



# Comparison Between Commercial and Art Films and Changes of Modern Films

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**Abstract.** After Martin Scorsese stated the claim in an interview of Empire that as a filmmaker, he does not consider Marvel movies as “cinemas”, a series of commercial vs. art film events happened. For instance, perspectives like James Cameron (the director of *Terminator*, *Titanic*, and *True Lies*) believes that Marvel is not epic, while Francis Ford Coppola (the director of *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *The Conversation*) believes that Marvel is “shameful.”, The director of *Braveheart*, *Hacksaw Ridge*, *The Passion of The Christ*) simply called Batman v. Superman: the dawn of justice “a piece of s \* \* t”, supported Martin Scorsese’s statement, and attacked commercial movies or Marvel and other superhero movies. Therefore, this paper will try to convey the idea of whether watching movies is subjective or objective and discuss the rivalry and balance between commercial and art films. Although filmmakers can come to an agreement of letting commercial and art filmmakers walk together hand in hand, by viewing cinematic history, the rivalry between commercial and art films can only result in the substitution of a new regime for the old.

**Keywords:** Martin Scorsese · Marvel · commercial films · art films · cinemas

## 1 Introduction

What elements in the movies please the audiences? What people can make movies like that? What can the audiences get from the movies? These are the three questions that every filmmaker should ask themselves before they start a project. The filmmakers that truly grasp the truth of these three questions are massive movie-production companies in the 21st century that influence the movies industry worldwide like Disney, Paramount Pictures, Warner Brothers, and Universal Picture, have mastered a formula for producing movies, that fulfill the satisfactions of the audience in the most dependable and reliable way; meanwhile, the movie-production companies are able to gain the highest profit with the lowest costs and risks. This paper is going to dissect the nature of current film industries and film-making systems and analyze the pros and cons of those subjects, which will lead people further to the possible solution of combing commercial and art films together. By examining the features and characteristics of commercial and art films, this paper is going to analyze how modern commercial movies are slowly dominating the current film industry and how certain movies shaped the prototype of future mainstream movies. The goal is to predict where, when, and what is going to be the next step of commercial art films leading us.

## 2 The Definition of Good Films

To judge the success and achievement of a movie, the critics and judges have to measure how much profits and interest the movie can bring to the commonwealth. In other words, how many audiences were attracted to the productions? Audiences wanted thrilling and groundbreaking experiences when they went to a theater, instead of watching Shakespeare plays for 3 h. To let the movies seem appealing to the audiences, realistic visual effects and breathless action scenes in movies often succeed unquestionably. The adventure, the excitement, and the duel are the things that keep the audiences in their seats at the cinema. As Jared Leto (played in *Lord of War*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Morbius*), a winner of the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, said that people should be “thankful” to Marvel for keeping the cinemas running by making all these popular actions and comic book films [1]. For example, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, *Avengers*, and *Avatar*—the movies that are considered some of the greatest movies of all time, if not the greatest movies of the time—made special effects that surpassed the techniques in their era. *Star Wars: A New Hope* made \$775.8 million [2]; *Avengers* made \$1.5 billion [3]; *Avatar* made \$2.749 billion [4]. These movies became iconic symbols in cinematic history and their influences on movies after them are immeasurable.

By achieving that, people have to consider movies as not just arts, but also productions, and most of all, movies are “team works”. Special-effect-teams are supposed to figure out how to appeal to the audiences with realistic visual effects and good action scenes, especially in Science Fiction and Action movies; actors are supposed to appeal to audiences with authentic performances or sometimes facial attractiveness; screenwriters are supposed to take care of the story structure of the whole movie. It can contain genres like romance, thriller, horror, and comedy. It can bring all stories that the audiences need. Finally, the most important role will be the producers. The producers are the determinants of the orientations of the movies. They make movies as investments that both benefits the talented filmmakers and the expectant audiences through team-working.

Moreover, the audiences are the final beneficiaries after the productions are done. The filmmakers have already got their payments after the movies are released, and they have done everything in their power to make the movies look fantastic, but giving the audiences something deeper in the movies is their final goal. The movies are not just moving pictures, because they meant something to the audiences. Maybe the movies gave them happiness after a whole day of work; distress; desperation. Movies are fast and efficient for the audiences to understand. The audience doesn’t have to take a lot of time to digest what the story is talking about after the movie is finished. Just like fast food, the restaurants make the meal very quick, and the customers might have to go to work, or they have no time to sit down and eat so they eat it even quicker. The same for commercial movies, people who got tired and bored all day, will always find a commercial movie to relax.

