

New York Times celebrates mindless Hollywood fare

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3 January 2007

In a December 27 article in the *New York Times*, “Pirates, Penguins and Potboilers Rule the Box Office,” reporter David Halbfinger reiterates his principal theme a number of times: 2006 demonstrated that US film audiences have no interest in substantive works.

“A year after Hollywood rediscovered weighty political and social issues in movies like *Syriana*, *Crash* and *Brokeback Mountain*,” he writes, “the box office story of 2006 was that moviegoers finally said, ‘Enough.’”

Granted that Halbfinger is struggling for a journalistic ‘hook’ on which to peg his piece about Hollywood’s commercial fortunes, it is telling that he chose this one. One pictures American filmgoers, exhausted from an endless stream of socially critical dramas, bursting through theater exit doors and pumping their fists in anger. Instead, in reality, 2005 offered a number of politically more interesting, limited works, that attracted critical and popular attention, after years and years of a terrible drought.

There was no comparable work in 2006. However, the autumn saw the release of perhaps two dozen American films that could be categorized as ‘serious’ efforts. Their individual fates depended on a host of factors, including artistic and intellectual quality. And their release followed a number of international film festivals clearly registering a global cinema radicalization. Halbfinger’s approach is impressionistic and superficial, to say the least.

He continues: “The big money was to be made [in 2006] making people laugh, cry and squeeze their dates’ arms—not think.” Halbfinger cites the comments of Rob Moore, marketing and distribution chief at Paramount: “What worked was classic, get-away-from-it-all entertainment.... What didn’t was things that were

more challenging and esoteric.”

Among the “challenging and esoteric” films that didn’t succeed at the box office, according to the article, were Richard Linklater’s *Fast Food Nation*, Paul Greengrass’s *United 93*, Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* and Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond*.

On the other hand, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* did very well, along with *Click*, *Talladega Nights*, *Open Season*, *Casino Royale*, *Da Vinci Code*, *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

Alan Horn, president of Warner’s, based on the relative commercial failure of *Blood Diamond*, draws the conclusion: “The audience is telling us that either they want lighter fare, and they just don’t want to go there and have a movie as thematically heavy as *Blood Diamond* is, or it’s the quality of the movie,” Horn said.

Halbfinger continues: “Audiences apparently weren’t eager to read, either. With directors like Clint Eastwood, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Mel Gibson pushing for authenticity, the studios wound up releasing subtitled movies that were shot largely or entirely in Japanese, Moroccan, Mexican, Mayan and Russian. But even Brad Pitt couldn’t draw big crowds for *Babel*, and the Fox Searchlight release of the Russian blockbuster *Night Watch* proved that some cultural exchanges will remain a one-way street.”

According to the article’s logic, most filmgoers in the US neither want to read, think nor concern themselves with much of anything. In the first place, if that were the case, who would be responsible for it? American films of a different era managed to entertain and say something about the world. If Hollywood has given up expressing anything important and thoroughly succeeded in accustoming its audience to mindlessness, that would represent a devastating indictment of the

film studios, not the population.

In any case, the situation is not as Halbfinger presents it. There are obvious ideological and political difficulties in the US, but everything indicates a serious state of discontent and anxiety in the population—poll numbers; the recent elections; an article published by the *Times* the same day as Halbfinger's suggests that in 2006 popular music songwriters "were also grappling with a war that wouldn't go away" and that "Awareness of the war throbs like a chronic headache behind more pleasant distractions."

Of course, audience members can attempt to flee the Iraq war and increasing economic hardships by seeking out 'escapist' entertainment. Such things have been known to happen. In the first place, however, why should 'laughing' and 'crying' and 'squeezing a date's arm' be counterposed to thinking? Again, there was a time when popular film entertainers, like Chaplin and Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford, could produce all those responses.

A chief difficulty with Halbfinger's piece is that it uncritically accepts the existing state of political and cultural affairs in the US. The article is predicated on the notion that somehow the 'average' American filmgoer is an entirely free agent, able to pick and choose what he or she likes, fully informed about the possibilities and deliberately selecting 'light' entertainment over the dreadfully 'heavy' alternative.

In fact, the American population lives virtually under siege, bombarded 24 hours a day by a noisome, ignorant media. An honest discussion about film quality and content in the US mass media is precluded from the outset under conditions where the television networks, radio stations and some newspapers are pieces of enormous conglomerates that also own movie studios.

General Electric, for instance, owns NBC and Universal Pictures; Time Warner owns CNN, HBO and Warner Bros. Pictures and New Line Cinema; Walt Disney owns ABC, along with Touchstone, Miramax and Walt Disney Pictures; Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns the Fox television network, 20th Century Fox, Fox Searchlight Pictures and Blue Sky Studios and the *New York Post* and *TV Guide*, among other print publications.

The film industry is a multibillion-dollar enterprise. Tens of millions of dollars are spent promoting this or

that 'blockbuster,' on whose box office figures the fate of a studio and its executives may depend. Other, sometimes better films are released without fanfare, ignored by the media and allowed to disappear. Still others are never made at all. The choices offered most filmgoers in the US are terribly limited. Under these conditions, the success or failure of a given work may possess something of an arbitrary or even accidental character.

Of course there are also problems with audiences. The debased culture has had an impact. People put up with far too much, in the cinema too. But an artist or a journalist, for that matter, who was genuinely concerned about the situation would wage a struggle for a higher level of popular consciousness, not simply register a kind of malicious delight at the problems.

In September 2006 Halbfinger vented his spleen at the spate of antiwar and politically radicalized films presented at the Toronto film festival. He wrote in the *Times*, "American conservatives itching to go another round with Hollywood liberals may want to redirect their ire to the north this time of year," adding that the film festival "has been all but overrun with films attacking President Bush or the protracted war in Iraq—in subtle ways and like sledgehammers, with vitriol and with dispassionate fly-on-the-wall observation."

Unease about critical films, and now pleasure over the success of trivial ones ... this kind of journalism is one of the objective problems the American population has to overcome.



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