PART I *THE SPECTACLE INDUSTRY*

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BLOCKBUSTER BALLYHOO

You've just walked out of a multiplex movie theater having seen a Hollywood blockbuster movie. This being the early twenty-first century, you've likely witnessed a motion picture packed with visually dynamic scenes, saturated with color and sound. You may have been thrilled or dizzied by sprawling, swirling, and soaring images, the product of actual or simulated camerawork. And the appearance of action that ignores the laws of physics may have been inventive. Or annoying. Or both. You may have been underwhelmed by the newest multichannel sound system, which promised pinpoint locations for sounds but mostly delivered volume. You may have been impressed by the novel situations and visual effects, and you may have enjoyed spending time with a cherished performer or been introduced to new talent. The settings, situations, and characters may have been familiar, part of a generationally expansive franchise and part of a seemingly complete rendering of a fictional world. Attending may have had more to do with a sense of duty and obligation to see the entirety of a franchise than actual desire for another installment in that story world. Or the movie might have been a stand-alone production, exploring what blockbuster aesthetics offer a nonfranchise tale. Whatever sensations you have at the closing credits— the exhausting, endless credits that scroll through countless corporations,

personnel, and legal waivers—you may leave with a feeling of wonderment about the film's drama or boredom with the monotonously familiar narrative clichés. Skillful emotional tugs may stick with you for a time, as do the abrasive projections of brutality and destruction. Blockbusters, as we have come to know them, engage, distract, and transport us, often in visceral ways that shake our senses and clot our ears. And you have surely paid what you imagine is the uppermost price point for such a sensory privilege. After all, neither wonder nor boredom comes cheaply.

Blockbuster films are as connected to the summer months as school vacations and mosquito bites. We hear the heavy-footed march of their approach, with calculated advance promotional peeks at the final product serving as processional trumpets heralding a new arrival. In ordinary conversation we expect people to recognize the titles of the day, the new entries into our popular image world, many of which are part of massive franchises and comprise elaborate story worlds that provide direct and immediate connections between films: "Lord of the Rings," "Star Wars," "Star Trek," "Indiana Jones," "Die Hard," "Mission Impossible," "Harry Potter," "Avatar," "Matrix," "Transformers," "X-Men," "Pirates of the Caribbean," "Terminator," "Toy Story," "The Fast and the Furious," "Hunger Games," "Marvel Cinematic Universe," "Batman," "Superman," and the grandfather of them all, "James Bond." When the opportunity arises, we may feel personally compelled to see one, coerced by family and friends to see another, and powerfully determined to avoid others. And though blockbusters do not make up a genre per se, we expect such films to share characteristics with and to display generic links to action, science fiction, disaster, fantasy, or family animation movies. This is the case even for the more baroque generic hybrids, where a "Western" blockbuster can have significant science fiction and action elements, drowning out many connections to precursors from the American Western (for example, *Cowboys and Aliens* [2011], *The Wild Wild West* [1999], and *The Lone Ranger* [2013]).

Or, at least, the claims just itemized about blockbusters in the preceding two paragraphs capture contemporary common sense about popular entertainment. We refer to a movie as a "blockbuster" and assume that others will understand what we mean—which is what I've just done—and that the movie will be loud, bright, dynamic, and familiar. Exceptions abound. There are comedy blockbusters, where we find more complete control by and showcasing of women producers, writers, and performers than in the action-oriented franchises. There are auteurist blockbusters that have tried to develop an interrogative style with the heavy industrial machinery of block-

buster production. These ostensible auteurist entries propose a paradoxical personal-impersonal cinema. Christopher Nolan's name may have popped into your head, or maybe Robert Zemeckis, James Cameron, and Steven Spielberg. The further we move from our contemporary franchise-driven entertainment culture, the more we bump into alternative models of big-budget filmmaking, ranging from prestige middlebrow works to the slow-paced historical action films of the past, like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *The Guns of Navarone* (1961).

More than any other single quality, blockbusters promise to be entertaining. This simple truism needs to be embraced as a foundational mandate. Where entertainment has conventionally given critics license to ignore and dismiss work, I stand in an opposing camp that recognizes the supposed inconsequentiality of popular culture as one arena in which the contours of our world form and its meanings are expressed. "To be entertaining" is not a natural and timeless state of being. It encompasses sensibilities about the pleasant, the enjoyable, the relaxing, and the inventive. To be sure, entertainment simplifies, clarifies, appeases, and comforts. It provides a safety valve, letting off critical pressures to allow society to return to a stable and predictable state, and paving over unsettling truths. But we can also see moments of disruption and struggle in entertainment, and can use popular works to detect anxieties and uncertainties about the world we share. Richard Dyer's classic argument about the ideology of entertainment alerted us to the wish-fulfilling utopian appeals of escapist films. Spectacle, in particular, according to Dyer, provides evidence of abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, and community, all of which can be lacking in everyday life. The feeling that results presents possibilities of "something better."[1] In this way, entertainment recognizes certain lived needs and contradictions, even as it shuts down acknowledgment of others.

The fact that "blockbuster" immediately conjures an image of a particular kind of movie, with an associated aesthetic, marks it as popular entertainment, deserving critical attention. Blockbusters are in-your-face. For all the pleasure offered, they can be like the rude houseguest who arrives without invitation and lingers a bit too long. Notices appear in all media, synchronized to circulate with a calculated eye on when and where audiences might take the time to spend some money on the work being promoted. They occupy our senses and set the agenda for the precious few hours of our leisure time. Blockbuster movies are counted on to be valuable additions to a screening schedule, a broadcast schedule, or a streaming service. They are highly visible and hence raise the visibility of other services and commodities. Their

popularity—their visibility—is a central motivation for this book. Whether they are thought of as good movies or bad ones, they are unavoidably there.

