisions and back into cinemas. New sound devices revolutionized how viewers consume films in that they added new sonic and tactile information to a previously vision-reliant medium. Through the five-speaker system and the low-frequency vibrations of the subwoofer (the “.1” in the 5.1 system), consumers became more immersed than ever in a film’s world.

This time also saw the birth of computer-generated imagery (CGI), which was meant to reinforce the spectacular—the incredulous and unbelievable—in a film. Guy Debord, a French Marxist theorist who believed that the spectacle of images was a veneer meant to cover the grotesque decay of human life due to capitalism, succinctly summarizes that “the spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations [because] it can no longer be grasped directly” (18). In the age of Contemporary Hollywood, computer-generated imagery is expected and commonplace; nearly every film has some form of CGI whether it be something as extensive as the use digital characters or something as “simple” as changing the time of
day in a shot. With such widespread incorporation of CGI technologies, it’s increasingly important for studios to develop more realistic and more groundbreaking uses for these technologies in order for their films to stay relevant.

Besides new production technologies, the last two decades of the twentieth century initiated changes in post-production. Non-linear programs, like Final Cut Pro and Avid, digitized the editing process. Moving far beyond the original cut-and-paste method—where editors literally cut the filmstrip at designated narrative breaks and pasted the two ends together to create a cut. What was once a job for dozens of people could now be performed—much faster and more efficiently—by a single person with a computer.

However, the studios’ production branches weren’t the only sectors to be revamped with the dawn of these new technologies; exhibition also became cheaper and much more streamlined than it had been in previous decades with the widespread adoption of digital projection. Rather than expending cost and labor to transport large and heavy 35mm film containers to every theater in the country, studios could simply send theaters a hard drive with a digital key that virtually unlocked the film on a specific date at a specific time.

Not only did these new technologies allow for significantly cheaper and less labor-intensive processes, but they also gave studios exponentially more finite control over their products. Production technologies like CGI allow a studio to make it rain, change mid-day to a sunset, and transform a couple of bean bags into a fully animated tiger, controlling the very essence and integrity of the image. Post-production editing
technologies allow for even more finite control over editing conveying a very specific point-of-view through editing techniques and cutting.

The digital keys of exhibition demonstrate the studios’ almost helicopter paranoia over the exhibition of their films; allowing exhibitioners to project the film only at a certain time on a certain day, these keys represent the ultimate kind of obsessive control. These tools reinforce the oligarchy created during the Classical Hollywood period. However, there is one branch of the studio system that is problematic—like an uncontrollable, unpredictable toddler on the new playground set.

Digital innovation, like the Internet (spanning Netflix to Youtube to piracy) have actually created chaos in the distribution sector of Contemporary Hollywood in that the well-preserved control of the studios is quickly and mercilessly disintegrating as a result of the constant accessibility of studio content and the growing number of exhibition platforms. Studios can no longer control viewer variables like who watches their films, when their films are watched, or even where or how their films are watched. Similarly, shrinking screens and growing platforms are making generic film formatting increasingly more difficult, unrealistic, and unprofitable in this growing digital landscape.

**Distribution: The Origin of the Multiplying Screens**

So, how exactly did the single cinematic screen explode into a multitude of smaller screens? It began with the introduction of the television in the 1950s. While television seems like a logical detriment to the major studios offering consumers the film experience with the expense of the theater, it actually created unforeseen opportunities
for major studios to infiltrate the home. In fact, several major studios had experimented with the implications of television in the 1930s and the 1940s, especially Paramount (King 226). Paramount actually started to acquire and operate their television stations as well as to create movies made for television (King 226). These made-for-TV movies would eventually become so successful that their stable income would provide the revenue needed to make the occasional, more expensive blockbuster (King 227).

Additionally, according to King, major studios used the boom of television to tap into the financial potential of their back catalogues for both broadcast and home video purposes, creating a foundation for future profit. One example of the exploitation of such back catalogues is demonstrated in Disney’s infamous Disney Vault. Essentially, classic animated films undergo the same theatrical and home video release; nothing unusual happens until Disney starts to advertise the disappearance of their films encouraging consumers to buy the home videos or the DVDs before they are “locked away” in the Disney Vault, creating a sense of artificial scarcity. Feigning a permanent disappearance, Disney retains these films for a span of 5-10 years before re-releasing the film on the newest media format in a new edition (Gold, Diamond, etc.) featuring all-new special features. Through this marketing tactic, Disney ensures financial profit from their back-catalogue nearly every decade. Although initially rejected by the major studios, smaller screens presently generate a significant portion of revenue for the major studios.

According to King, home video—particularly sales and rentals—account for nearly half of the total global profit (224-225). Contrarily, cinematic screenings account for only 26% of the major studios’ total profits (225). Drastically different from the Classical
Hollywood era, the small screens have become a vital, albeit unexpected, organ of the film industry. However, small screens is not the issue for this thesis; rather, it is the excessive, unstoppable, overwhelming multiplication of screens that is forging this new economy of attention, which threatens the very foundations of the film industry.

But, in terms of this thesis, it is no longer simply about television screen; the laptop, the iPad, the smartphone, the tablet, the MP3 player, the eReader have infiltrated, dominated, and forged the new media landscape. Always present and constantly relevant, these technologies have become essential parts of the consumer’s daily life. There is not a single moment in our lives when one (or several) of these screens is not present, powered on, and in use. In the past, Hollywood enjoyed the somewhat staggered release of these new viewing technologies and was given relatively ample time to battle, to accept, and eventually to incorporate the new screen into its arsenal. Frighteningly, however, current screens are multiplying so quickly and evolving into so many different formats that Hollywood simply can’t address and integrate all of them. Setting internet piracy—the major and most publicized threat to Hollywood’s dominance—aside, major studios must deal with online viewing sites like Netflix and Hulu as well as significantly shrinking screen sizes.

