

How Franchise Films Affect the Art of Filmmaking

Why do movies matter? Sure they represent a billion-dollar industry, but that is not the real reason they matter. They matter because films possess a power that is the envy of none, and have such a profound ability to unite even the most adverse of people together. Even back in 1985, Noël Carroll, who has a Ph.D. in Cinema Studies and Philosophy, illustrates this concept by saying that when groups gather at the movie theater, people from all different socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds are all united together under one roof in order to experience deep concepts into the human experience. Life for them essentially pauses as they immerse themselves in a new world in which they can hopefully experience a wave of emotions and be psychologically challenged (Carroll 101).

When humans view movies they undergo a plethora of different psychological effects that largely differ from other mediums. They experience “pictorial representations, variable framing, and erotetic narrative,”(Carroll 102) and these teach humans far more effectively because they have an innate cognitive ability to learn from pictures and sound at an incredible rate. The content in movies has the ability to positively or negatively affect society because fundamentally stories and pictures are how people learn. Meaningful and impactful movies can be highly beneficial to society, but movies that lack originality or lack important overarching themes are no more than mindless remakes and are not beneficial at all. Cinema has the ability to bond people together, teach them and cause them to experience deep emotions, but many modern movies prefer their bottom line over engaging audiences in profound messages and giving them original content. When big companies choose their bottom line over this, they are renegeing on their duty as filmmakers to uphold the artistry of the medium.

Recently Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and many other top filmmakers have spoken on the concept of impactful cinema versus non-impactful cinema in the film industry today. These seasoned filmmakers chose to address the role of the recent box office juggernaut Marvel Comics and specifically highlighted them as one of the root causes of the degradation of modern cinema culture. This contention with Marvel essentially all stemmed from comments made by Scorsese in an interview and he recently chose to clarify these comments in order to add validity to them. In Martin Scorsese's Op-ed piece published in the *New York Times*, he specifically chooses to single out Marvel Comics but what he is really tapping into is the detrimental effects of large corporations running unchecked in the film industry. Scorsese is correct when he poignantly addresses the negative aspects of franchise film culture on the industry but is incorrect when he chooses to address Marvel Comics in its singularity. His attack on Marvel comics disregards the prominent features that make Marvel more than just another movie franchise devoid of artistry, and with an examination of the movies and decisions of the studio, this is made clear.

In order to fully understand Scorsese's argument it is important to understand that Scorsese defines the truest form of cinema as being "about revelation — aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation," and his main contention is that these franchise films escape this definition (Scorsese). This is a bad thing because according to him, franchise films are so detrimental because they take the place of films that intend to portray genuine artistry, and he calls out these films as being no more than remakes with slight variances. He has a problem with this because these non-impactful movies are taking away precious theater space from impactful movies.

Many people would simply choose to disregard all Scorsese's opinions because of the fact that film is subjective and movies are not definitively good or bad but are instead subject to

varying opinions and interpretations. They would point to the fact that movies resonate with people differently and that one person's interpretation is seemingly pointless because of the fact that millions of other people find franchise films to be entertaining, but when you consider Scorsese's accolades in the industry, simply pointing to the popularity of the films would be considered to be the logical fallacy of bandwagon. Scorsese deserves to be listened to because according to Encyclopedia Britannica, "In terms of artistry, he was perhaps the most significant American director of the late 20th and early 21st centuries."(Barson). He also has a slough of academy awards and has been in the industry for over fifty years. The points that he brings up and his perspective, therefore, deserve careful analysis because of the noteworthiness of his career (Barson).

The concept that Martin Scorsese expressed these opinions because of his film the *Irishman* having a limited theatrical release definitely has some merit to it. Though most people would side with Marvel and dismiss Scorsese as a cinema traditionalist who is upset that his heyday has passed, it would be rash to simply take this as jealousy because movies content matters to society. While Scorsese brings up valid points about the nature of franchises in the film industry, he is incorrect in singling out Marvel specifically, and this can be seen by analyzing his main points. Scorsese's argument essentially brings up four separate questions to analyze, including the following: how does the prevalence of franchise films affect the industry, why can people not just stream movies, are there any positives of this new era of film, and what can be done to promote more art-centered cinema? In order to fully answer these questions, it is paramount to be knowledgeable about the past trends that have taken place previously in the film industry.