The widespread certainty about what defines a blockbuster is curious given the term's actual definitional slipperiness. "Blockbuster movie" alludes to tonnage, to outsize production budgets, unusually elaborate promotional campaigns, and significant box-office results. Only one of those attributes is required for the term to apply, so one hears of low-budget blockbuster hits and high-budget blockbusters that are box-office flops. Notoriously demonstrating the latter is Eddie Murphy's ill-fated vehicle *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (2002), which remains one of the biggest money losers of all time with a $4.4 million domestic return on a $100 million blockbuster investment. Conversely, *Paranormal Activity* (2009) may be one of the biggest blockbuster moneymakers of all time, with domestic box-office revenue of $108 million for a movie that reportedly cost initially just $15,000, and whose success spawned a franchise of similar small-scale horror entries.[2]

The bigger the blockbuster, the more it connects with other sources of revenue and the more it is implicated in the circulation of other commodities. This is the case whether the movie is a part of a franchise or not. Risk diversification is a factor here; if the domestic box office for a movie is disappointing, it still has a chance at international, television, video game, or merchandising success, or it could be a launching pad for a more successful film to come later. Blockbusters are not just single films. They are elaborate orchestrations of commodities and investments. Eileen Meehan has shown that the varying corporate structures of "the Big Six"—Disney, Sony, Comcast, National Amusements, News Corporation, whose Twenty-First Century Fox is now part of Disney's holdings, and Time Warner, now called Warner Media and merged with AT&T—reveal nonsynchronous relations among entertainment sectors, hence differing approaches to industrial strategy.[3] But they do make up what Thomas Schatz calls "Conglomerate Hollywood," in which films are only one facet of a wide, cross-media, interindustry plan.[4] In industry terms, blockbusters are described as "tentpoles," meaning they are the centerpiece for the coming season, under which less capitalized works will be sheltered. In effect, blockbuster success provides cover for other works to be produced and distributed. Importantly, the motion picture tentpole extends to other media and commodities, such that a blockbuster is as much a T-shirt, poster, television content, magazine article, video game tie-in, and advertising opportunity as it is a movie.

Popular audiences and critics share the term "blockbuster" with industry agents. Trade publications are replete with discussions about films that are more than hits or financial successes; they are events, cultural and economic bellwethers, and signals of the health of the entertainment industry. The term is part industry insider lingo, part outsider lingo for what industry lingo might be, and also reflects a general-audience idea about a big film of the moment. The importance of this multisectoral aspect is that usage references ideas about the economy of entertainment; it alludes to the market-driven machinations that produced and circulated the movie as much as the movie itself. Constance Balides showed us how the economic world inside *Jurassic Park* (1993) mirrored the merchandising outside the film, and J. D. Connor has elaborated on the allegories of capitalism in Hollywood entertainments.[5] As these and other scholars have taught us, popular cultural forms are more than cultural commodities governed by market forces and investment decisions. They circulate ideas and sentiments, arguments and thrills, including ideas about capitalism itself. Fredric Jameson made a comparable claim, describing "mass culture not as empty distraction or 'mere' false consciousness, but rather as a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed."[6] Just as Roland Marchand wrote of advertising as the social realism of capitalism, blockbusters are likewise social realist products of a capitalist culture that is imagistic, affective, and international.[7] Put another way, "blockbuster" performs that "transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies," capturing and shaping an encounter between industry and culture; it is part of our language about movies and capitalism.

Whatever the definition, whether used with a priority connection to budget, promotion, or revenue, "blockbuster" represents a deliberate and calculated industrial strategy, one that has been central to the operations of Hollywood for many decades. Schatz correctly pinpoints *Jaws* (1975) as a key work that solidified the "hit-driven" focus of "Conglomerate Hollywood." There were key precursors two decades earlier. Schatz has outlined the forces following World War II that produced Hollywood's new and lasting concentration on big productions and promotions, along with a regularization of the "event movie." He noted that Hollywood's reliance on prestige productions really took hold and became standard practice in 1955, following a postwar period of uncertainty and upheaval largely driven by the studios' requirement

to get out of the exhibition business and by competition from television for moving-image audiences. Though the full impact was not settled until the 1970s, Schatz showed that budgets and expectations of revenue continued to rise, more marketing took place on a film-by-film basis, and Hollywood began to look further afield, to independent producers and international locations, for ways to finance, coproduce, and shoot bigger and riskier projects through the 1950s.[8] As Schatz elaborated, the mid-1970s may not have seen the first blockbusters, but they were "a new breed of blockbusters," with an aesthetic and financial plan attuned to developing ancillary markets of home video and premium cable as well as franchises.[9]

Building on this history, *American Blockbuster* explores the origins, impact, and dynamics of the blockbuster movie, this highly visible and highly capitalized cultural form. It studies the turn to a "hit-driven" focus for the American film industry from the beginning of the 1950s and elaborates how this turn was a major reorientation for the entertainment business as well as for popular expectations about culture. *American Blockbuster* traces the blockbuster's rise to a lasting position of dominance in popular culture. More than a movie, a blockbuster is a set of ideas about spectacle, culture, and economy. For this reason, I refer to a "blockbuster strategy" as the rationale that embraces the big-budget cross-media production at the expense of other industrial and artistic approaches. Most influential among the naturalized ideas about a blockbuster strategy is a core presumption about technology and its centrality in entertainment. As will be explored, the emergence of the blockbuster, and the settlement of an associated industrial strategy, accelerated the prominence of technological innovation in both the entertainment business and modern American life. In the end, the rise of the blockbuster went hand in hand with the emergence of our contemporary technological society.

Schatz referred to "the blockbuster syndrome" and "blockbuster mentality," capturing the complete attention that big films received from producers, to the exclusion of other types of films, and showing that this focus drove the rekindling of Hollywood after the industrial restructuring demanded by the Paramount Decree of 1948.[10] That turning point for the American film business forced the Hollywood studios to retreat from their control of movie theaters. Relinquishing this market power opened up competition for screens, thus making the bidding for films by exhibitors more transparent and advantageous to owners of movie houses who had no studio connections. At the time, though, moviegoing took a massive hit from television, and exhibitors as well as the film industry as a whole entered the 1950s in a state of crisis about future prospects.