However, there have been some exceptions to this rule that have tried to work with the shrinking screen size and the growing screen number. A current example is Rian Johnson’s theatrical director’s commentary. Because he wanted viewers’ to have the option of hearing his commentary for his film, *Looper* (2012), he made it a free downloadable file that could be saved to an mp3 device and played in theaters. *Looper*
demonstrates that it is possible for Hollywood to use the new mobility and convenience of shrinking screens to promote, exhibit, and market its films. As discussed earlier, Comcast owns Hulu and uses the site to publicize its other holdings, particularly the films of Universal studios and the television shows of NBC. Yet, the screen’s rapid and diverse expansion, arguably, might be too unpredictable and uncontrollable for Hollywood to ever completely master.

Hollywood itself is becoming increasingly panicked and desperate to stifle these foreign entities making it less and less likely that Hollywood will ever recognize and utilize the potential of these new technologies. Internet piracy remains an obvious example of the elusive and slippery nature of the multiplying screens. Despite the studios’ strong-willed attempts to gain control over this force, they cannot gain even a grasp on the increased spread and accessibility of pirated films. Perhaps, Hollywood’s failure to contain this pocket of the internet is a foreboding sign of things to come. Is internet piracy the first crack in the marble columns of Hollywood’s fortress? Is it the slow beginning of a swift end for Hollywood’s corporate empire? Or, it is merely an unruly child that will be absorbed like the television, the VCR, and cable?

Despite the convenience and accessibility of this media-heavy culture, is there a dark side to such an overstimulated society? With so many media venues assaulting us from all direction, how can we possibly attend to all of them? The final section of this thesis will discuss how our contemporary media culture is slicing are already overtaxed attention span into pieces. Instant gratification, perpetual connectedness, and endless accessibility have significantly shortened our attention spans to the point where we can
barely watch a three minute YouTube video without skipping through it for fast-forwarding. Focus and prolonged attention become rarer with every new media-filled day; and, consequentially, these things are becoming economically valuable. Finally, this thesis will discuss Richard Lanham’s theory that attention is the commodity of the twenty-first century. Hollywood—always adapting—understands this manufacturing blockbusters with shorter shot lengths, less intellectual investment, and a constantly evolving CGI veneer. Industrially, Hollywood is learning to utilize the capacity and accessibility of new technologies like the internet and video-on-demand to its advantage, feeding our culture’s need for instant gratification and ubiquitous accessibility. And, most importantly, as a society, where do we go from here? How severe is our addiction to media? How much longer can any attention span survive? In such a schizophrenic society, can we, as individuals, truly focus on anything anymore?
Chapter 4: The Attention Economy

“So, we live in an ‘information economy.’ But information is not in short supply in the new information economy. We’re drowning in it. What we lack is the human attention needed to make sense of it all. [...] Attention is the commodity in short supply” (Lanham xi).

A professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Richard Lanham is the author of numerous books that focus on the art of rhetoric—“the body of doctrine that teaches people how to speak and write and, thus, act effectively in public life” (xii). For Lanham, rhetoric is the focal point of “the economics of attention” in that “it tells us how to allocate our central scarce resources, to invite people to attend to what we would like them to attend to” (xii-xiii). And, who are the economists in this new type of culture?

For Lanham, it’s visual artists, who have figured out the delicate oscillation between the object of art and the response itself; essentially, they understand that it is no longer about the stuff (the art) but rather about the attention attributed to the stuff (the response to this art) (Lanham 15). Marcel Duchamp’s art—let’s just say his piece, *Fountain*—embodies this idea that an object is inherently just an object; however, call attention to this object as an object, and it becomes art. Taking something commonplace, like a urinal, out of its context forces the audience to recognize the shift in context, the unusualness of the object in its new context. Consequentially, the audience
perceives and conceptualizes the object differently. It becomes art; and, this transformation is founded on new information about that object. Essentially, innovation—changing the context of the object—has brought value to something once considered valueless. Furthermore, with so much information, how do we decide what to attend to? Well, in the age of text, rhetoric—the way a person writes, his or her style—would determine what we pay attention to and what we ignore. In the media age of information, style is synonymous with design; Lanham argues that “the design of a product invites us to attend to it in a particular way, to pay a certain type of attention to it” (18). Design transforms the “stuff” into something relatable, something full of human “feelings, attitudes, and ambitions” (18).

Although his expertise doesn’t lie in either film or economics, Lanham’s theories concerning the contemporary information age and the power of style as the only reliable attention-grabber are applicable to this thesis if we think of films as a unique kind of rhetoric. Combining moving image and sound into a stylistic composition, films struggle to get and maintain the attention of the consumer—a fairly difficult task when the modern consumer is drowning in media. Many of the motivations behind Contemporary Hollywood’s films and mechanisms underlying its industrial structure exemplify Lanham’s concepts of the attention economy. Without a doubt, the increasing number of screens in the current media landscape has contributed to this stark attentional deficit in society. Constantly connected through mobile phones, laptops, tablets, televisions, etc., the consumer has access to an expansive and virtually limitless amount of content—amount of stimulation. With so many choices, the consumer is choosing to attend less and
less to traditional films in the traditional setting of the theater. Consequentially, Contemporary Hollywood has adapted the types of films it makes in order to appease the growing fickleness and spastic quality of the human attention span, as demonstrated through the blockbuster. Embodying the newest technological innovations, blockbusters emphasize spectacle; their design (Lanham’s rhetoric of the new media age) strives to capture and maintain audience interest. Often these spectacularly designed blockbusters prove to be relatively successful in contemporary Hollywood; however, there are instances when the smaller screen’s ubiquitous appeal overpowers the stagnant presence of the theatrical screen. And the smaller screen’s growing prevalence ultimately explains Contemporary Hollywood’s transforming economical status from studios into media conglomerates. Essentially, since studios can’t regain the large theatrical audiences of the 1940s, they have begun to infiltrate these other media outlets by becoming media conglomerates. By controlling more and more of these smaller screens, Contemporary Hollywood can enjoy the same lucrative economic success of the 1940s despite dropping theatrical audiences. Furthermore, these new types of screens allow them to display digital technologies in unique, merchandise their products through new venues, and appeal to a wider audience than ever before.