Most people cling to the proposition that cinema trends are based on the desires of the populace, and the creative concepts that the artists choose to enact. They think that feature films shape themselves based on what the people want and what the artists choose to portray.

According to Charles Musser, who has a Ph.D. in cinema studies and has served as a leading author in the subject for over thirty years, these ideas about cinema are incorrect. It is true that it has a minor impact on the direction of cinema, but in a broader scope, it drastically negates the fact that the real drivers of feature films have always been technological advancements and cinema conglomerates. Considering these two forces and reviewing the history of the industry is essential to begin to understand the complex climate of the movie industry today (Musser, “When did Cinema” 38, 33).

Isolating the inciting incident of what people conceive to be modern-day cinema is a contentious topic. Some propound that the movement originated in France with the Lumière brothers showing their cinematograph in the basement of the “Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895”(Musser, “When did Cinema” 33), while others accredit Edison’s creation of the kinetoscope in 1894. While these conjectures are both valid in their own right, the first time the full cinematic experience was truly executed was in 1905 in an opera theater called the Nickelodeon. This event was rather barebones when compared to today’s standards, and people were only charged a nickel to view “*The Great Train Robbery* unroll on the screen to piano accompaniment”(Allen 2), but it inspired the creation of 7,000-10,000 similar venues in only three years.

These venues were referred to as Nickolodeans as a means of paying tribute to the old opera theaters, and where essentially the primitive form of what people choose to call movie theaters (Allen 2-3). Newfound technology engendered the advent of cinema because it was the

first time that video productions could be used to transmit messages to a large group of people. Technology played a pivotal role in shaping early cinema, but once the industry expanded, large corporations emerged to control this newfound entertainment industry(Gunning 198).

According to Michael DeBow, who is a law professor, and used to work in the U.S. Antitrust division, these corporations used vertical integration and owned the production company, the theaters and anything else that had to do with the business. Essentially, they began to start a monopoly in the film industry. The film industry has a long history of monopolies, and the government has intervened several times in order to break these up. The most famous case of this was in 1948 in the *Paramount v. United States* Supreme Court Case, which would later create the Paramount Decrees. According to the Justice Department's records on the case, Paramount Pictures along with a plethora of other companies were found guilty of “conspiracy to illegally fix motion picture prices and monopolize both the film distribution and movie theatre markets.” This incident caused the Supreme court to take action against the five main film studios at the time, Paramount, Fox, MGM, Warner Bros, and Columbia.

The Supreme Court ruled that it was essential to disband the system of vertical integration in the industry in order to minimize collusion and promote capitalistic competition. They broke up large companies that owned all of the means of movie production, and distribution, as well as the theaters. They told them they could either keep their production branch or choose to keep their theaters (DeBow 362).

Dividing these elements of the industry created a healthy distance between each branch and allowed directors to try and create quality products, versus trying to conspire to manipulate the business side of it. Whenever these companies get too powerful and only focus on the bottom line, the quality of the industry suffers. Before the Paramount decrees, movies would, for the

most part, be remakes of previous films, and would be guaranteed to make money because of the block booking system they had in place. This system guaranteed every one of their movies was played in theaters regardless of its merit or content. Book blocking was the act of selling movies to theaters in packages and deals, and the production company being able to negotiate heavily with the producers. They would force movie theaters to buy several subpar movies in order to get the one they actually wanted. This practice essentially only allowed large theater companies to thrive and caused independent theaters to suffer. Large chains can negotiate with and buy mass amounts of content from a studio in packages, but small theaters could not afford to do so (Maltby 143-145).