So, Schatz described a "syndrome" and "mentality" about big films that emerged in response to the crisis. Jon Lewis, for his part, referred to the "blockbuster mindset," seeing the mental blinders that drove Hollywood to similar decisions about the financial attractiveness of large-scale productions for decades.[11] The psychological obsession implied by these terms— "mindset," "syndrome," "mentality"—is appropriate to what each author, and others who follow suit, hope to capture, namely, the single-minded focus on the big film as a path to financial health for the industry, sometimes followed even when it defied reason. But with "blockbuster strategy," I wish to signal that there *was* a cultural and economic logic that drove the conventionalization of the "big" in film entertainment, and that that logic by and large remains intact and dominant today. Accordingly, this book charts the backstory to our current era of "Conglomerate Hollywood" and examines how blockbuster movies have become especially important to a broader economy of new media.[12]

The technological specificity of "big" Hollywood movies has been considered by some scholars. Steve Neale and Sheldon Hall have elaborated on the importance of state-of-the-art cinematic technologies in the development of the Hollywood epic production of the 1950s, most visibly the varied widescreen and large-gauge formats, many of which did not last long but nonetheless served the purpose of pushing the distinctive technological features of the films to which they were attached.[13] Geoff King has smartly responded to the claim that special effects set pieces arrest narrative momentum, and in so doing he commented on the function of spectacle. He took note that the first era of blockbuster production in the 1950s presented long, languishing attention to vistas, showcasing the new widescreen theatrical experience. The result was an encouragement of contemplation, one that melded well with the construction of a sensibility of bourgeois prestige in the exhibition venue and the "quality" film. King argued that in recent decades the aesthetic of television commercials and music videos, including saturated colors, quick-pace editing, and disregard of spatial continuity, became a conventional expectation of blockbusters. The style seemed to prohibit the contemplation encouraged in David Lean's and Cecil B. DeMille's approaches to epic films. Despite this shift in style, King detected a strong continuation of the classical narrative structure, though it had been adjusted to provide room for extravagant effects sequences that, in effect, made technology the story.[14]

Peter Krämer provided a critical illustration, writing about one of the most prevalent descriptions of contemporary blockbuster narrative: the

rollercoaster ride. He did this through a study of *Contact* (1997), directed by the generally ill-considered Robert Zemeckis, who is in fact one of the more advanced and consistent Hollywood filmmakers, with deep investment over several decades in producing films designed to explore technological wonder. Krämer suggested that *Contact*'s explicit rollercoaster set pieces visualize the spiritual uplift that rests at the heart of the blockbuster, an emotional journey through a technological apparatus that promises to lead to another plane of serenity.[15]

The movie ride produces more than the thrill of sublime dizziness. Yvonne Tasker has effectively demonstrated that the technological architecture of the Hollywood action movie has equally produced gendered figures. The conventions of excess, and the representational modes that privilege spectacular experience, have most particularly made a spectacle of the male body and masculinity. Tasker pointed out the complicated pleasures of these exaggerated masculine bodily displays and performances while showing the dimensions of class and race that result. She remarked on "the complex ways in which popular cinema affirms gendered identities at the same time as it mobilises identification and desires which undermine the stability of such categories."[16] The politics of blockbuster affect, in other words, only amplify with the increasing focus on sensation.

King pointed out that one can see the shift away from contemplation toward technological flash in minor ways within franchises. Each new installment promises a faster, more action-packed experience than that offered by the previous one. Tom Shone described this as the "inflationary drive of blockbuster thrills."[17] It is especially the case with special effects, where, according to King, "the main *point* of the blockbuster sequel . . . might be to provide the opportunity to display the latest advances in special-effects capabilities."[18] Even the most relentless of contemporary action editing will pause for a brief contemplative rest, if only to better launch into the next visual and aural onslaught, so a historical split between contemplation and flash is not so cut-and-dried. But King's observation is useful as an indication of a general tendency that matches contemporary aesthetic expectations: blockbusters confront audiences with accelerated editing, amped-up sound, and obsessively considered visual effects. In each of these directions, they showcase technological features.

Michael Allen, charting innovations spanning from synchronized sound to digital effects, showed how blockbusters highlight new cinematic technology.[19] In many respects, the most elaborate and circumscribed special effects sequences function as display cases for cutting-edge innovations. Blockbust-

ers court this status, and blockbuster production can entail an anxious exploration of novel forms of technological wonder, forms that are supposed to surpass previous efforts and contemporary competitors. Though this tendency can be seen with physical effects and stunts, it has been amplified with digital effects. As Michele Pierson observed, "audiences do make demands on special effects that they don't make on other types of computer-generated images, and this has put the producers of this imagery in the position of having to find new ways of soliciting audiences' attention once the aesthetic novelty of a particular technique has worn off."[20]

Other authors have highlighted the promise of the sublime rooted in the large-scale technological wonder of the blockbuster. Scott Bukatman understood that "what is evoked by special effects sequences is often a hallucinatory excess as narrative yields to kinetic spectatorial experience."[21] He saw this as producing kaleidoscopic perception, composed of "equal parts delirium, kinesis, and immersion."[22] The most elaborate of special effects sequences illustrate Bukatman's point best, representing a will to break free of the limits of physical constraint, and with that the limits of rationality, in favor of pure, dizzying, sensation. His broad claim was that this focus was "the narrative process of technological accommodation."[23] Kristen Whissel has read similar textual dimensions of impossible physics as a desire to break free of historical constraint. Whether the seemingly endless expanses of creatures and people squeezed into the frame by digital effects, or the soaring verticality of gravity defiance, Whissel saw an allegorical "radical break" from hierarchies of power. The digital multitudes of battles in "Lord of the Rings" and the verticality found in *Titanic* (1997) just before the ship sinks visualize rupture from the past. Here, the fantastical physics of digital effects are a commentary on historical disruption.[24]

Sean Cubitt expanded arguments typified by Bukatman and Whissel, seeing technological excesses as ways to siphon off representational freedom from actual historical circumstances. In describing the sumptuous aesthetic of what he called "neobaroque cinema," Cubitt focused on the creeping perpetual motion of the Steadicam camera and digital effects that transformed spatial organization into an indeterminate geography, one that could be infinitely expanded and removed from the world. With neobaroque, as he saw it, spectators identify with fictions that are sealed off from historical context and consequence, instead invested in world building. In the end, Cubitt wrote, "Digital technologies promise to elevate fantasy worlds above the troublesome everyday world."[25] He continued to see a demolition of what might have

been a social realist impulse in popular cinema, claiming, "The digital corresponds so closely to the emergent loss of an ideological structure to social meaning because it no longer pretends to represent the world."[26] He wrote, "Each closed diegetic world is replete, condensed, full as an egg, solid as a billiard ball."[27]

The impact of this technological focus expands beyond filmic construction and special effects. Blockbusters have played a special role in advancing cross-media relations since the 1950s and have eased the introduction of new technologies, whether for cinematic, consumer electronic, medical, military, or educational use.[28] Pierson reminded us that early computer animation developed to feed software for special effects but also industrial and military applications.[29] J. P. Telotte's study of Disney's relationship to technological development similarly showed us the ideological high-wire act they conducted between the world of tomorrow and the world of yesterday, in the process embracing new technological processes in film, television, and other entertainment media. He wrote that theme parks "are not fantasy worlds but great technological wonders."[30] Blockbusters do comparable cultural work. Many current blockbusters feature computer-generated imagery, can be connected with new generations of video game systems, and might be central to promotional material selling new formats (Blu-ray, 3-D home technologies, virtual reality gear). Whether overtly or by virtue of their form, featured properties or franchise entries are strategically promoted to advance new platforms, hardware, and media systems, and as such they act as *technological tentpoles*.