According to Lanham, the current cultural landscape signifies a dramatic transformation from the economic backdrop of previous decades. Multiplying screens and ubiquitous all-consuming media accessibility in this new digital age have created an information overload. Not only has this “information… annihilated distance,” but it’s also “a public good that is effortlessly duplicated and distributed” (Lanham 2 & 12). With
such an excess of information—no longer just text, but also moving images and sound, society has become schizophrenic. A single screen will no longer suffice; rather, we must be immersed in media of all types (filmic, social, print, etc.). However, immersion has turned into suffocation. So many media avenues threaten to overwhelm us that we have become desensitized to the stimulation and arousal that a film, a video game, a website once offered. A consequence of this desensitization is a remarkably short, incredibly selective, attention span.

Since 2000, Hollywood has been subconsciously preparing itself and audiences for the inevitable multiplication of screens. Many films produced during this decade started experimenting with dividing the screen and creating several smaller screens. For example, *Timecode* (2000) splits the screen into four separate boxes, each following its own character and storyline. While these separate narratives occasionally overlap, the viewer can choose to attend to one, either, or all of screens at any single point in the film. Getting tired of one narrative simply means averting your gaze, and your interest, to another. Another example is Ang Lee’s *Hulk* (2003) which treats certain scenes as if they are a frame of a comic book, contextually surrounded by related scenes and narrative moments. Fascinatingly, this
movie is a poignant example of Hollywood’s experimentation with a growing number of screens and, perhaps, it’s also Hollywood’s acknowledgement of the increasingly fragile nature of the consumer attention span.

Peter Greenaway’s work is another interesting attempt at utilizing the screen as mechanism for keeping audience attention. In a way, Greenaway’s film, *The Pillow Book* (1996), embodies the new rhetoric of contemporary culture in that it uses multiple types of media—moving image, still image, sound, text—simultaneously to tell its story. Additionally, his film, *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) plays games with the audience in that he has hidden the numbers 1-100 in his film. Perhaps, camouflaged in the mise-en-scene or quickly mentioned in the dialogue, the viewer can choose (or not) to try and find all of the numbers. A blatant understanding of the consumers’ shortening attention span, Greenaway gives viewers alternative ways to keep themselves entertained during the film if they find the narrative too bleak or the characters too uninteresting.

**How Does the Attention Economy Operate?**

Lanham argues that the egalitarian nature of the current economic landscape, where everyone (regardless of individual variables) can tap into the new “natural”
resources of information, has created a scarcity in attention, which has become the commodity. For him, “the kitchen that cooks the raw data into useful ‘information’ is human attention” (7). Essentially, information can lay stale and stagnant in the dusty corner of someone’s personal blog or in the fine print of a television ad. It is only through human attention that these things become applicable and relevant. For Lanham, it is human nature that represents “the attention capital of humankind…the stored-up impulse to pay attention to certain kinds of things in certain kinds of ways” (9). In such an information-saturated world, how does one stream of information distinguish itself from the rest? How does something draw attention to itself? Lanham would argue that it is “the design of a product [that] invites us to attend to it in a particular way, to pay a certain type of attention to it” (18). It is through a product’s design that we become aware, become acquainted, and become invested in it.

A significant part of Lanham’s argument is the idea that, in the twenty first century, rhetoric and style function somewhat differently. Style has mutated into design; and rhetoric no longer revolves around text but, rather, centers around the screen—the computer monitor, the television set, the mobile phone. For Lanham, “the screen works differently from the page. Words don’t stay put. They dance around. Images play a major role and they move too. Color is everywhere. And sound, too, spoken and synthesized. Above all, a different expressive economy prevails” (20). The printed page relied on “an economics of deprival” lacking color, movement, and images; “it is the monopolistic attention economy, directed from the top” (20). Contrarily, “the digital screen depends on
an economics of plenty” capturing sound, image, movement, color, and text (Lanham 20). It is dynamic and untamed.

One consequence of such a digital transformation is that reality—the concrete, the tangible—become questionable. Lanham discusses how “the ‘real’ world becomes a printout...created increasingly by computer graphics, by digital design” (5). The time of the real has passed; we presently inhabit a “synthetic” reality evident in everything from a television commercial to a computer game (Lanham 5). The World Wide Web, perhaps, embodies this new kind of economy where virtually anything is accessible from anywhere to anyone. Most significantly, this new world is a fabrication—a creation—molded by a few “master illusionists” (Lanham 5). And, isn’t this the credo of a Hollywood film? Puppeteers that hide their presence beyond controlled space and time, manipulated style and content? Lanham argues that the digital screen can stimulate every human sense; this idea is concurrent with the concept behind the Hollywood blockbuster—arguably, an overstimulation of every sense. A wild and overwhelming collage of sound, movement, and color, the Hollywood blockbuster employs every potential of the digital screen, of art, of technology to hold consumer attention...to wrangle a few rare minutes of undivided attention.

