Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End and Spider-Man 3

The dilemma of blockbuster filmmaking

Joanne Laurier
4 June 2007

Pirates of the Caribbean: *At World's End*, directed by Gore Verbinski, screenplay by Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio; *Spider-Man 3*, directed by Sam Raimi; screenplay by Sam and Ivan Raimi

The Hollywood blockbuster might better be characterized as a marketing rather than as a cultural phenomenon. In an intense media campaign, a deluge of promotional materials is unleashed on the population months in advance of the mega-film's release. Artistry is not entirely irrelevant to the final result—after all, a better-looking and more fluid work may sell more tickets—but a serious critique is generally not in order.

Reviewing such films, a template suggests itself: check off 'Bombastic,' 'Facile' and 'Technologically juiced-up.' The basic recipe calls for numbing the mind and artificially exciting the senses. A bit of pulling at the hearts strings often translates into added cash value.

There are obvious objective reasons for this state of affairs. Riding on each blockbuster are gigantic sums of money. Any deviation from finely tuned prescriptions could mean financial disaster—the margin for error is very small.

The "Big Seven" film studios dominate the field: Fox, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.; Paramount, owned by Viacom; Sony; MGM, owned by Sony and Comcast; NBC Universal, owned by General Electric and Vivendi; Time Warner; and Buena Vista, owned by Disney.

The summer blockbuster is all-important for the Hollywood studios. Some 40 percent of expected earnings for the year are made in the early summer period. This year's crop of mega-movies, *Spider-Man 3*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*: *At World's End* and *Shrek the Third*, each the third in its respective series, rolled off the assembly line almost simultaneously.

A dismal box office year in 2005 so panicked the US film industry that the studios responded by producing a record number of movies in 2006, resulting in an increase in production costs for the first time in three years. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) noted a jump in costs by 3.4 percent over 2005, with the combined average cost of making and marketing a studio picture logging in at $100.3 million, versus $78.2 million in 2002.

"Rise in production costs may be a result of rivers of private equity flowing into Hollywood over the past year as investors and hedge funds showed up with bushels of money to underwrite studio pictures," according to a recent article in *Variety*. The commentary points out that Hollywood is being obliged to pour more of its money into online advertising and other nontraditional marketing methods.

Last year's box office recovery was due in large measure to Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean*: *Dead Man's Chest*, which grossed more than $1 billion worldwide. For studios concerned about soaring budget costs, franchise films—such as *Pirates 3*, *Spider-man 3* (*SM3*) and *Shrek 3*—represent a relatively safe bet, guaranteeing something of a ready-made audience.

It is a calculation that has already borne fruit this time around. In its first days in global cinemas, *SM3* pulled in a record-breaking $382 million, shattering opening weekend records in 29 countries. *Pirates* took in $142.1 million domestically on its first weekend—the largest Memorial Day gross in history. The four-day total for the top 12 films was $250.2 million, up from $231.8 million last year.

Hollywood is releasing an astonishing 14 sequels this summer. Certainly unyielding commercial demands (and the legendary appetites of hedge fund operators for high returns) cannot be played around with. But the pursuit of money doesn't explain everything. There is also the significant element of mental exhaustion or simply empty-headedness. Do these people have *any* new ideas, or even think that having new ideas might be a positive good?

If works with integrity appear, that is to some extent a matter of happenstance.

That having been said, the current trio of third installments do elicit a certain legitimate popular response. They are not the worst, by any means. Eschewing the typical excess of violence and misanthropy, they attempt, albeit in a grade-school way, to address the human element.

Gore Verbinski's two-and-three-quarter-hour-long *Pirates of the Caribbean*: *At World's End* is marginally more coherent than last year's sequel—a very small mercy. It is, however, just as bloated, requiring a level of familiarity with both its predecessors. As with *Pirates 2*, the new film is a step backward from the original movie, which had a relatively light touch and anti-establishment bent. At the core of the first *Pirates* is the amusing interplay between Johnny Depp and Geoffrey Rush. If *Pirates 2* was damned by a plethora of tacked-on, uninteresting characters, this has been trumped by the latest installment.

Number three begins promisingly as the Crown's Lord Beckett (Tom Hollander) of the East India Company declares a state of emergency, suspending the right to assembly, the right of *habeas corpus* and the right to an attorney and jury of one's peers. The

pirates—or insurgents—are being hung in droves. The references to attacks on democratic rights and reprisals against political opponents, however, end here.