Avatar (2009) was unusually highly developed in this respect, with 3-D filming processes, 3-D exhibition, digital exhibition, and 3-D home entertainment banking on its success. Consider *Avatar*'s newspaper advertising, which promised the routine geographic reach of a wide-release blockbuster ("everywhere") but also format choice ("every*way*") between 2-D, digital 3-D, and IMAX 3-D presentations, each with distinct appeal and pricing (figure 1.1). Panasonic later used *Avatar* in an international cross-promotion deal to sell its own new HD 3-D Home Theater system, with mobile units offering point-of-purchase illustrations while the film was still in theaters.[31] This deal was extended with the first 3-D home version of the film, released in December 2010—available only on Blu-ray and compatible only with Panasonic's Viera set for a little over a year (figure 1.2).[32] This exclusivity ran until February 2012. *Avatar*'s promotion demonstrated a heightened *platform consciousness*. In essence, the campaign sold media format and film at once.[33] As intensified as these multiplatform features of our popular film industry have become, the roots are found in the
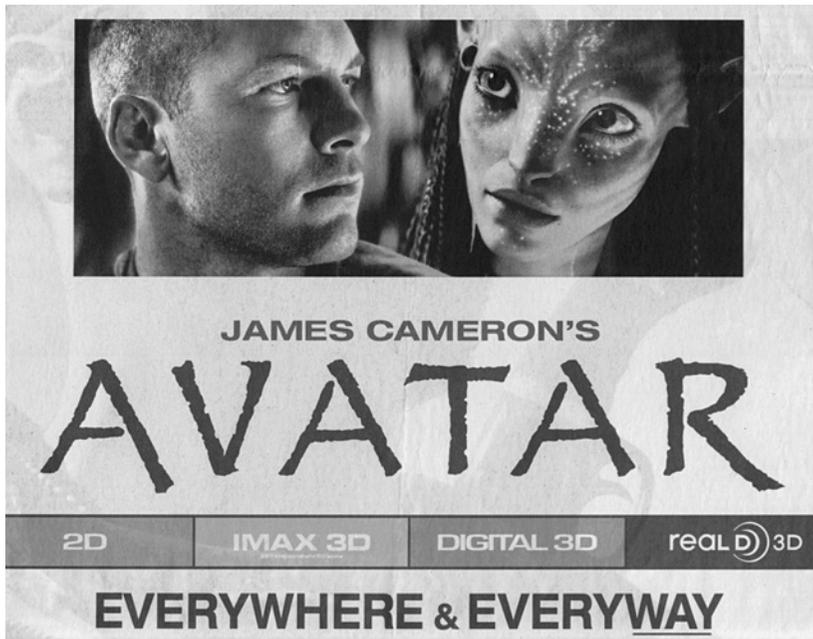
FIGURE 1.1 *Avatar* newspaper advertisement, 2010

initial settlement of the meanings of "blockbuster," as a type of film and as an industrial strategy, seventy years ago, with a comparable investment in technological advancement.

Accordingly, this book is about technological innovation in relation to entertainment industries. Technological innovation has been inseparable from the history and vitality of the American film industry. But today, as Thomas Elsaesser described them, blockbusters are prototypes for the future of cinema.[34] More than this, blockbusters are, and have been, prototypes for ideas and commodities associated with the future of technology and culture. Blockbusters, directly or indirectly acting as technological tentpoles, are complex cultural machines designed to normalize the ideologies of our technological era.

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A full history of spectacular entertainment would stretch back several millennia and would encompass theatrical and athletic performance of various kinds, some cruel and some amazing, as with Roman circuses and the modern

FIGURE 1.2 Panasonic advertisement for Viera 3-D television cross-promoting *Avatar*, 2010

Olympics. The global pop star, the worldwide best-selling book series, and the international television franchise all offer illustrations of hit-driven and geographically flexible cultural commodities. So there are precedents and companions to the brilliant visibility of the blockbuster movie. Some features, though, mark the blockbuster movie as distinctive. Not only does it enjoy a dominant presence in so many locations, often in a highly compressed time frame, but its seasonal release schedule makes its appearance predictable and regularized. Blockbusters are slates of popular works presented globally as such. They are the new foliage of each season of commercial entertainment. Moreover, blockbuster movies are among the most fully realized *American* cultural products of our time. Virtually every national cinema culture has its version of a blockbuster. But at the top end, where a handful of films each year are the most popular and lucrative films across international markets, those movies are overwhelmingly American.

Here's the thing, the troubling element that shakes the global triumphalism of the blockbuster: there is a widespread consensus about how bad they are. There are multitudes of fans for various franchises, and the enthusiasm for beloved characters and compelling dramatic or comedic moments lifts any popular work beyond its immediate economic function. The power of popular works lies precisely in their ability to wend their way into people's lives, and there to provide emotional, intellectual, and communal sustenance. But the very idea of the blockbuster, its industrial provenance and commercial intentions, draws out suspicion and resides as inconsequential: "It's only a blockbuster." For all the fandom, blockbuster efforts are habitually vilified by audiences and critics alike, sometimes even before their release or viewing. The American blockbuster movie, for all its popularity, is one of the most agreed-upon vacuums of cultural value. Cultural critic Alexander Huls wrote about the major films of 2013:

> Blockbusters have never been a particular source of maturity or sophistication. That's been mostly by design, given that they've always traded in trying to capture something of our inner child's fantasy and awe. It's why we're often prone to framing the success and failure of big-budget spectacles in those terms: "*Pacific Rim* was great and made me feel like a kid again" vs. "*Transformers* was awful and only a kid would like it." But thanks to a growing emphasis on mass-destruction in recent years, blockbusters have started to feel like they're not so much facilitating child-like states as they are regressing into them.[35]

Many will no doubt agree with Huls's appraisal of the films he discussed. But notable are several qualities that are presumed to be understood about blockbusters: immaturity, lack of sophistication, spectacle, fantasy, and awe. The argument hinges on the claim that blockbusters have "always traded" in childishness.