**Lanham’s (Warhol’s?) Rules of the Attention-Economy**

In one chapter of his book, Lanham summarizes several rules of the attention-economy according to Andy Warhol—an artist who transformed mundane, even clichéd, objects into art by simply calling attention to them. As a commercial artist, Warhol had a
particular preoccupation with stuff; for him, art and business were two synonymous ideas—“making money is art and work is art and good business is the best art” (Warhol as cited in Lanham 48). For him, art was less about beauty, less about human connection, less about abstract thought; for Warhol, it was simply about making money, and he never led anyone to believe otherwise. Putting a “banal object in an alien attention structure,” Warhol believed that “the surface… was all there was” (Lanham 49). But, enough about Warhol as an artist; it’s time to discuss his rules of art.

Warhol’s first rule is to create an attention trap (Lanham 53). This was done, most simply, for Warhol when his Campbell soup cans were shown at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1962. For consumers, the exhibition couldn’t simply be about soup cans; these objects had to signify something. Because Warhol never specified exactly what they represented, it wasn’t long before diverging opinions took flight and a commentary was created. Without confirmation, people were left to wonder, to debate, to discuss; their attention was piqued and they were intrigued. The trap? The consumer invested more time, energy, and attention trying to figure out the correct metaphor for these soup cans when, in fact, there was no metaphor at all. Meanwhile, for Warhol, the meaning of these soup cans could change on a daily basis; taking his own art less seriously, he could make up meaning or say the piece was absent
of any meaning (Lanham 50). This ambiguity, nonchalance, and uncertainty only added fuel to the fire and prolonged the discussion of and focus on his work; and, according to Lanham, “that’s how an attention artist works” (50).

The second rule is to find the centripetal gaze, harness it’s power, and profit from it. Evident in Warhol’s celebrity portraits, Lanham’s idea of the centripetal gaze—“the flow of energy from the margins of a society to its center of attention” is how attention can be monetized (Lanham 53). For instance, Warhol’s famous silk screen portraits of Marilyn Monroe presented “such a profitable and efficient way to paint attention” in that he could quite easily mass-produce this art, maximizing profit and minimizing labor (Lanham 51). With his celebrity portraits, Warhol successfully brought “a certain category of information—somebody else’s celebrity, maybe even celebrity itself—down to earth in salable products” (51). Whether he realized it or not, celebrities are often the draw of the centripetal gaze of society. They are fascinating and strange and consumers happily take part in trying to learn about “the private lives of the social selves” (52).

The third rule is that “the customer is never wrong” (Lanham 52)! In this instance, Lanham discusses how Warhol sent an imposter on his college lecture tour because he felt that “the impersonator was much better at saying the kind of things college audiences
expected to hear” (Lanham 53). His art embraced the reproduction as opposed to the “real;” by sending a reproduction of himself, he was enforcing the power of reproduction so prevalent in his art.

The fourth rule is to forget the “masterpiece psychology” of typical art (Lanham 54). It wasn’t about creating some rare or timeless; in fact, much of his work depicted current pop culture and was produced with a medium that begged for mass-production. Mass production (as opposed to skill) and mass audience (as opposed to connoisseurs) were two requirements of much of his artistic products. Warhol’s art turned many previously conceived notions of art upside-down. While his work was profitable and he enjoyed those profits, Warhol believed in questioning the very nature of art itself. By transforming everyday soup cans and silk-screen celebrity images into art, Warhol used his pieces to investigate the question, “What is art?”

This profit-focused mentality ties in with the fifth rule—“create stuff you can sell” (Lanham 54). Less concerned with abstract art, he turned concrete, tangible, everyday objects into things of value that could be bought and sold for wildly inflated amounts of money. Less about artistic merit or creative innovation, Warhol created things that filled a particular economic gap—he responded to a consumer need. Fundamentally, don’t create things that people have don’t want, don’t need, and won’t buy.

And the last rule is to “live in the present” (Lanham 54). Create something currently relevant and desirable…not something that will make you money long after you’re dead. Don’t rely on rarity—pieces that will become valuable only after you’re dead and they are no longer reproducible. Make something that current consumers desire
and can appreciate; reap as much economic profit as you can from it; and worry only about the next product when needed. For Warhol, art was a job—a highly successful job, but it was also a question.

How does Lanham help us explain Contemporary Hollywood? His six rules provide an interesting and unique insight into a new mode of film-making and a new type of film. Digital technologies grow and expand each day, monopolizing more and more sectors of the consumers’ lives. Contemporary Hollywood, if it wants to survive, must create movies that obey these rules and negotiate the dangerous, unstable, and uncontrollable maze of the digital revolution. More importantly, Lanham’s rules act as an outline that can explain some of the new developments in film seen over the past five decades. Ultimately, by understanding how these rules apply to and explain Contemporary Hollywood, we can reach the ultimate conclusion of this paper—that Hollywood’s transformation was a necessary response to a distracted society.

**The Attention Economy and the Blockbuster**

Interestingly, many of Lanham’s rules of the attention-economy describe Contemporary Hollywood’s own mantra when it comes to the blockbuster. The first rule was to “build attention traps”—a.k.a. the prototypical Hollywood blockbuster (53). Whereas Warhol used mystery and uncertainty to ensnare attention, blockbusters utilize spectacle and glitz. However, the same basic idea applies—create something so potently attractive and shamelessly alluring that consumers can’t look away. It’s not about substance; it’s about spectacle—a mantra easily applied to the Hollywood Blockbuster.
For Wyatt, these types of products—saturated films “freeze” the narrative, and theorists like him would argue that the blockbuster signals the death knell for the narrative—once revered in the Classical Era (Wyatt as cited in King 179 & 217).