Unfortunately, the things above are all subjective points of view from commercial movie lovers.

### 3 The Undefined Definition of Films

The true and definite answers for the three questions mentioned in the beginning certainly do not have solid or something that critics and judges can determine without involving subjective perspectives.

However, cinemas, which is the production of movies as an art, are much more unpredictable. Movies are not dull or fixture. Making movies often involve risks. Breaking the rules of cinema and exploring new ideas and genres; pushing the movies to the edges and limits. Filmmakers can produce movies with great innovations that stimulate the promotion of the development of cinematic history. For example, Sergei Eisenstein brought up the word, montage, which is a way of editing that is constantly used in modern cinemas, to the table in the movie *Battleship Potemkin* in 1925. It was brilliant and crazy also, because everybody thought Eisenstein was crazy to come up with an idea that's so weirdly exciting. Like Francis Ford Coppola (director of *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Conversation*) said that cinemas are supposed to be enlightenment, knowledge, and inspiration [5]. It is true because enlightenment does not just appear in vacuum.

Cinemas' artistic expressions are certainly not limited by the audience's responses to the film and are not controlled by the large companies to restrain their value. Just like when Michael Cimino (director of *Heaven's Gate*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*) made *Heaven's Gate*. He didn't want anybody to stand in his way of pursuing his own visions. Films collectively, especially when considered as an art form, are called cinemas. In Martin Scorsese's words, he categorized and defined cinemas as if those are defined as literature, music, dance or any forms of performances and entertainment that can be found in many different places and forms. Movies like "*The Steel Helmet*" by Sam Fuller and "*Persona*" by Ingmar Bergman, in "*It's Always Fair Weather*" by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen and "*Scorpio Rising*" by Kenneth Anger, in "*Vivre Sa Vie*" by Jean-Luc Godard and "*The Killers*" by Don Siegel that Martin Scorsese mentioned about are often inspiring and surprising [6].

It will always be a big event for cinematic history whenever Bergman (the director of *Persona*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*) or Godard (the director of *Breathless*, *Pierrot Le Fou*, *Contempt*) releases a movie, because they have come to a higher level of filmmaking, not just creating visual movements that are appealing or stories that are fun for audiences to watch, but presenting literature and the problems of the world and people's life. These are real filmmakers who make pure cinemas that are true and films that are in line with the existing struggles in society and the strives of people. Bergman recalled that once Michelangelo Antonioni (director of *Blow-Up*, *L'Eclisse*, *L'Avventura*) said that what films are really about, they are a curious medium for him (Antonioni) to convey what he (Antonioni) wanted to convey to the audiences, and he (Antonioni) can really say it with films. Bergman also referred to a director as who's not a technician. Directors of Marvel movies or categorized movies are especially technicians. They relied on special effects and created movies that are flashy without substance. The stories are also impossible for the audiences to relate to their personal experiences. Like what Andrei Tarkovsky (director of *The Mirror*, *Andrei Rublev*, *Nostalgia*) said: "don't differentiate life and movies [7]." True films and good films come from the inspiration of lives and the world. For example, *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles is the perfect epitome of the American bourgeoisie; *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola is the criticism

of the Vietnam War and the incite of anti-war resistance in America at that time; *Sunrise* by F.W. Murnau is the most beautiful and graceful hymn of love and human nature.

The above-mentioned is another type of subjective perspective from the lovers of movies that are artistic.

## 4 The Rivalry Between Commercial and Art Films

Both art and money are important, but it makes the significant to distinguish which is the primary and which is the secondary to achieve. Like Van Gogh died without a single penny. Filmmakers don't want to be ended up like Van Gogh. They want to be Picasso! The fearless and bold ideas of cinemas are certainly not the productions under the control of massive movie production companies or under the influences of the box office. For instance, Michael Cimino literally hijacked the whole production of *Heaven's Gate* in 1980. Cimino purposely switched the locks of the studio's editing room, to ensure that the producers wouldn't see how the movie was going and not change Cimino's own artistic visions in the final cut, although Cimino disputed this story [8]. In the end, *Heaven's Gate* lost almost \$41 million [9].