There is plenty of critical excuse-making that suggests their sorry state comes from their formulas, their "brewed-in-a-lab" veneer, and their targeting of teenagers. For every cherished film—*Star Wars* (1977), *E.T.* (1982), *Titanic*, *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and what have you—and for all the elaborate displays of enthusiastic fandom, even the most committed devotee of popular filmed entertainment will still speak disparagingly of the all-too-plentiful crass and vapid blockbusters. They—even the youngest of teenagers—will quickly revert to a lament about the industrially manufactured soullessness of the general category of the blockbuster.

A beautiful, irresistible example of blind presumptions about blockbusters is Slavoj Žižek's essay on *Avatar*, published in the *New Statesman* a few months after the film's release, as it was just crossing into record-breaking box-office territory. His essay made some observations about compulsory heterosexuality in Hollywood films, drawing illustrations from *Reds* (1981) and *Titanic*, pointing out that grand historical events were there to provide a backdrop for romantic couplings. The ideological consequence, he reasoned, is that potentially revolutionary ideas are neutralized, however progressive the narrative may appear to be. Žižek identified this especially in tales that emphasize contact with a class or ethnic Other, whose role is really to bestow characterological development on the protagonist and their love life. This, Žižek wrote, is what *Avatar* does. The film embraces indigenous culture and provides a surface-level critique of imperialism, only to twist its priorities toward the romantic couple of the aboriginal princess and the disabled marine.

In this short essay, Žižek highlighted some standard narrative tropes of popular American film, which are useful to revisit. The essay, though, has some clunkers. He wrote that Hollywood habitually adds sex scenes that don't appear in original source material, when, actually, Hollywood's skittishness about sex is one of its defining characteristics. While Žižek's argument rested on an observation that Hollywood film gives prominence to the stabilizing force of romantic couples, he contradicted this core claim by suggesting, following commentary from Alain Badiou, that "the very notion of falling in love, of a passionate attachment to a sexual partner, is considered obsolete

and dangerous."[36] And the details about *Avatar* were slim, imprecise, and not nearly as exact as the descriptions of scenes from *Titanic* and *Reds*. But the vague treatment of *Avatar* can be easily explained: he had not seen the movie.

Pause to consider that for a moment. At that particular moment, *Avatar* was the most viewed and hotly debated motion picture on the planet. And yet Lacanian popular cultural critic Žižek did not consider it necessary to see the film when embarking on an essay about it. To be fair, he has claimed not to have seen half the films he has written about and that, for a Lacanian, the idea—which in his case means his imagined sense of the work and not its actuality—is enough to go on.[37] Pride in such blatantly irresponsible scholarly behavior is no doubt part of his self-constructed persona as a bad-boy critic. But the level of generality with which he wrote about *Avatar* makes it evident he was writing without having examined the film carefully. As an opera lover and a critic who has written about the political potential of opera, it is doubtful that Žižek would advocate writing about one based only on a synopsis, or that he would encourage a student of Lacanian theory to avoid reading Jacques Lacan. His scholarship has encouraged us to take the symbolic realm of popular film seriously; to double-back, saying you don't have to take works seriously in order to take them seriously, is astonishing. It exposes a deep presumption about the obviousness of popular film, its simplicity and predictability. A counter-example is the work of Katie Ellis, who provided a dead-on reading of *Avatar* that shows the unstable progressive heart of its representation of disability, easily upturning the surface claims of Žižek.[38] Ellis's smart argument took care and paid attention to the actual movie, meaning, you know, she saw it.

Žižek is not alone in his presumptions about the obviousness of popular film. Themes of commercial artlessness, and the valiant efforts of brave auteurs to battle the system, populate Hollywood historiography. Virtually every period has its seductive narratives that reproduce the admiration of mavericks outside the studios and cunning nonconformists within. Particularly emblematic of this tone are the tales of the New Hollywood of the 1970s. Peter Biskind popularized the rendition in which Hollywood, moribund under the weight of its own ambitions, was saved by a new generation of artists who investigated, and consequently revived, familiar genres, doing so with film language that owed as much to the French New Wave as it did classical Hollywood style. These filmmakers, among them Francis Ford Coppola, Hal Ashby, Elaine May, Robert Altman, and Peter Bogdanovich, in short order produced some of the most original and popular Hollywood motion pictures ever, only to be struck down by the commercial and artistic barriers erected as

the industry again reorganized itself to focus on blockbusters post-*Jaws*. Challenges to that new orthodoxy came in the 1990s with the surprising successes of the Sundance Film Festival and independent producer and distributor Miramax. Part of Miramax's story, in Biskind's version and elsewhere, was of the terrorizing rampages and general intimidation of one of its founders, Harvey Weinstein.[39] This story is being rewritten with accusations of persistent sexual harassment and assault, which eventually led to Weinstein's conviction.

Janet Maslin had earlier voiced a version of Biskind's assessment about the New Hollywood and its demise, marking June 1975 as the turning point, when Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) and *Jaws* each appeared on the cover of different national magazines. This was the end of the artistic high of the New Hollywood, represented by the former film, and the beginning of the era of the blockbuster. She wrote, "When *Jaws* made it possible for every would-be viewer in America to be targeted for a unilateral marketing blitz, it created irrevocable change. Films would now be held to a different and increasingly exacting standard, one that accepted across-the-board popularity as the ultimate sign of merit. A stellar new generation of film makers would do their best to translate personal concerns into broad, crowd-pleasing terms, and would often do so with great success. But the golden age was over. The time of the blockbuster had begun."[40] Maslin extended the binary claim about artistic quality and commercial success, adding recognizable comments about "across-the-board popularity" and "broad, crowd-pleasing terms" with regard to the films of the blockbuster era post-1975. She, as many critics do, also gave the impression that this kind of film had not ruled Hollywood before this moment: "The time of the blockbuster had begun."