The two main concepts that are seen from the early beginnings of cinema are that the industry gets negatively affected when monopolistic practices emerge, and that money has always been the driving factor behind movie productions. These concepts remain true with modern-day production companies and the problems that took place in the early twentieth century have once again appeared. History has begun to repeat itself as the old rules that were set in place lose their validity, due to them being outdated for the modern market.

Production studios have amassed a devastating grasp on the industry that is similar to the ones observed in the 1930s because the Paramount Decrees are not as strictly enforced and are frankly outdated. Martin Scorsese addresses this by saying that these companies are engaging in the “steady elimination of risk” and do not leave anything to chance. He states that large companies like Marvel are so big that they can run hundreds of test screenings and for the most part have guaranteed the success of the movie far before it has aired in theaters. The movie industry has always essentially been primarily about profits, but these large companies take this much farther and eliminate the artistry from their movies because it is a risk that they cannot

take. In his opinion, they take the most talented industry professionals and shove them into a formulaic storyline and create mediocre products that are guaranteed to be successful because of how much power the head company yields (Scorsese). Scorsese's general consensus on this matter is true for most franchise films, but he does not give tailored examples from Marvel and research that will be presented later in the paper dictates Marvel actually does try and diversify their storylines. Something Scorsese should be talking about is the parent company of Marvel comics, Disney.

The largest producer of franchises in the world is Walt Disney Studios, which is not only worth a conservative quarter of a trillion dollars but owns the vast majority of the top movie franchises including the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Avatar*. They also own a series of streaming services, television channels and a multitude of other production companies including Fox Entertainment (Clark). When they were trying to acquire Fox, they were actually sued by the Federal government in the Supreme Court case, *US. V. Walt Disney and Twentieth Century Fox*, because combining these two companies were perceived to a monopoly. Despite this they somehow were granted the ability to merge the companies, making them the largest production company ever (Clark).

So what is the big problem with large corporations in the film industry? Most people would think of it as classic capitalism, but it is not that. While capitalism is actually generally good to increase the competitive nature of the industry, the vertical integration taking place creates more a monopoly than an open market. In 1947 Robert Brady refers to early cinema monopolies specifically when he states that "the integration of production, distribution, and exhibition lies in the accomplishment, not of more closely-knit operation, but of virtual elimination of competition"(Brady 125). While other companies are trying to compete in an open

market and are forced to take immense risks to turn a profit, these large companies make guaranteed money. Scorsese refers to the decline of competition in the industry by saying that “productive tension,” caused cinema to peak, but “Today, that tension is gone.”

So if theaters are dominating the movie industry, why can filmmakers not just resort to streaming. Obviously, there is nothing stopping people from deciding to pursue streaming services to display their productions, but this is not a panacea for the problem. While this seems like a viable option, in reality, the same companies that perpetuate franchise films also own a large majority of streaming services. According to Tabe Bergman, Disney+ and Hulu are owned by Walt Disney Entertainment and WarnerBros owns HBO. The only prominent streaming service that is not owned by a large parent corporation is Netflix. Netflix does do a great job of holding its own by commissioning content from smaller studios and picking up older content to add to its service (Bergman 160). Scorsese recently did his latest film with them but regrets nothing being able to air his movie in large cinema chains due to the politics between theaters and streaming platforms.

The *Paramount Decrees* are essentially rendered useless because of the rise of streaming platforms. Once again the production companies are also involved in the distribution of movies and have vertically integrated throughout the whole system. Even if films are picked up by streaming services they will be buried in franchise films and lack the recognition that a theatrical release gives to a movie. So far the negative sides of franchise films have been heavily displayed, but there are actually numerous benefits to them that Scorsese fails to recognize.

