

Will There be Another Hollywood Golden Age?

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Abstract: After the end of Hollywood's second golden age, the film industry has fallen into a cycle that lacks creativity; it is often argued whether there will be another golden age. A film golden age often refers to a time period where Hollywood movies are seen as the most important part of popular culture and directors have a huge amount of creative freedom. Although the first two golden ages were caused by seemingly different reasons, the events that lead to their occurrence share many similarities, creating a possibility of another golden age.

1. Introduction

When thinking about a Hollywood movie nowadays, people think of blockbusters with big budgets and popular stars that lack in originality and depth. Increasingly, Hollywood films are falling into two categories: franchise blockbusters that have strong financial backing but fail to produce original content, and individual art movies that lack the budget of the studio films but are more creative. For the newer generation, it might be hard to imagine a world where this dichotomy didn't exist; however, this dynamic existed during the two "Golden ages" of film. Golden ages refers to the eras in a time period where Hollywood movies are seen as the most important part of popular culture and directors have the economic freedom to produce creative films. While the blockbuster era in the past few decades had resulted in the decline of the second golden age, the recent rise of the streaming services has created factors that are similar to the factors that contributed to the first two golden ages. Therefore, are we going to experience another golden age?

This essay is going to introduce the first two golden ages, analyze the contributing factors of the first two golden ages, and explain the current state of film. It will compare the new opportunities created by streaming services to the factors at the start of the previous golden ages to answer whether there is going to be another film golden age.

2. The two golden ages

The first Hollywood Golden age began in approximately the late 1920s, at the end of the silent film era. At the time, the film industry was a growing business. In the previous, D.W. Griffith's *Birth Of A Nation* became one of the first films to gain national popularity. Its huge economic success drew investors to the emerging industry, paving the way for outstanding independent films[1]. In the 1920s, sound was introduced to filmmaking, completely changing the industry. Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* became the first film to include dialogue, an innovation that brought American films to the international stage[1]. Soon, the innovative uses of dialogue allowed American films to become

dominant in the global filmmaking industry. The successes of these independent films stimulated filmmakers and actors to come together, forming film studios in order to mass-produce films more efficiently. Many of the big studios, like MGM Films, Twentieth Century Fox, and Paramount Pictures, are still powerful today. Going into the 1930s, filmmaking had become one of the most successful industries in America[2]. While the Great Depression caused many industries to suffer, film on the other hand thrived. Historians speculate that films offered a welcome distraction from the struggles of real life for many individuals. Around 800 films were released per year between the 30s and 40s, even more than the 500 per year we see today[3]. However, the quantity of the films did not harm their quality. Many of the all-time classics such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Wizard of Oz* were made during that time[4]. These huge successes allowed filmmakers to become national and even international celebrities. However, the First Golden Age did not last long. In the 1950s, the United States government sued Paramount Pictures, claiming it was illegally monopolistic for the film studios to control both production and distribution[5]. This lawsuit effectively dismantled the old studio system. No longer could the studios distribute their content seamlessly to audiences, and the film industry began the reconstruction of its entire business model. In addition, the invention of TV resulted in a huge blow to the movie industry. The fact that people could enjoy video content outside of movie theaters was devastating to the industry. All of these factors led to the downfall of the First Golden Age.

The Second Golden Age, also known as the Hollywood Renaissance, occurred around the 1960s[6]. At the start of the decade, the old studio system that was devastated due to the *United States v. Paramount Pictures* lawsuit, making way for a new filmmaking system that coexisted with the private-owned theaters[5]. The United States also lifted its strict censorship regime, known as the Hays code, allowing directors to portray much more mature topics. These factors attracted young talents such as Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick, and Francis Ford Coppola, producing fantastic movies like *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*[4]. These movies were a huge economic success, convincing investors that giving the directors more creative freedom could be more financially rewarding than simply making the same type of movie over and over again. This resulted in the directors having more control of storytelling and a film's budget, allowing their creativity to flourish.

However, the Second Golden Age quickly came to a close in the late 70s. When Spielberg's *Jaws* came out in 1975, it became an unprecedented economic phenomenon[7]. Before *Jaws*, most movies were released in individually-owned local theaters and gradually spread across the country. However, Universal Pictures decided to release *Jaws* simultaneously across the whole nation, an act that soon proved to be lucrative[7]. Before, releasing movies was extremely costly and inefficient. By releasing the movies to the local theaters one by one, studios had to pay for advertisement in a piecemeal manner. This often resulted in under-advertisement since they had to allocate their distribution budget across different cities. Simultaneous nationwide releases allowed the companies to build up anticipation with more efficiency, since they only had to put one advertisement in a national newspaper instead of ten in different local newspapers. Universal Pictures made *Jaws* merchandise, an usual strategy at the time. This new way of producing a film became a financial success and soon evolved into the standard industry practice we know today.