On the one hand, Biskind's and Maslin's stories are exciting and illuminating accounts. On the other hand, they are partial, downplaying how "Hollywood" the New Hollywood was, with considerable overlap with the stars and filmmakers of the earlier studio era. The flow between old and new, from set dressers to scriptwriters to actors to marketing teams, was substantial and constant. Far from being obscure artistic statements, many of those pre-1975 personal films were exceptionally popular with broad audiences and were by most measures blockbusters in their own right. Some even set new "exacting standards" for box-office success, especially *American Graffiti* (1973), *The Godfather* (1972), and the sequel *The Godfather: Part II* (1974). Conversely, the quintessential blockbusters of the 1970s were considerably indebted to the new film language that had come to be associated with those New Hollywood

mavericks. *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) include overlapping dialogue, improvisational acting styles, photorealist flourishes like lens flares, rich saturated colors, and a misty atmospheric look. Julie Turnock developed this assessment in her research on Hollywood's increasing reliance on "expanded blockbusters" in the mid-1970s. She wrote, "While most critics perceive the special effects-driven blockbuster as the opposite of the auteurist-driven 'personal' film, instead I see these films, especially *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*, as extensions of this ethos."[41] The familiar story of *Jaws* putting the brakes on the artistry of a new generation of Hollywood filmmakers is apocryphal at best but is perhaps closer to a critical fantasy that reflects recognizable middlebrow cultural hierarchies (*Nashville* over *Jaws*, personal films over blockbusters).

In the narratives of Hollywood economics deposing Hollywood artistry, Francis Ford Coppola often gets a pass, perhaps because he did not benefit as stupendously as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote, in bourgeois art sensibilities, we take "failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise."[42] But let us remember that "The Godfather" was one of the most expansive and lucrative franchises to emerge from the 1970s. And what are *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *One from the Heart* (1981) if not big-budget extravaganzas that rest on advanced cinematic technology for physical and photographic effects?

The entwining of what we commonsensically understand as "Hollywood" with contrasting and more artful film cultures is the subject of Sherry B. Ortner's *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream*.[43] In it, she shows how the rise of the American "independent" film in the 1990s was the consequence of many factors, including new production/distribution units like Miramax operating outside the major studios, the majors' own efforts to capitalize on the independent film wave and establish their own indie wings (like Sony Pictures Classics and Fox Searchlight), and more venues to integrate outsiders, such as festivals and film schools. Ortner describes a generational shift in the United States, showing that the experience of economic precarity produced filmmakers and audiences who sought to understand conditions beyond what had been prevalent in the dominant cinema. Key to her study is a reigning idea of Hollywood. So powerful was this idea, as much as Hollywood's actual economic might, that it was able to assimilate its own alternative even as "Hollywood" served as the touchstone against which that independent film movement of the 1990s emerged in the first place. No film

form better typified what Hollywood means than the blockbuster, and the immediate response, the one that sparked indie film energy, was disgust.[44]

The art/commerce divide, paired as it is with the personal film/impersonal blockbuster duo, rules our hierarchical organization of value for popular film. And yet, as with all categories of cultural value, these binaries provide notable exceptions, like the possibility of a "blockbuster auteur."[45] Christopher Nolan, Sam Raimi, the Wachowskis, and Peter Jackson illustrate what blockbuster auteurs might look like; Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and, further back, David Lean have figured as such as well. But the very fact that a blockbuster requires the modifier "auteur" to count as good reveals the sense that the two are not easily appended to one another. The blockbuster—or, more precisely, the idea of the American blockbuster movie—travels as an agreed-upon extreme manifestation of industrial culture; it exudes artlessness unless otherwise designated. As Julian Stringer has described it, there is always a suspicion on the part of audiences that with the newest, most extravagant blockbuster, one has the "impulse to recoil in the face of vulgar exhibitionism."[46]

Following Bourdieu, collective social action builds our cultural hierarchies, doing so by establishing mechanisms through which cultural value can be identified and agreed upon. The supposedly clear-eyed recognition of art in fact requires a range of interventions, though those interventions must be hidden or thought of as transparent. He wrote, "The constitution of the aesthetic gaze as a 'pure' gaze . . . is linked to the *institution* of the work of art as an object of contemplation, with the creation of private and then public galleries and museums, and the parallel development of a corps of professionals appointed to conserve the work of art, both materially and symbolically."[47] The more obvious interventions, especially those of the market, place the work further from the realm of art. Accordingly, one might say that the field of cultural production occupied by the contemporary blockbuster is that of what Bourdieu called *heteronomous* culture, the field of large-scale production beholden to the laws of the market, as opposed to the more artfully inclined, and commercially sublimated, field of restricted *autonomous* production, which is where the auteur film, with its evocation of personal style and supposed disregard for market potential, conventionally resides. We all know which one holds the most cultural value. And the clarity and obviousness of that divide is precisely what Bourdieu marks as the cultural power to build and reproduce differential taste formations and class hierarchies.

★ ★ ★ ★

How did the term "blockbuster," this point of intersection of ideas about commerce and entertainment, find a stable and lasting place in contemporary vernacular? How did the normative meanings about blockbusters come to be situated so securely at the heart of how we understand popular motion pictures? A blockbuster strategy has defined the American film industry for decades and indeed has proven flexible enough to persist even after earth-shifting industrial upheavals in the business of entertainment. Technological change has upturned standard practices of production, promotion, and distribution, most powerfully represented by the adoption of digital formats in every facet of the media industries. Significant corporate restructuring, including mergers and acquisitions involving businesses outside the entertainment industry and new sources of capital coming from international entities, means Hollywood is now entwined with industries far afield from narrow definitions of the film, television, and music businesses. Still, blockbusters and their appended assumptions about business and entertainment remain central.

The longevity of "blockbuster" and its wide circulation are not without precedent in the entertainment world. A number of terms that move between industrial and popular contexts similarly provide a basic lexicon for addressing and comprehending film culture, including genre designations, star personas, film cycles and franchises, and production entities and locations. Yet there is surprisingly little documentation on how the blockbuster strategy emerged and rose to the position it currently enjoys. The derivation of "blockbuster" has been left largely to rumor and supposition. As Stringer put it, "because 'event movies' seem always to be *there*, in the public eye, we have thought about them less than we should."[48] The presumptions of crassness, our familiarity with the titles and the attention the films seem to crave, make us more likely to take them for granted and conclude that we already know all we need, or care, to know about them. It is time, finally, to get down to sorting out the history of this idea that came to be so tightly woven into our understanding of popular entertainment.