Fundamentally blockbusters are spectacles meant to distract and interrupt—“an intrusive presence of the commodity-form”—that detracts and destroys the narrative (King 179). No longer a gradual, beautifully subtle rising curve, narratives in the blockbuster are like roller coasters—bumpy, unsteady, and somewhat chaotic—punctuated by action or battle scenes that never necessarily contribute to the narrative formula as a whole. Wyatt states that “the new studio owners prefer to treat Hollywood movies as “products”—“consumable” items (Wyatt 65). However, King argues differently stating that these intermittent action sequences “engage viewers and…increase the impact of the action and spectacle by locating it in relation to character and plot” (202).

One way to accomplish such spectacle is through the use of CGI. Once used to enhance the narrative experience where realism simply couldn’t suffice, CGI has now become a mere embellishment, a veneer meant to distract from the poorly developed narrative or the lackluster characters. It is the manifestation of pure spectacle. CGI technologies have reached new heights of both realism and fantasy and Hollywood isn’t hesitating to incorporate as many CGI elements as possible into its films. By injecting novel creatures and worlds into its films, it aims to capture audience interest and attention with the promise of the things they have never seen before.

One trilogy, usually critiqued as most guilty of the crime of spectacle, is Michael Bay’s Transformers. Often criticized for a faulty narrative and a disproportionate focus
on action, his films are infamous for being visually overwhelming and inordinately fast-paced. In such a movie, there are very few long shots meant to establish narrative or close-ups meant to develop characters; rather, central focus rests on packing the movie with as much action and spectacle as possible. In sixty seconds selected from the excessively long, battle-laden climax of the film, there were about 33 shots, making the average shot length 1.81 seconds with the shortest shot being less than 1 second. The *Transformers*’ shot length seems particularly abrupt when compared with sixty seconds from *The Third Man*, an example from Classical Hollywood. In the climax of this film, there are only twenty shots, making the average shot length about 3 seconds—almost twice as long as the shots in *Transformers*. Furthermore, many of these shots are long close-ups intended to develop the characters and progress the narrative, especially because it is in these crucial sixty seconds that Harry makes his suspenseful dash into the sewers to escape the police after being warned by Anna.

In this scene, the Decepticons have invaded the city, and the armed forces are preparing to take down a single Decepticon that is about to interfere with a one-on-one battle between Optimus Prime and another Decepticon. Interestingly, the first several shots of this minute are simply flashes to two of the main actors—Tyrese Gibson and Josh Duhamel. When Duhamel’s character mounts a motorcycle that just happens to be lying around the periphery, Bay felt the need to simply have a single-second shot of the wheels as Duhamel dramatically turns the bike toward the enemy robot. Arguably, there is some narrative seeped into this minute in that the armed soldiers do launch an offensive against the robot. Yet, Duhamel’s heroic bike ride occupies most of the sixty seconds,
with particular emphasize on the determination in his eyes and the speed of his bike. For viewers, it’s difficult enough to even process the screen’s content when the editing is so fast and sharp, but it’s practically impossible to make narrative connections or establish character development. The audience is left no choice and, perhaps, has no desire to dispute the content of the film but, instead, passively absorbs the spectacle on-screen.

For King, Contemporary Hollywood doesn’t shift too drastically away from the precepts of the Classical Era but, instead, subtly adjusts them to current audience expectations. He argues that the blockbuster is a “product of a different era, shaped by its own particular industrial demands” (223). Another film theorist, Murray Smith argues that narrative hasn’t disappeared; rather, “new technologies and new markets have encouraged certain kinds of narrative, traceable to serials, B-adventures and episodic melodramas” (Smith 13). In fact, for him, narrative is conveyed through spectacle, with action sequences progressing the narrative forward (Smith 13). Debord supplements with his idea that “the spectacle’s form and content are identically the total justification of the existing system’s conditions and goals” (6). In this sense, the blockbuster embodies Hollywood’s survival response to a shifting culture and technological arena.

For Lanham’s attention economy, contemporary films have to embrace the roller-coaster dynamic to keep audiences engaged in such a schizophrenic society, where a million distractors are fighting for the same attention span. No longer having to intellectually invest in a narrative, the viewer allows himself or herself to be swept up into the spectacle (if it is grand and novel enough), while the constant thirst for new stimulation is satiated, however briefly.
The Centripetal Gaze and CGI

Warhol’s second rule is may the force of the centripetal gaze be with you. There are two ways to apply this rule to Contemporary Hollywood—one more faithful to Lanham’s definition than the other. When discussing the centripetal gaze, Lanham was using Warhol’s celebrity silk screens as an example primarily because they emblematized stardom and glamour—poignant attractors of the centripetal gaze. Stars create and foster a type of glamorous veneer over their personas, often deemed the “cult of personality.” Fundamentally, it’s the ephemeral idea of stardom that comes to mind when one thinks of Marilyn Monroe of the marble stars on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame. It implies elusiveness and mystery once only found in real-life people.

However, CGI has allowed for things never previously done. Entirely computer-generated creatures like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings* or the Hulk are replacing the live-action stars; these artificial creatures are becoming the main attraction, the primary interest of the filmmaker and thus, the consumer. These entirely digital stars are beginning to develop their own cult of personalities despite the absence of blood and flesh. For the studios, the use of CGI creatures means infinite control; no longer having to deal with impatient actors or unpredictable child stars, CGI allows for complete and total manipulation of a character’s appearance, personality, and behavior. The most important implication of this new
technology is that the once elusive and rare stardom that drew the centripetal gaze toward it is now fundamentally reproducible. It’s not unique, indescribable, or abstract. Now, stardom and the centripetal gaze itself are mechanical and superficial.

