

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Return of the Nostalgia Industry

By T. Rob Brown

Perusing through the biggest summer movie offerings, one might assume Hollywood is out of original ideas. This happened before and it will happen again.

True, we are enjoying throwback films like *Top Gun: Maverick*, *Jurassic World: Dominion*, *Lightyear* and even the *Elvis* biopic. For some, this is a welcome return to the fandoms of yesteryear. For others looking for something else, as my colleague Marcus Carey said, “It’s a sad state of affairs.”

To better understand what’s going on, let’s take a trip back to my master’s program in 2013-2015. I wrote a series of academic papers on various film directors from Joss Whedon to the Wachowskis to Michael “Boom” Bay. While working on my paper on Bay, I studied a set of communication theories under the umbrella of critical theory.

Critical theory, in terms of film, is a fairly complex set of theories, which in part look at how marginalized people are portrayed in or involved in the filmmaking process. This concept extends to acting, directing, producing, etc. It includes a lot of buzz words you may have heard that often don’t come with specific examples in the public discourse—things like “the male gaze,” feminism, queer theory, black face, blackploitation, “Hollywood Injuns” and numerous other historical problems in the film industry. In other words, these issues happen when people and their cultures, sexual preferences, genders or religions aren’t portrayed in an accurate and fair way in film. Ultimately, much of this early media influence led to stereotyping, or perhaps was influenced by the stereotypes already existent in that period’s culture—thus perpetuating those stereotypes.

This type of theory began with a 1943 academic paper by the Frankfurt School called “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. The term refers to commercial marketing of culture, producing culture that contrasts with “authentic culture.” For example: who makes money off of Cajun fries? It’s probably not the Cajun people and those fries aren’t authentically Cajun. If you’re a Chris Rock fan, he has a whole comedy bit that reflects this same idea in terms of Hawaiian Punch.

In “Critical Discourse and the Cultural Consecration of American Films,” by Michael Patrick Allen and Anne E. Lincoln, the academic paper indicates: “It is important to note that cultural value is distinct from economic value. Sociologists typically view cultural value in terms of cultural legitimacy.”

That was a long route to get to this point, I realize, but it’s important to understand why critical theory—while not a perfect set of theories, also often associated with Marxism—is still relevant today in terms of film, as an analysis tool.

My critical theory paper “The Nostalgia Industry: How Michael Bay sells toys to adults” looks into the draw of nostalgia in films. Through the *Transformers* film franchise, Bay appealed to adults who wanted a piece of their childhood back and were willing to pay for it—not just in the price of a movie ticket, but also through the purchase of collectible toys and expensive special automobiles like the Chevrolet Camaro Bumblebee edition.

This isn’t anything new for Hollywood, of course, but leaning toward the tried-and-true franchises and callbacks to things already popular is a straight-up no-brainer for Hollywood investors. Success breeds more success. If it worked before, surely it will work yet again. That’s a big philosophy among Hollywood producers and financial backers.

“While determining consumption, it excludes the untried as a risk,” Adorno and Horkheimer wrote. “The movie-goers distrust any manuscript which is not reassuringly backed by a bestseller.”

Following the closure of cinemas throughout portions of 2020 and 2021 due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, Hollywood decided to take less risks—seeking out successful sequels and films centering around the theme of nostalgia. When the industry becomes more stable, we may once again see more original film concepts.

Even the 2021 films that reached cinemas, and some on streaming services, relied heavily on nostalgia or existing properties: *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, *The Matrix Resurrections*, *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, a new James Bond film titled *No Time to Die*, *Cruella*, yet another stale entry in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise, along with biopics like *Being the Ricardos*, *King Richard*, *House of Gucci* and *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*.

Even last year’s *Spider-Man: No Way Home* relied heavily on nostalgia leading back to both the Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield Spider-Man films. And on Disney+, *WandaVision* threw us back through generations of TV programs to tell the Scarlet Witch’s story.

I think the highly successful *Free Guy* may have been one of the few major studio releases of 2021 that wasn’t based on an existing movie franchise. Hollywood should have taken more note of this film and the value of its originality.

This brings us back to the present. We return to sequels and reboots of existing properties or films saturated with nostalgia. In fact, director Mario Martone figured we had such a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past that we even got a film titled *Nostalgia* this year.

After recent years' rock biopics like *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Rocketman*, *Respect*, *The Dirt*, etc., it's no wonder the King of Rock and Roll finally got a modern major motion picture.

Austin Butler impressively recreates the iconic classic vocals of the biggest solo act of all time: Elvis Aaron Presley. The choreographed leg movements during Elvis' trademarked "rubber dance" felt right at home and really showed off the legend's talent for stage performance. Without that, it just wouldn't be an authentic Elvis impersonation.