According to *The Harvard Business Review*, Marvel films actually do have many upsides to the film industry that Scorsese fails to mention. They think that Marvel films actually do not follow the mold of classic superhero movies but strive for “continuity and renewal.” They point

out the fact that Marvel actually has made strives to hire directors and writers from other genres in order to bring a new perspective into the superhero mold. Prime examples of this would be hiring renowned Shakespeare actor-director Kenneth Branagh in order to direct the first *Thor* movie, and hiring the indie filmmaker Destin Cretton, PLNU alumni, in order to direct the movie *Shang Chi* coming out in 2021. Marvel takes filmmakers that essentially would have never been involved in the superhero genre and use them in order to make each film different. Scorsese simply states that they are bringing nothing new to the table, but he admits, “they’re not for me,” and that he has not seen any of them. Frankly judging the Marvel series without watching a movie in its entirety drastically weakens his argument, and while his points about franchise films, in general, are valid the concept that marvel just produces a similar mold every time is invalid. They clearly are trying to make drastic changes to the typical superhero movie mold by intentionally casting different personnel for each movie.

Another problem with franchise films that he addresses is the change of focus from theme to spectacle. Scorsese chooses to show this by propounding that the movie industry has gone into two categories and says that there is “worldwide audiovisual entertainment, and there’s cinema”(Scorsese). The content that Scorsese has been producing throughout his career, and considers quality cinema, is primarily comprised of narrative movies that reveal the redeeming factors in morally ambiguous protagonists. According to Scorsese, Marvel films do not have such character developments and complexities as most other films, and therefore do not qualify as cinema. He thinks that in Marvel films there is not “revelation, mystery or genuine emotional danger.” This is essentially the crux of his argument on why Marvel’s content is so bad, but since he has not seen a Marvel movie he cannot obviously dismiss these movies as lacking anything. Scorsese is essentially grouping all of the problems with franchise films together and addressing

Marvel solely. This is guilt by association because while Marvel films may be the biggest box office franchise ever, they actually differ greatly from most other franchises.

Marvel films differ from most other movie franchises according to Spencer Harrison because they have far greater critic scores than comparable franchises, and they actually grant filmmakers far more flexibility than other franchises. Everyone knows a movie franchise that pretty much follows the same story every time and seems to stick to a certain formula to make each movie, but most Marvel films are actually very unique in terms of content. Sure they are all superhero movies and similar character arcs are definitely observed, but they are different. For example, “*Ant-Man* is a heist film; *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is a spy movie; *Guardians of the Galaxy* is a giddy space opera”(Harrison). Marvel knows that its genre can be repetitive and therefore tries to make up for it by bringing in diverse talent.

Another one of Scorsese’s main contentions with Marvel films is that they are no more than thrill rides, and they are taking away precious theater space from impactful movies, but just because they escape his definition of true cinema does not necessarily make them less impactful or important. Once again referring to the writings of Musser it is evident that thrill and spectacle focused movies have been prevalent in the industry long before Marvel Comics, and actually played an elemental role in the history of American Cinema. Musser writes that much of early cinema was based on “Coney Island and its rides that thrill”(Musser, “Rethinking Early Cinema” 391).

While Marvel films do not necessarily contribute much to the artistry of cinema, they still satisfy the basic concept of cinema being primarily about escapism for the modern man. Scorsese defines his view of movies as being “equal to that of literature,” but it is evident that movies are not just the niche concept that he chooses to see them as. They are something that

comes in many forms. Scorsese is correct in saying that there are certainly different types of cinema but is incorrect when he states there is “worldwide audiovisual entertainment, and there’s cinema.” He bifurcates movies to either fall into being part of his definition or not to be considered cinema at all, but his definition of movies is singularly derived from the kinds of movies that were prevalent in Hollywood's Golden age in which he was an elemental part of. Movies can be about far more than revelation, character development, and overarching themes because the art form comes in many variations. Franchise films are definitely different from artistically driven movies, but they still have a place in cinema that is timeless and is not going away any time soon.

Ultimately Franchise films definitely over-saturate the movie industry and large studios can definitely make it hard for smaller studios to produce content, but studios can take steps to support artistic films. Scorsese should have restructured his argument to include other franchise films and specifically addressed the companies behind them in order to make his point. He also should have watched the Marvel movies and gave specific examples instead of generalizing Marvel as being just another superhero franchise.