Even though most of filmmakers care less about money than their own artistic vision, without gaining any profits, the filmmakers can't seem to complete their visions too. Martin Scorsese (director of *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*) complained about no movie-production company wanting to fund him to make his new film in 2019, *The Irishman*, except for Netflix at the end. The reason why movie-production companies won't lend a hand to Martin Scorsese is that modern films are market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, reverted and remodified until they're ready for consumers to feed on [6]. Art movies are clearly being oppressed by the commercial movies' strong hit of on box office. Like *The Shawshank Redemption* by Frank Darabont and *Barry Lyndon* by Stanley Kubrick, which are movies that are considered as art-house, gained pitifully few profits.

The economic distribution of the whole film market is very uneven. As Fig. 1 illustrated, in the top 12 lifetime grosses, 11 of them are commercial movies; the 11 of them are from the 21<sup>st</sup> century; 7 of them are from Disney; 2 of them are from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox; 2 of them are from Universal; 1 of them are from Paramount Pictures [10]. All of them are massive movie-production companies that lead the world economy of movies.

### 4.1 Mainstream Movies Fixed Story Structure: Taking Star Wars as an Example

There is a whole film-making system on how to make these blockbusters with the lowest risks. Take an example from the movie, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, the movie that shaped the prototype of how nowadays blockbusters are like.

The story structure in such categorized movies is often called the Hero's Journey, which divides in several parts of the story's further development. Just like *The Odyssey* or *The Lord of the Rings*. In the Hero's Journey of *Star Wars*, first, there will be the introduction of the normal life (with a little dissatisfaction) of the main protagonist, who is Luke Skywalker. He is living just fine, but he always wanted to get out of his hometown Tatooine, which is an eternity of sands and nihilism. Second, there's the "disturbance",

## Top Lifetime Grosses

Worldwide ▾

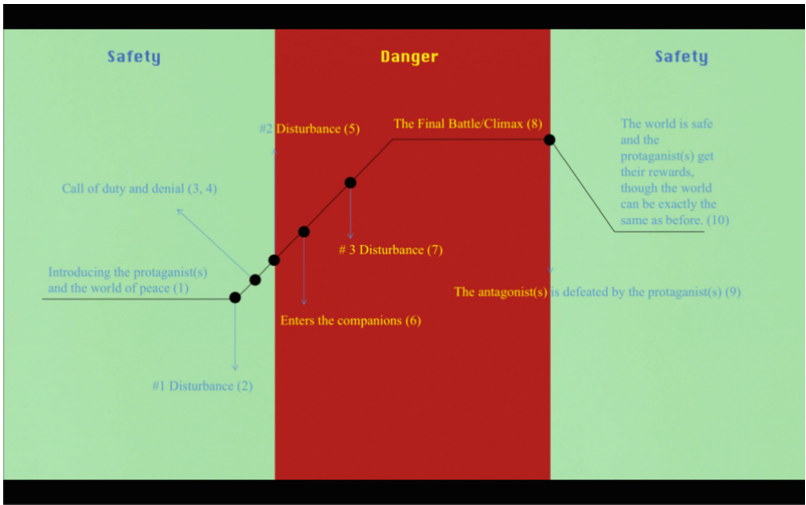
Data as of Sep 9, 1:39 PDT

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Rank	title	Worldwide Lifetime Gross	Domestic Lifetime Gross	Domestic %	Foreign Lifetime Gross	Foreign %	Year
1	Avatar	\$2,847,397,339	\$760,507,625	26.7%	\$2,086,889,714	73.3%	2009
2	Avengers: Endgame	\$2,797,501,328	\$858,373,000	30.7%	\$1,939,128,328	69.3%	2019
3	Titanic	\$2,201,647,264	\$659,363,944	30%	\$1,542,283,320	70%	1997
4	Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens	\$2,069,521,700	\$936,662,225	45.3%	\$1,132,859,475	54.7%	2015
5	Avengers: Infinity War	\$2,048,359,754	\$678,815,482	33.1%	\$1,369,544,272	66.9%	2018
6	Spider-Man: No Way Home	\$2,019,835,359	\$811,871,869	40.2%	\$1,207,963,490	59.8%	2021
7	Jurassic World	\$1,671,537,444	\$653,406,625	39.1%	\$1,018,130,819	60.9%	2015
8	The Lion King	\$1,663,250,487	\$543,638,043	32.7%	\$1,119,612,444	67.3%	2019
9	The Avengers	\$1,518,815,515	\$623,357,910	41%	\$895,457,605	59%	2012
10	Furious 7	\$1,515,341,399	\$353,007,020	23.3%	\$1,162,334,379	76.7%	2015
11	Frozen II	\$1,450,026,933	\$477,373,578	32.9%	\$972,653,355	67.1%	2019
12	Top Gun:	\$1,442,543,869	\$702,143,869	48.7%	\$740,400,000	51.3%	2022