However, this new way of releasing film turned out to be devastating to the creative side of movies. Since modern films premiere nationwide, companies spend a huge amount of money on an advertisement up front, betting that the movie will become popular. Unlike before, when a studio could simply pull the movie out of rotation if it did terribly in the first few local theaters, there is no turning back once a studio decides to wide release a movie. Given the cost of merchandise and other expenses associated with a release, companies tend to "play it safe". No longer are they willing to invest in directors' new ideas, fearing that they will not be received well by the public. Therefore,

bigger studios have resorted to making sequels, remakes, or films that are extremely similar to others that did well in the past. These practices have created a demand cycle. Since the big companies are only spending money on advertising the “commercial films”, that’s naturally what the people are going to see in the theaters. Thus, this gives the studios even more incentive to make these films. In the year 2019 for instance, all of the top ten grossing movies were either sequels, remakes, or based on superhero comics[8]. Although many of these films are still interesting to watch, they lack the originality of Golden Age films.

3. The cause of the two golden ages

So, what constitutes a Golden Age? Looking at the two Golden Ages, there seem to be a few core characteristics.

One important characteristic of a Golden Age is sudden expansion in storytelling possibility. During the First Golden Age, the factor that transformed the industry was sound. By combining this new technology with film, the studios were able to spark the interest of new audiences who want to see the new piece of technology for themselves. During the Second Golden Age, the opening of the film restrictions allowed the film industry to grow. The opening up of these restrictions allowed filmmakers to discuss deeper topics in their content, attracting young talents able to exercise their creative ideas more freely, making their film much more interesting and attracting new audiences as well.

Another important characteristic of Golden Ages are social and macro economic trends that influence the film audiences. Unlike other industries that are damaged by social crises, the film industry tends to go the opposite way as the general trend. Film provides its audience with a sense of confrontation, distracting them from their reality. During the First Golden age, America was in the middle of the Great Depression, one of the lowest points in its history. Millions of workers lost their jobs, devastating more industries in the process. However, the film business grew. Although seeing a film can’t help fill someone’s stomach, it provides a short distraction for the issues people are facing, allowing them to forget about their current reality. In a time of crisis, this is exactly what the people needed. Similarly, film was able to provide comfort in the Second Golden Age. During the 60s, the Cold War was at its peak. Americans had to worry about the outbreak of a nuclear war every day; the air was filled with dread. However, watching films helps them to forget about those terrible feelings. While sitting in the movie theaters, most Americans could immerse themselves in the cartoon style of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* or the epic kingdom of *Cleopatra*, forgetting they were living in a time of crisis[7]. The filmmakers at the time understood their feelings, not making many movies relating to the Cold War itself, in the fear that it would spark more negative feelings.

Ultimately, the most important factor contributing to a golden age of film is creativity caused by a sense of exploring. Creativity is the key to producing an all time great film. The ideal mode of filmmaking is when the investors, the audience, and the filmmakers reach an understanding about the risk of creativity. In order to approach that status, the film industry often has to be in a state of construction and exploration, a characteristic both of the golden ages possessed. During the First Golden Age, filmmaking was a developing art. Since the studios were just founded, few knew how to create a commercially successful film, allowing the filmmakers to explore freely. Everyone was trying something new and wonderful ideas were being produced into film every day, yielding phenomenal results. Likewise, the Second Golden Age too provided the filmmakers a freedom to explore. At the time, the film industry was a mess. After the breakdown of the studio system, investors had no idea where to put their money, since it was unclear which films could be popular in this new era of cinema. As the *Graduate* became a huge economic success, the studios realized that since they didn’t know what to produce themselves, they were going to invest in the great directors, allowing them to have the biggest say while making a movie. It is the trust the investor put in the filmmakers

that allowed so many all-time great pieces of work to be produced. The understanding between investors, filmmakers, and the audience resulted in the creation of new ideas with big budgets, something that is rarely seen today.

4. The current state of the industry

Interestingly, all three factors identified above are present in today's film industry.