While Scorsese should have been more clear and could have provided better evidence, his points about American franchise films are actually very true. Franchise films can make attempts to make their films more impactful, but the vast majority of them are made just for the business aspects of it and are totally devoid of artistry. As a solution to this, people should try and support more artistic films as well as watching franchise movies. The people decided what makes money and when people are constantly supporting movies without purpose than they will inevitably keep being made.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, AMC, the movie theater, has introduced a solution to this and has recently started airing new movies. Their website states that “AMC Artisan Films seal is an artist-driven film that advances the art of making movies.” They are specifically putting artistic films into their theaters in order to preserve the art of cinema and are not only buying movies from large production companies but also smaller ones as well. They are bringing independent films to the masses instead of just big blockbuster movies. This is a prime example of a large company taking action to uphold the artistry, and other corporations should be encouraged to do the same. Scorsese says that people’s obsession with Marvel is a “chicken-and-egg issue” and that people love Marvel because they have not seen a truly good movies. Whether or not people believe this to be true, it is still a challenge to be conscious about their consumption of movies and to try and support creative artistry in the medium.

Works Cited

- Allen, Robert C. "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1979, pp. 2–15. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1225438.
- Barson, Michael. "Martin Scorsese." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 13 Nov. 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Scorsese.
- Bergman, Tabe. "American Television: Manufacturing Consumerism." *THE PROPAGANDA MODEL TODAY: Filtering Perception and Awareness*, edited by Joan Pedro-Carañana et al., vol. 8, University of Westminster Press, London, 2018, pp. 159–172. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv7h0ts6.13.
- Brady, Robert A. "The Problem of Monopoly." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 254, 1947, pp. 125–136. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1026150.
- Carroll, Noël. "The Power of Movies." *Daedalus*, vol. 114, no. 4, 1985, pp. 79–103. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20025011.
- Clark, Travis. "What Disney Buying Fox Means for Movie and TV Consumers - from Marvel to Hulu." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 20 Mar. 2019,

www.businessinsider.com/how-disney-fox-merger-affects-consumers-hulu-marvel-streaming-2019-3.

DeBow, Michael E. (1987) "Judicial Regulation of Industry: An Analysis of Antitrust Consent Decrees," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1987, Article 14, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1987/iss1/14>.

Faughnder, Ryan. "AMC Theatres Launches Program to Make Sure Franchises Don't Kill Smaller Movies." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 27 June 2019, www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-amc-theatres-artisan-films-blockbusters-20190627-story.html.

Gunning, Tom. "Cine-Graphism: A New Approach to the Evolution of Film Language through Technology." *Technology and Film Scholarship*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2018, pp. 195–212. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1zqrmrh.13.

Harrison, Spencer. "Marvel's Blockbuster Machine." *Harvard Business Review*, 15 Aug. 2019, hbr.org/2019/07/marvels-blockbuster-machine.

Maltby, Richard. "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema." *Film History*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, 2013, pp. 143-145. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/filmhistory.25.1-2.138.

Musser, Charles. "Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity." *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, pp. 389–416. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n09s.28.

Musser, Charles. "When Did Cinema Become Cinema?: Technology, History, and the Moving Pictures." *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory*, Amsterdam

University Press, Amsterdam, 2018, pp. 33–50. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1zqrmrh.6.

Scorsese, Martin. “Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema. Let Me Explain.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 Nov. 2019,
www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/martin-scorsese-marvel.html?module=inline.

Staiger, Janet. “Combination and Litigation: Structures of U.S. Film Distribution, 1896-1917.” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1984, pp. 41–72., www.jstor.org/stable/1225124.

“The Paramount Decrees.” *The United States Department of Justice*, 30 Oct. 2018,
www.justice.gov/atr/paramount-decree-review.

“U.S. v. The Walt Disney Company and Twenty-First Century Fox, Inc.” *The United States Department of Justice*, 24 Sept. 2019,
www.justice.gov/atr/case/us-v-walt-disney-company-and-twenty-first-century-fox-inc.