A second way to apply this rule to Contemporary Hollywood involves the idea of the blockbuster as an industrial advertisement. Blockbusters inherently draw consumer gazes through their spectacle and glamour; as mentioned before, they are “event” movies. Because they have so much consumer and media attention pointed toward them (both pre- and post-theatrical release), they become the perfect canvas to promote ideologies, sell products, or even publicize celebrities. Why not use the force of the centripetal gaze, harnessed through the power of the blockbuster, to sell your products? For all intensive purposes, they are industrial advertisements. Blockbusters and industry are remarkably intertwined in that these films often act as vehicles for product placement and merchandising.

According to Justin Wyatt, this kind of “high concept” filmmaking consists of “simplified narrative concepts designed to fit into strategies led by marketing and merchandising” (Wyatt as cited in King 216). Losing some of the narrative and artistic integrity of the Classical Era, blockbusters are created for one purpose—to make money. Narrative depth, character development, and artistic deviation matter very little in the blockbuster as long as the Coca-Cola bottle is clearly in frame and the hero drives a BMW. For example, 007 movies are notorious for their blatant and unrepentant use of product placement.
In fact, the 2006 film, *Casino Royale*, was produced and funded by product placement alone. Consequentially, the film boasts more than 20 instances of product placements from the Sony Ericsson phone that Bond uses to a Fedex delivery to the main lobby of Bond’s hotel. Interestingly, all technological product placements like cell phones, TVs, laptops, and digital cameras are of the Sony brand. Why is this? Well, like a true conglomerate, Sony owns Columbia pictures—the studio that produced the film; what better way to advertise its other products than through a multi-million dollar blockbuster that will be released worldwide.

Michael Allen concisely summarizes the motive behind product placement when he argues that “the blockbuster movie has offered an ideal platform for displaying new developments in technical and artistic expertise”—in essence, it has become an “industrial advertisement” (Allen as cited in Stringer 101).

**Give Your Audience What They Want…Even If You Already Have.**

The third rule is to “draw your inspiration from your audience not your muse” (53). Essentially, forget auteurism, independent films, and experimental cinema. Adapt
material that comes with an already-established fan-base (e.g., *Star Trek*, *Superman*, etc.); employ only the most marketable and beloved stars; and, stick to meticulously perfected generic codes. Essentially, give your audience what they already know. Don’t upset them, befuddle them, and make them think.

Perhaps, the most important feature of the Hollywood blockbuster is that they are “pre-sold”—they are built upon materials already embraced by audiences (King 50). These materials could be beloved comic books, esteemed novels, video games, or even = television shows. For instance, the summer of 2013 will see a reboot of the popular film franchise, *Superman*, with Christopher Nolan’s new adaptation, *Man of Steel*. Based off an already prosperous comic book series, the film virtually guarantees its own success (or, at the very least, a successful box opening weekend). Warner Bros., who is producing the film (and coincidentally owns DC comics and the rights to the material), avoids a great amount of risk by simply recycling a previously esteemed and well-received concept that has already been profitable in other formats or on other platforms.

Additionally, Nolan’s movie reboot also emphasizes the idea of recycling—reusing concepts, characters, and plots. By using smaller, lower-cost things like comic books or television shows to gauge audience interest, studios can practically predict the success of a potential film adaptation. This audience fishing underscores Lanham’s idea that studios needs to draw from the wishes and desires of the audience rather than the impulse of an independent screenwriter or the vision of an auteur director.
The Assembly Line of Contemporary Hollywood

The fourth rule is to invert “masterpiece psychology” by taking advantage of mass production, mass audience, “trendiness not timelessness,” “repetition not rarity” (Lanham 54). Basically, use only the fastest and cheapest production methods; appeal to everyone even if it doesn’t really appeal to anyone; embrace whatever unoriginal trend of the moment (i.e., superhero movies, fantasy movies, apocalyptic movies, etc.); the narrative formula has survived so long for a reason—use it.

The digital technologies discussed in the Contemporary Hollywood section provide a keen example of the types of mass production possible in film-making. New editing technologies like Final Cut Pro reduce the time and laborers needed to edit a film. Digital film allows for more convenient and more efficient transport of films to theaters and, consequentially, other platforms. The internet—when used correctly—allows for a wide-release of promotional material to larger and more diverse audiences with very little effort on the part of the studio. All of these technologies have formed a virtual assembly-line for the film-making process as films becomes products rather than works of art.

Finally, this rule also applies to the repetitive tendencies of Hollywood film. Reboots comprise a greater part of Hollywood’s arsenal of films. Rather than experiment with new ideas or concepts, Hollywood prefers to invest attention and investment by rebooting an old movie franchise, based on the success of its predecessors. Even comparing the highest-grossing films of the 1980s and the 2000s demonstrates the power of the sequel. Only three out of the ten highest-grossing films of 1980 are sequels; however, there are seven out of the ten highest-grossing films of the 2010s are either
sequels or the first part of franchise films (e.g., *The Hunger Games* and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*).

**Conglomerate Merchandising**

The fifth rule is to “create stuff you can sell” (Lanham 54). Translation: only create films that can spawn countless variations of merchandise. Unapologetically use the growing number and variety of digital technologies and platforms to publicize, promote, debut, and extend your film. Studios are conglomerates and their control has seeped into every type of media outlet. Create a media universe around your film that draws inestimable amounts of attention to it as well as stimulates profits from multiple sectors.

Use every digital access point to the modern audience to build hype around the film.

Fundamentally, make your film a franchise film—the ultimate breed of Blockbuster.