Some tell the apocryphal tale that "blockbuster" migrated from the live-theater trade, where a play that has audiences lining up around the block is a blockbuster, claiming that the movie business appropriated the same reference for box-office lineups as its measure of success. Extensive research in trade and general readership publications reveals that no corroborating evidence supporting that story exists. In another bit of historical misdirection, one still encounters erroneous claims that *Jaws* was the first blockbuster movie.[49] This claim, too, is apocryphal and historically myopic. Even a critic

as historically aware as Tom Shone still began his book *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* with the story of the summer release of Spielberg's shark opera. *Jaws* is an essential work, no question, and it is best understood as yet another watershed moment in Hollywood's reliance on big box-office hits and as a catalyst for a new phase of popular usage of the term "blockbuster." But the term did not originate with Spielberg's surprise hit (which was actually the third surprise smash of his career).

So uncertain is the status of the concept of the blockbuster that specialized film dictionaries and glossaries do not consistently include an entry for it. For example, such different reference books as Frank Eugene Beaver's *Dictionary of Film Terms: The Aesthetic Companion to Film Art*, Susan Hayward's *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, and Ephraim Katz and Ronald Dean Nolen's *The Film Encyclopedia: The Complete Guide to Film and the Film Industry* do not include entries for "blockbuster."[50] Steve Blandford, Barry Keith Grant, and Jim Hillier's *The Film Studies Dictionary* includes one, succinctly contrasting the use of the term in the 1950s, referring to a particular kind of epic and big-budget film often released through road-showing, with the post-1970s use that referenced virtually any financial success and was more associated with saturation releasing, which is a superior definition.[51] The absence of the term in those other resources is perplexing. After all, we are not talking about a localized microscopic film phenomenon. We are talking about the most watched, discussed, and economically productive movies in motion picture history.

Some works have charted the rise of the blockbuster era of the 1950s, countering the ahistorical accreditation of *Jaws* as the first, and have investigated the aesthetics and significance of the most spectacular films of various eras.[52] For instance, Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale's history *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* made the essential observation that what we now call blockbusters—big-budget spectaculars and big-grossing films—had variants from the beginning of Hollywood cinema. Their historiographic approach took the lavish production as central to Hollywood history, and they found this to be a point of continuity across periods. And John Sanders made an attempt to solidify the blockbuster as a genre of Hollywood film and in the process anachronistically applied the term to films he considered exemplary, for example, *Intolerance* (1916), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Bambi* (1942).[53] He included these films as they, respectively, were "big and spectacular, with dramatic narrative sweep," had a "grand story and visuals . . . indelibly etched into the collective cinema memory," and were financially successful.[54] Though he, like many scholars and fans, specifically dated the

current phase of blockbusters to the mid-1970s, he also wrote that "the block-buster has always been a mainstay of Hollywood cinema."[55]

In other words, our understanding of blockbuster films has assumed that the term can be used to reference big-budget and successful films from any era. But what do we find if we consider the actual historical specificity of the term, its emergence and circulation, rather than transporting our current usage backward? To date there has been only the thinnest of treatments of how we came to settle on this specific term. Steve Neale noted, "Originally coined to describe a large-scale bomb in World War II, the term was taken up and used by Hollywood from the early 1950s on to refer on the one hand to large-scale productions and on the other to large-scale box-office hits."[56] There is no elaboration on these origins. Here is another typical rendering from Marco Cucco: "The word 'blockbuster' has a military origin and was used to indicate the large-scale bombs used during the Second World War. Later, during the 1950s, the word came into use in the cinematographic field."[57] In both, the breezy, self-propelled movement from bomb to movie has no intervening stage. Filling in the details of this migration is not Neale's nor Cucco's purpose, but it is striking that a detailed account of this prominent and lasting term is not available elsewhere either.

A noteworthy exception is Sheldon Hall's "Pass the Ammunition: A Short Etymology of 'Blockbuster.'" This research resonates productively with the work I present in these pages. Hall comments on the origins of the term, considering additionally the parallel developments of other terms like "block" and "block-booking," a practice in which distributors required exhibitors to rent packages of films rather than bid on each one individually. He correctly identifies the World War II provenance of "blockbuster" and traces other military associations promoted by Hollywood. As will be elaborated in subsequent chapters, Hall connects the more regularized usage of the term in the American film business with changes in postwar exhibition practices and post–Paramount Decree relations between exhibitors and distributors.[58]

Many accounts associate the origin of the blockbuster with the cycle of biblical epics of the 1950s. For example, the headline for *Variety*'s November 1951 review of *Quo Vadis* (1951) called the film "a boxoffice blockbuster" (figure 1.4).[59] Hall and Neale referred to this as the moment after which "the term quickly passed into trade and public vocabulary to become all but ubiquitous by the mid-1950s."[60] *Quo Vadis* certainly displays the production extravagances associated with blockbusters. Based on a popular bestseller from the late nineteenth century, which had been adapted for the screen at least three times
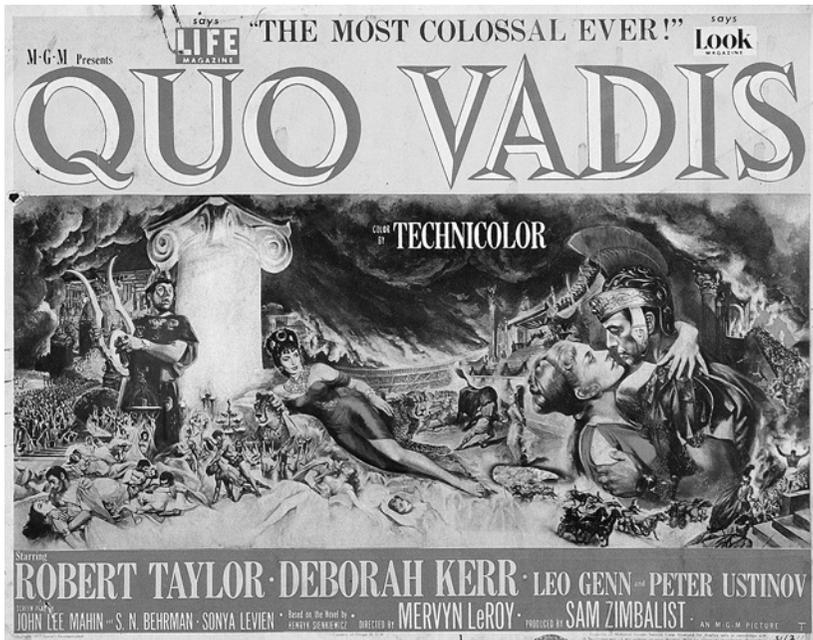
FIGURE 1.3 *Quo Vadis* lobby card, "the most colossal ever," 1951