To begin with, streaming services have changed filmmaking fundamentally. As Netflix and other services began to dominate, the way films were released has undergone a huge transformation. Before, every time a studio produced a movie, they were selling that film as an individual product. In the current culture of wide releasing movies, one has to spend lots of money on advertisements in order to give the film a platform. Naturally, studios will never bet on new ideas by lesser-known directors, since it is extremely economically risky. Therefore, these riskier films can only be released gradually in local theaters. If, by some miracle, they receive some attention, they still likely never match the works of the bigger studios, with larger platforms. In this manner, the industry has entered into an uncreative cycle. Since the smaller movies never receive as much exposure to the public as the bigger movies because of less advertisement, the public will likely not see those movies when they go to the theaters since they can never be sure whether those smaller movies will be guaranteed to be good. Whereas if they spend their 15 dollars on the bigger remakes or sequels, even though they can't be dazzled by creativity, they can still have a good time. Thus, film companies have an incentive to make more of those films. However, streaming services change this dynamic fundamentally. As streaming services no longer rely on selling individual titles but rather than selling the service as a whole, studios don't have to take the risk of spending millions of dollars to create a platform for a movie, giving them more incentive to release smaller movies. In addition, individuals don't have to pay for the movies separately, giving them more incentive to watch those smaller movies. Therefore, in theory, the chances of exposure to a low-budget tennis movie will be the same as a million-dollar Marvel movie. Combining that with the AI recommendation technology present in the streaming services, the low budget films will be able to spread much faster than the slow process of going from theater to theater. Just like the invention of sound and the lifting of the Hays Code restrictions resulted in more creativity for the other two golden ages, the rise of the streaming services will result in more creativity for years to come[9].

Similarly to the eras of the other golden ages of film, there is also social disorder in our society. Just like how the Great Depression stimulated the First Golden Age and the Cold War stimulated the second, the pandemic can possibly be a catalyst for the next golden age. During quarantine, film became the major entertainment alongside video games. Netflix for example topped 200 million subscribers at the end of last year, a number that was unimaginable a few years earlier[10]. As the results of the pandemic slowly die down, Netflix has already become part of people's habits. This new wave of interest in film entertainment will likely inspire another generation of talented filmmakers, bringing another golden age of creativity.

Most importantly, the new way of distributing film brought about by the emergence of the streaming services has resulted in the complete reshaping of the filming industry, giving new filmmakers the chance to explore new genres. In the era of the Blockbuster that began with *Jaws*, the studio's profit from a film is a one-time-thing. Since they release a film simultaneously across the country, they have to make sure the film has enough exposure and can make enough profit when it comes out. Therefore, a big company like Marvel might spend 200 million dollars just on advertisements when they are trying to profit from a big film like *Avengers: End Game*[11]. A small movie will likely never receive that much attention since the studios wouldn't have the courage to bet so much on it. However, the business model nowadays has completely changed. Instead of selling each film individually, studios are trying to attract more subscribers and keep them subscribed to their

service as a whole. No matter how much the audience likes an individual movie, it is not as valuable compared to a popular TV series that can attract a new audience and keep them there to watch new episodes. This new way of filmmaking is still being explored by various filmmakers, just like how the First Golden Age filmmakers explored film with sound and the Second Golden Age filmmakers explored film with fewer restrictions. Hopefully, this can lead to the emergence of more creative work in the years to come. In addition, the new way of thinking about film can allow studios to release more films for smaller audiences. Let's say two directors are proposing two ideas, one, a superhero movie, and the other, a sports movie. Before the streaming services emerged, the studios would have to choose which one might have a larger audience even though both might have a substantial amount. This has resulted in many of the "smaller audience" riskier films getting buried. However, since the goal of the services is to attract larger audiences, they can release both of the films, attracting audiences of both genres to subscribing to their service. They can even save more money since they wouldn't have to spend that much on advertisement. The release of the smaller genre films can allow more creative freedom and attract the audiences of other genres. Take *The Queen's Gambit*, a hit drama on Netflix. The script of the novel had been bouncing around Hollywood for ages, however, no one was willing to take it up, since a chess movie seemed too risky. However, with the Netflix streaming service, *Queen Gambit* turned out to be a huge success.

5. Conclusion

In Summary, the Golden Ages of film were majorly caused by macro and micro trends that resulted in a burst in creativity. Factors such as social despair, the reshape of the film industry, and new ways of making film became incentives for investors to allow filmmakers to exercise their creative vision. While the blockbuster era suppressed creativity, Netflix is bringing all of those factors back by developing a new way to distribute films. Combined with the social distress caused by the pandemic which allowed Netflix to slowly creep into the people's habits, it is clear there will be another Golden age.

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