One enormous different between American culture of the 1930s and present American culture is the sheer number and types of technologies in contemporary society. Audiences live in a world where media and “being connected” saturates every hour of their lives. Hollywood, in response, has integrated itself into as many of these media branches as possible—magazines, television networks, websites, etc. Essentially, Contemporary Hollywood’s industrial landscape sees the transformation of the studios into royal media conglomerates, literally corporate empires. Extending control way beyond the production and distribution of film-making, the studios have acquired resources like magazine publishers and television studios, which they can use to further advertise and promote their films. One notable benefit of such expansive influence is the
stabilization and minimization of the financial risks associated with blockbusters; a flop does not mean immediate and irreversible bankruptcy, and can be recovered through the various other lucrative parts of the larger parent organization (King 68). Jon Lewis, an English professor at Oregon State University who has written several books on New Hollywood film culture and genre, argues that there is a certain “interconnectedness of the mass media these days” in that “popular print and electronic media participate in the marketing of motion pictures” (Lewis as cited in Stringer 63).

Just as in the Classical Era, the studios’ industrial structures impact the types of films that they produce. Conglomerates no longer aim to make movies but, rather they strive to create franchises—“a property that can be exploited in numerous other ways” (King 69). Free from restraints like copyright, a studio can build an entire world that can then be marketed into theme parks, video games, and action figures; these “complementary” components work together to create “synergy,” a greater overall profit than each of its parts (King 71). For Wyatt, “a film’s initial success in 2001 depends on how a studio ‘positions’ it in the marketplace, how various print and other audio-visual media are used to define, advertise, and promote the picture well in advance of its release” (Wyatt 65).

For example, the Harry Potter series began as children’s novels. These novels were transformed into films, which spawned a plethora of other products like video games and websites. Time Warner, owner of the Warner Bros. production studio, used its various other media outlets—like Entertainment Weekly—to promote these films. Even after their theatrical runs, these films are readily available on HBO, another property of
Time Warner. Even the after the release of the final film, which arguably could have ended the franchise, *Harry Potter* continued to rake in financial profits through the Universal theme park, the debut of the Warner Bros. studio tour, and the release of Pottermore, a website that allows to engage in interactive versions of the books.

**The Disposable Film**

The last rule is to “live in the present” (Lanham 54). Cinema is disposable. Attention is the commodity. The consumer is no longer interested in owning the film, but merely watching it. Rentals and DVD purchases are things of the past. Multiplying screens have made films available to watch at any time from anywhere for any period of time. Whether it be watching a film on the train during your commute or sitting down in a home theater to watch a movie at length, the consumer no longer values film enough to purchase it permanently. Cinema no longer warrants that kind of pre-determined attention. Rather, this rule embodies the schizophrenic, attention-lacking nature of our society. We watch a film when we want for however long we want. If that means turning to Youtube on our smartphone and skipping through the film to the parts we like, that’s acceptable and even preferred to sitting down and spending hours on a single film. Hollywood has no current response to the stark degradation of cinema’s value as a commodity in contemporary society, but it must utilize the powers of these new technologies and the constant media accessibility to its advantage.

In other words, use what you have to accomplish what you want. Just as Hollywood as absorbed technologies like the television and the VCR, it’s possible
(although, arguably, not probable) that it can utilize new platforms like the mobile phone or the internet to its advantage. Instead of nostalgically trying to regain the past—the glory days of Classical Hollywood—and trying to halt the future of new digital entities like the internet, Hollywood should be trying to harness these extensive powers in the present. If it can accomplish this, then Hollywood stands the chance of reaching more people and generating more profit than at any other point in its history.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

There is no doubt that Hollywood has undergone a major transformation since its birth in the 1930s. Classical Hollywood represented the Golden Age of Hollywood. A clearly defined narrative formula, strict stylistic guidelines, and an oligarchic industrial structure ensured Hollywood’s success and dominance for over thirty years. However, external and internal factors would eventually rock Hollywood’s throne over the filmmaking world. Dwindling theatrical attendance as well as historical events like World War II and Vietnam forced Hollywood to change its films to create a larger and more powerful draw back into theaters. Despite losing their exhibition venues through the Paramount Decree, Contemporary Hollywood utilized new technologies like sound and CGI to create bigger and more spectacular films—films that could only truly and justly be enjoyed in the movie theater—most notably, the blockbuster.

In comparison to the movies produced during Classical Hollywood, current blockbusters tend to value style—particularly, spectacle—over narrative. Breaking away from the traditional narrative structure where the story peaks at the climax and then dips back to resolution, the blockbuster narrative employs a more roller-coaster dynamic with multiple highs and lows, corrupting the structure of the more traditional narrative. Furthermore, new technologies like CGI, sound, and digital cameras allow for more stylistic manipulation than ever before. Spectacles no longer have to be recorded or captured; they can be created. The human imagination is the only limit on how grand and spectacular the filmic world can be.
Although this thesis did present some film analysis, I would delve into a deeper and more thorough exploration of film throughout the decades if time allowed. It would be very interesting to analyze films from the 1930s to present, decade by decade, as opposed to picking a single film from the 1930s and a single film from the 2000s. While these two films perfectly depict the contrast between the two eras, they don’t provide nearly as a comprehensive a picture if I were to take multiple films from each decades and cross-compare them. By conducting a more longitudinal analysis, I would observe the progression of the shortening shot length and the changing narrative structure. Additional analyses could be conducted including CGI characters’ on-screen time as opposed to actors’ on-screen time as well as the number of cuts in a given segment of a film, which would more thoroughly illustrate changing editing techniques that accompanied new post-production technologies like Final Cut Pro.