Fig. 1. Top Lifetime Grosses [10]

which will affect the world of the protagonist. Princess Leia (also count as the main protagonist) is captured by Darth Vader and the evil Empire, and then Leia finds out that the Empire has built a powerful weapon called the Death Star that it can destroy millions of lives and a whole planet within seconds. Third, the “call of duty” must come upon the shoulders of the protagonist. In Star Wars, Obi-wan finds Luke and introduces him the lightsaber of his father and says he must come with him to complete his destiny. But fourth, the protagonist is not going to accept the call that soon, he is going to “refuse the call”. Luke says that he got his aunt and uncle to take care of, so he can’t leave. Fifth, the protagonist has to complete his destiny, so there will be another disturbance (the disturbance will become larger and larger while the story is processing). Luke’s aunt and uncle are murdered, so the protagonist accepts the “call of duty” unwilling. Sixth, throughout the journey, there must be companions fighting side by side with the protagonist, the supporting protagonists are there to make the story rich and full, so this is the time when Han Solo and Chewbacca enter the story. Han Solo and Chewbacca successfully help Obi-wan and Luke to rescue Princess Leia and also find out about Death Star. Seventh, when the story reaches this point, the protagonists can’t be in their comfort zone for too long, or the audiences will lose attention, so another bigger disturbance must come. Darth Vader, the main antagonist, killed Obi-wan. Eighth, this larger disturbance makes the protagonists feel that they have lost, but they are still going to complete the mission, but it is going to be a bumpy ride. Ninth, enter the final battle. The story now has



**Fig. 2.** Story Structure of The Hero’s Journey (Photo credit: Original)

come to the most exciting and high point of the movie, which is the climax. With strong belief and willpower, the protagonists are going to win the battle between good and evil at the climax of the whole movie. Tenth, Luke and his friends are happily rewarded for their acts of bravery at last (see Fig. 2).

**4.2 Pros and Cons on Commercial and Art Films**

The good side of this whole system that determines how film industries should work is that it is fast, quick, and efficient. The categorized elements and the unchanged format of story structure. It kind of form a formulaic lubricant, so there will be at least 1 film in every 10 films that work if these 10 films are made in the same way. Large movie production companies can make 10 stupid moves, as long as there’s a smart one. In early 2000, whether Marvel was going to survive was responded with a question mark, but in 2008, Marvel produced Iron Man, which turned out to be a blockbuster. It saved Marvel from being on the verge of death. They made almost \$590 million in the end [11]. This shows the strong sense of power that commercials can bring to the film industry.

The bad side is that they are often repeated. It will never and it can never think outside of the box if the massive movie production companies wanted to stay in the comfort zone of making movies with an unbelievable amount of box office without taking a big risk. Sooner or later, commercial movies are going to be replaced as in Francis Ford Coppola’s words, Marvel movies are prototype movies that there is only a lazy structure that is made to look different repeatedly [5].

Instead, artistic movies can be made for eternity because directors and writers always have things to say or judge the world. The subjects of the movies will be added and enriched as time goes on, but audiences wanted to spend their free time fast and efficiently. They wanted to be satisfied in a very short time. That’s the difference of how much knowledge, entertainment, and nutrients people can get from an artistic movie and a

commercial movie. But art movies are taking a lot of risks than commercial movies do. The ideas of art films might not be excepted by the major group of audiences, but commercial movies do. They worked the story structures like Star Wars that have already been confirmed to be popular and accepted by a large group of audiences. The massive movie-production companies can't afford to take such a risk to let the whole company be jeopardized.

If commercial or categorized films keep in dominant possible, and artistic films are being oppressed, soon, nobody is going to artistic films, because directors got to feed themselves. Like what happened to Martin Scorsese, when he was looking for production companies that could fund him for his new film in 2019, *The Irishman*, he couldn't find one. He said he was heartbroken when his beloved film, which has been prepared for several years, couldn't come alive. This is hard for every artistic director. If someday, the literary performances and manifestations are lost and become a cultural heritage, it would be a huge loss for the world and all humans.