Beckett, who has gained control of the ghost ship captained by Davy Jones (Bill Nighy), utters a phrase intended to characterize the battle between the forces of British law and order and the otherworldly folk: "The immaterial [i.e., the supernatural] has become immaterial [i.e., irrelevant]." Unfortunately, however, the film's "material" is also all too immaterial, as one cares little from the outset what happens and to whom it happens, so sloppily are the plot and characters drawn.

The resurrected Captain Barbossa (Rush) joins forces with the estranged lovers, Will Turner (Orlando Bloom) and Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightley), to defeat Beckett by bringing together the nine Pirate Lords of the Brethren Court. This involves rescuing Captain Jack Sparrow (Depp) from his hallucinatory state in Davy Jones's Locker. The scene of the Locker's surreal setting provides a respite from non-stop action and overlapping visuals.

Also involved in the plan to vanquish Beckett is the Pirate Lord of Singapore, Captain Sao Feng (Hong Kong superstar Chow Yun-Fat). Plot twists complete with treachery come to a head at the expense of Will and Elizabeth, an outcome that smacks of a potential for *Pirates 4*.

The constellation of performers from Europe, America, Australia and Asia is appealing, but wasted. Chow Yun-Fat often seems unsure of where he figures in the chaos. Rush suffers from a one-note—not always decipherable—performance. Depp, who resists being overrun by the mayhem, emerges the most intact of the leads.

A cameo by Keith Richards as Captain Teague, Jack's father, is the film's little insider joke. Depp is reputed to have based his character on the British rocker.

Rush and Depp vie for top place with the lackluster female leads, Knightley and Naomie Harris as Tia Dalma/Calypso. Artificially elevating Knightley and Harris, a ploy perhaps to extend the film's demographic reach, works to the film's detriment.

Relentless special effects highlight rather than disguise the movie's banality, best articulated by scriptwriter Terry Rossio in the production notes: "The overall theme that we're dealing with in *At World's End* is the nature of what it takes to be a good person, and each person faces that struggle.

"We embrace the idea that all pirate movies are about moral ambiguity, and good people can be forced into circumstances wherein they do something bad. So from the point of view of every character, they all have to go through that challenge, that transformation, facing their own ability to do something they're not comfortable with, and making nearly 20 really tough choices [20 might be an underestimation!]. In that sense, every character in the story has a villainous moment at some point."

The driving force behind Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End is producer Jerry Bruckheimer, described by the Washington Post as "the man with the golden gut." And rightly so! In the course of his career, Bruckheimer has been responsible for generating worldwide revenues of more than $14.5 billion in box office, video and recording receipts. Fifteen of his films have grossed more than $100 million at the US box office, a financial benchmark that until the recent sharp increase in costs entitled a film to be dubbed a blockbuster, according to the Internet Movie Database.

Director Sam Raimi has upped the ante in his latest Spider-Man movie. To a single arch-nemesis in the first film of the franchise, two more have been added in the third: Sandman (Thomas Haden Church) and Venom (Topher Grace). The Goblin, the first of the rogues in the series, has been updated to the New Goblin (James Franco), a late-in-the-game force for good.

Piling on more villains, more childish love scenes between Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) and Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst), more technological wizardry and adding another version of Spider-Man in the tradition of Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde does not make for an exponentially better film. Rather, it competes unsuccessfully with the original, which was a minor cut above the typical 2002 blockbuster.

The logic of a Hollywood sequel in 2007 is analogous to the transformation of Thomas Haden Church's Flint Marko—a "decent" man who accidentally undergoes a genetic alteration and becomes the Sandman. Like an insatiable market imperative, Sandman is condemned to amass more sand (and evil), reaching monstrous proportions. The process is limitless, subverting his humanity.

The film's press notes give an idea of the dimensions of the more than $250 million project. Over 1,000 production personnel worked on the film. It took 200 man-hours to create one Spider-Man suit, and filming called for 40 suits. "That's 8,000 man-hours just to create the Spider-Man suit—not counting Spider-Man's black suit or any other costumes," state the production notes.

Producer Grant Curtis revealed that "when we began the pre-production process, the computer programs had not yet been developed which could achieve the look of Sandman and his capabilities that Sam [Raimi] wanted to see.... [T]o animate Sandman the way Sam wanted to, we would have to be able to render billions of particles. In the end, the new software they wrote required *ten man-years to code*." (Emphasis added)

These were remarkable achievements toward an unremarkable end. And that is the tragedy of large-scale, commerce-driven cinema.