Meanwhile, Tom Hanks expertly slips into the role of the seemingly wise manager Colonel Tom Parker. Hanks, primarily known for playing the traditional "good guy" in most films, probably pulled from his more sinister nature in films like *The Ladykillers* (2004). While I certainly wouldn't call Parker a villain, Hanks' performance certainly displays the grand manipulator and showman, or "The Snowman" as he called himself, as the central opposition character of the story—standing in the way of Elvis' potential grander success on an international level. Basically, he is portrayed as a con man—more concerned with his own wealth and needs than the life and future of his star performer.

As someone who enjoys Elvis' music and has been to Graceland to tour the King's home, I quite enjoyed the film and that nostalgia. I wasn't alive during Elvis' biggest years as a performer, since he passed away when I was a small child—so, I can't say I'm the primary audience for this film. Despite that, I would definitely watch this movie again.

How accurate is this film? Most of the details I noticed reflected back to things I learned while touring Graceland and the Elvis Museum. Much of the film seemed to fit in with what I already knew about his life. A few things were left out that I would have liked to see.

One of the few things I questioned the accuracy of revolved around his relationship with B.B. King (Kelvin Harrison Jr.). While I'm quite familiar with Elvis' love of the blues and how he was influenced by it, he definitely bridged cultural gaps between what—at the time—was considered "white music" or "black music." Through his efforts, the blues—or rhythm and blues—reached a much larger audience and went mainstream.

Previously, I hadn't heard anything specific about his relationship with B.B. King. They were contemporaries, both from Mississippi, and I thought it sounded reasonable to say they might have known each other, but the movie indicates they were good friends. It certainly doesn't seem out of character for Elvis—and such a thing would be awesome if it were true. Perhaps it is.

In a 2010 article in the *San Antonio Examiner*, B.B. King told a reporter that he and Elvis "were born poor in Mississippi, went through poor childhoods and we learned and earned our way through music."

King further said in that interview, "Music is owned by the whole universe. It isn't exclusive to the black man or the white man or any other color," and "I told Elvis once, and he told me he remembered I told him this, is that 'Music is like water. Water is for every living person and every living thing.'"

In *Blues All Around Me*, King wrote about how Elvis helped him give a show in 1972 at the Hilton Hotel. King also mentioned that after their shows together, they would end up in Elvis' suite to talk and play music.

"I'd play Lucille [my guitar] and sing with Elvis, or we'd take turns," King recalled. "It was his way of relaxing ... We were the original Blues Brothers because that man knew more blues songs than most in the business—and after some nights it felt like we sang every one of them."

Elvis, rated PG-13, was directed by Baz Luhrmann and stars Butler, Hanks, Harrison and David Wenham. It received a Certified Fresh 78% Tomatometer score and a strong 94% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.8/10 on IMDb. It runs for a lengthy 2 hours and 39 minutes. I give it two thumbs up after seeing it at our local Alamo Drafthouse.

It's time to hit the afterburner and discuss the long-awaited *Top Gun: Maverick*. Cue the "Top Gun Anthem."

We've been waiting for this one since the first official trailer dropped on July 19, 2019. Well, we've really been waiting 36 years. I didn't get to catch this one in Laredo, but today, July 7, in Kansas City, Missouri, at an AMC cinema. What a perfect film to watch around the Fourth of July.

One of the neat AMC features is called the AMC Prime. These special rooms feature enhanced technology with a larger screen—almost as big as IMAX—numerous speakers with powerful sound, reclining seats with a deep bass and rumble feature. This ended up being the perfect choice for the new *Top Gun* film, feeling the rumble in the seats each time the planes took off. Can someone please get us an AMC in Laredo? Maybe they could renovate the old Regal cinema.

The nostalgia really hit me with this one. This film features so many throwbacks to the original that it's best to make sure you've seen the classic 1986 film recently before checking out the sequel. That way you won't miss all the cool subplots and character interactions.

Tom Cruise returns as Capt. Pete "Maverick" Mitchell; this is one of the early character portrayals, which put him on the map of Hollywood stars as a leading man in the 1980s. With more than 40 current acting credits as a star, Cruise is one of the biggest leading men of all time. This film proves his career still has quite a way to go.

Top Gun: Maverick, rated PG-13, was directed by Joseph Kosinski and stars Cruise, Miles Teller, Jennifer Connelly, Jon Hamm, Glen Powell, Lewis Pullman, Charles Parnell, Ed Harris and Val Kilmer. It received a Certified Fresh 96% Tomatometer score and an astounding 99% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus an 8.6/10 on IMDb. It runs for 2 hours and 11 minutes. Worldwide, this film has already brought in more than \$1.1 billion. It held the No. 1 spot from May 27 to June 9 then took it back June 22 and 23, then took it back again from June 25 to 27, then took it back yet again on June 29 and 30. I give it a formal military salute and two thumbs up.

"The show must go on."