Blockbusters also present an interesting comment on the industrial structure of Contemporary Hollywood as opposed to Classical Hollywood. Classical Hollywood’s industrial landscape consisted of a few major studios controlling most of the film-making world—for all intensive purposes. Classical Hollywood was an oligarchy. However, Contemporary Hollywood has taken this oligarchy to the extreme with the idea of conglomeratization. Essentially, studios are buying more and more properties—particularly, media outlets—until they are no longer just film production studios but, rather, powerful media conglomerates. A single studio can several television networks, dozens of websites, a handful of magazines, a theme park or two, and even internet
service providers. Essentially, they can own (and therefore, control) every part of the film-making process from production to exhibition to distribution.

Future research could also explore the history of the studios’ conglomeratization. Although I presented a brief summary of a few studios’ holdings, it might be enlightening to explore the timeline of these acquisitions and if these dates correlate with significant events in the studios’ histories. Furthermore, I think it would be incredibly interesting to examine several case studies in more detail. For example, I discussed Warner Bros. Harry Potter, but I think it would be really informative to trace the progression of the promotional build-up before a movie’s release, the qualities of an event-movie’s release, as well as the post-release marketing tactics that the studios’ use to reap as much profits as possible.

However, despite the generally profitable nature of blockbusters and the extensive control of conglomerates, Hollywood continues to face obstacles today. Most notably, the wildly growing distribution sector of the film industry. Mobile technologies like the laptop, table, and smartphone mean that screen sizes are getting progressively smaller but largely more accessible. If I could explore this topic further, I would love to examine how Hollywood is adapting its film style to these new exhibition platforms. For example, the film Rage, was designed for the small screen of a smartphone. Mise-en-scene is virtually absent as the entire film consists of a series of interviews—actors against colorful backdrops. This simplistic style allows the film to be played on a four inch screen without sacrificing narrative or style. I think it would be interesting to unearth other movies that
attempt to maneuver this changing playing field. Screens surround us, and it’s impossible for us to attend to all of them, which brings us to the final part of the thesis.

Richard Lanham’s idea of the attention economy, where attention is the most valuable commodity in a highly information-saturated economy, provides a reasonable and persuasive explanation for these new developments in Hollywood. Although Lanham primarily discusses the dwindling power of text in contemporary society, many of his ideas can be applied to the growing power of the screen. In fact, Lanham himself argues that the screen is dynamic and full, a much larger attractor of consumer attention than text, an inherently empty way of communication. Additionally, many of Lanham’s rules of the attention economy, inspired by Andy Warhol, can be applied to Contemporary Hollywood and, in fact, provide explanations for the new developments in Hollywood today. If time allowed, I think it would be fascinating to complete a more in-depth comparison of Warhol’s works and some works of specific film-makers like Quentin Tarrantino, Steven Soderbergh, and Christopher Nolan. Much of Warhol’s credo apply to the Contemporary Hollywood’s own internal manifesto, and I think that fleshing this out in more detail with specific examples would be an interesting next step for this argument.

Just as Lanham uses these rules to support his idea of the attention economy, I used these rules to support my belief that the attention economy is fundamentally altering Hollywood’s genetic structure. Not only is it impacting the types of movies that Hollywood makes, but it’s also causing dramatic shifts in Hollywood’s industrial makeup with the growing popularity of conglomeratization—by owning every media outlet, a studio can capture a greater portion of consumer attention.
This impact on Hollywood is significant precisely because of Hollywood’s strong and immovable foundation. Hollywood was and still is one of the most powerful forces in the media world and it has swallowed its competition in the past with things like the VCR and DVDs. Yet, it’s finding tremendous difficulty in absorbing the multiplying screens and constant accessibility of the internet. Perhaps, Hollywood isn’t equipped to do so. Or, maybe it’s only a matter of time before these technologies are also absorbed into the massive filmmaking behemoth.

I argue that the failure doesn’t fall on Hollywood itself but, rather, the consumer. Hollywood is losing the battle against this new landscape not for lack of trying, lack of power, or lack of resources. In fact, Contemporary Hollywood is using much of its power to try and stunt these technologies and many of its resources trying to utilize them. No, Hollywood’s been largely unsuccessful because it isn’t the changing landscape that’s bringing Hollywood to its knees. It’s the changing consumer.

We are no longer the consumers of the 1930s, whose only recreational activity was to go to the movie theaters. We are the consumers that are constantly exposed to media from multiple devices simultaneously. We are the consumers that can’t stand to watch something longer than a two minute Youtube video (and even that’s too long sometimes). We are the consumers that want instant gratification but not threat of permanence. For example, we don’t buy movies. We rent them. We pirate them. We stream them. Hollywood can’t capture our attention and our focus because we ourselves can barely focus.
Contemporary Hollywood exists because it has to, but it is not the Hollywood of the 1940s. Hollywood’s Golden Age is over. Contemporary Hollywood generates a single genre of movie, and that is the blockbuster. More unsuccessful than not, Contemporary Hollywood uses this occasional movie success to finance many of its other films. However, these single-successes are getting more sporadic and unpredictable. Contemporary Hollywood is having more difficulty than ever gauging audience interest and predicting film success, hence the drastic increase in the development of franchise films and the investment in film sequels. However, media conglomerization might prove to be Contemporary Hollywood’s panacea to the decay of its control over its distribution sector. By ingraining itself into all of these media access points, its establishing its presence in this new media world and attempting to regain the dominance it had in the 1940s.

There is no question: Hollywood is changing because it has too. If it stands any chance of survival, it must adapt and it must adapt quickly. Unfortunately, however, it’s not adapting to technologies that can be manipulated or media outlets that can be purchased. It’s attempting to adapt to a dynamic and unpredictable force—the human attention span. And if it can’t evolve to challenge this force, let alone tame it, Hollywood, as we know it, will cease to exist in another fifty years.
Works Cited


Capra, Frank, dir. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. 1939. Film. 28 Feb 2013.