## 5 The Balance Between Commercial and Art Films

To come to a balance between commercial and art movies, the filmmakers have to determine whether to treat movies as productions or art forms. Clearly, achieving both the peak of artistic expressions and still getting an unstinting payback from the audiences is the dream of every filmmaker.

### 5.1 How to Make Movies that Have the Elements of Both Commercial and Art Films: Taking *Pulp Fiction* as an Example

*Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino is a perfect example of the balance between commercial and art films. In *Pulp Fiction*, people can see that movies are not as expected and as predictable as the categorized movies. It contained action that often occurs in typical Hollywood action films that thrilled the audiences. It got iconic actors like Samuel L. Jackson (*Do the Right Thing*, *Goodfellas*, *Jackie Brown*), John Travolta (*Saturday Night Fever*, *Blow Out*, *Grease*), Bruce Willis (*Die Hard*, *Die Hard 2*, *The Sixth Sense*), and Uma Thurman (*Batman & Robin*, *Kill Bill*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*). Basically, the movie is visually appealing and structurally organized and ideally innovative.

It is compromised and brand-new in every cinema and the directors have their own ideas, instead of controlling by the man behind the chair of large movie production companies. Moreover, Quentin Tarantino feverish displayed the cinema and music he liked when he was young throughout the whole movie. This depicted the Tarantino's love of 1960s Hollywood, as if he was bringing us through the voyage in time. Tarantino added and paid tribute to the cinemas he fell in love with, like 8½ by Federico Fellini or *The Seven Year Itch* by Billy Wilder. Just like what Andrei Tarkovsky said that audiences shouldn't differentiate movie and life, because movies came from life and movies are very personal. Movies are the whole perspective of the directors. This is the difference between commercial and artistic movies. Commercial movies are owned by the companies to achieve the greater good of making money for everyone in the

production, but artistic movies are owned by the directors to achieve their own artistic visions for spreading their thoughts and ideas to all audiences in a spiritual way.

The name *Pulp Fiction* basically means that fiction that are badly written and vulgar, but the movie was also nominated for 1995's Academy Award, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay. The movie also contains elements of bloodiness, drugs, and sexual things, but it could be viewed and loved by millions of people, including professional artists and filmmakers. *Pulp Fiction* made 213 million in the end, which is huge financial and turned Tarantino into one of the greatest directors [12].

## 6 Conclusion

Even though great movies like *Pulp Fiction* are able to come to an intersection point of commercial and art films, art films are still off the list of top box offices. Art films lovers might judge that commercial movies are stealing the glory of cinemas and dictating the markets of cinemas. But time evolves. Just like the young filmmakers during the New Hollywood Wave started to ignore the Hays Code and Hays Code finally ended in 1968. There were fewer regulations in films and rising filmmakers could make films about any topics they wanted. So many incredible filmmakers like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen (director of *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Midnight in Paris*), and Michael Cimino rose at that period of time. American movies were truly “free” during The New Hollywood Wave. But old filmmakers like John Ford (director of *The Searcher*, *Stagecoach*, *How Green Was My Valley*) slowly exited the stage of movie productions, because they thought that movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Easy Rider* were movies that they thought were vulgar and destroying the arts of cinemas, but in the end, the audiences adore the movies during the New Hollywood Wave. Before that, the silent-movie filmmakers also thought that the Talkies (nonsilent-movies) were poisoning cinemas. Even before that, when cameras were first invented and the very first theater was being built, people thought that movies are some sort of “freakshows”. People can see that art films like *City Lights*, *Singin’ In the Rain*, *Breathless* or *The Godfather* cannot be made ever again. Maybe it is the time for the revolution to happen. Some other filmmakers got to take over the reign that former directors, like Martin Scorsese, David Lynch (director of *The Elephant Man*, *Blue Velvet*, *Mulholland Dr.*), and Roman Polanski (director of *The Pianist*, *Chinatown*, *Rosemary’s Baby*) who created great movies for people that people will never forget. Many years later, there might be another kind of movie that will appear and take the throne that was once the commercial movie’ in the era.

Audiences will also change as time moves on. It is all about perspective when audiences are watching movies. Not everybody’s tastes are the same. A person can love Shakespeare’s plays and *Harry Potter* at the same time. It is the people or the audiences who determine which type of movies they like. It will always be a mystery for filmmakers what pleases audiences and how long could they keep that satisfaction of contemporary joy.



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