before, it is nearly three hours long and boasts spectacular sets and dramatic events, especially a staging of the burning of Rome. With 200 speaking parts, 30,000 extras, and 120 lions, the film would be unimaginably—prohibitively—expensive to produce today. At the time, the gargantuan production expenses paid off. *Quo Vadis* was in theaters for almost two years and was released again in 1964. In 2005, adjusted to contemporary U.S. dollars, it was still in the top one hundred domestic box-office hits.[61]

Notably, the *Variety* review of *Quo Vadis* that described the film as a blockbuster also referenced the "now-cliched 'super-colossal' term" and "super-spectacle" to characterize the unusual expansiveness of *Quo Vadis*.[62] Both of those terms had been used by Hollywood to drum up interest in especially big-budget films for years. Productions might be called "super-westerns" or "super-musicals" to distinguish big-budget genre offerings from more modestly produced fare. For a film like *Quo Vadis*, "epic" and "spectacle" were primary qualities, hence "super-colossal" and "super-spectacle."

The ascendancy of "blockbuster," however, was already in process by the time that leading trade publication's review appeared. One week earlier in the

Quo Vadis
(COLOR)

A boxoffice blockbuster.

Metro release of Sam Zimbalist production. Stars Robert Taylor, Deborah Kerr, Leo Genn, Peter Ustinov. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. Screenplay, John Lee Mahin, S. N. Behrman, Sonya Levien, based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel; music, Miklos Rozsa; cameras (Technicolor), Robert Surtees, William V. Skall; editor, Ralph E. Winters; lyrics and historical adviser, Hugh Gray; dances, Marta Obolensky, Auriel Millos; special effects, Thomas Howard, A. Arnold Gillespie, Donald Jahraus; costumes, Herschel Mc-Coy. World premiered at Astor, N. Y. (twice-daily reserved) and Capitol, N. Y. (continuous), Nov. 8, '51. Running time, 171 MINS.

Marcus Vinicius	Robert Taylor
Lygia	Deborah Kerr
Petronius	Leo Genn
Nero	Peter Ustinov
Poppaea	Patricia Laffan
Peter	Finlay Currie
Paul	Abraham Sofaer
Eunice	Marina Berti
Ursus	Buddy Baer
Plautius	Felix Aylmer
Pomponia	Nora Swinburne
Tigellinus	Ralph Truman
Nerva	Norman Wooland
Nazarius	Peter Miles
Terpnos	Geoffrey Dunn
Seneca	Nicholas Hansen
Phaon	D. A. Clarke-Smith
Acte	Rosalie Crutchley
Chilo	John Ruddock
Croton	Arthur Walge
Miriam	Elspeth March
Rufia	Strelsa Brown
Lucan	Alfredo Varelli
Flavius	Roberto Ottaviano
Anaxander	William Tubbs
Galba	Pietro Tordi

"Quo Vadis" is a b.o. blockbuster. No two ways about its economic horizons. It's right up there with "Birth of a Nation" and "Gone With the Wind" for boxoffice performance.

It has size, scope, splash and

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FIGURE 1.4 *Variety* review for *Quo Vadis*, detail, "a boxoffice blockbuster," 1951

same publication, Dore Schary, soon to be Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's (MGM) production head and one of *Quo Vadis*'s producers, drew a notable distinction between blockbusters, which were in color, expensive, and more plentiful than ever, and "orthodox" pictures.[63] Less than two months later, for *Variety*'s forty-sixth-anniversary issue, producer Hal Wallis and director Stanley Kramer both wrote articles critical of the "so-called blockbuster."[64] The vice president of Republic Pictures, James R. Grainger, voiced an early argument against an exclusive focus on the big-budget film, also referring to it as "a so-called blockbuster." Elucidating reasoning that would gain steam through the 1950s, he argued that what was important to producers and to exhibitors was "a steady flow of product to keep their screens occupied, and [that] every picture can't be a 'blockbuster.'"[65] Other guest columnists in the anniversary issue discussed big-budget films but used older terms like "colossal" and "super-colossal" pictures.[66] But "blockbuster" was already recognizable enough for one contributor, director George Sidney, to use it anachronistically, reminiscing that when he first arrived in Hollywood in 1934, "Dick Arlen was killing them in such blockbusters as *Come On Marines* and *Let 'Em Have It*."[67] Action packed as these films were, they do not fit contemporary ideas about blockbusters and were modest genre films. But these references to something called a blockbuster, by prominent industry insiders, reveal that prior to our accepted narrative about "the Hollywood blockbuster"—beginning with the religious epics of the 1950s or even later with *Jaws* in the 1970s—some earlier currency had already been established.

"Blockbuster" did indeed originate in World War II as a way that newspaper reporters described the new four-thousand-pound bombs dropped by Allied Forces on enemy cities, and chapter 3 explores this in detail. Beyond the catchy ring of the term's alliteration, it is surprising that a colloquialism for an instrument of destruction came to be a lasting designation for an expensive and lucrative cultural commodity, whether for stage, screen, print, or broadcast markets. Investigating this terminological migration is one objective of this book. These pages open up the history of the settlement and dispersion of "blockbuster" by providing instances of its early cultural usage. I approach this topic with the analytic stance that the settlement of a term of this kind, which becomes a common way to reference popular works, involves more than the appearance of a new word. Along with the term go assumptions about and organizing principles of entertainment culture. Examining the emergence of a term is also a way to evince dominant priorities in culture and society.

The next chapter, "Industrial Regimes of Entertainment," continues part I, "The Spectacle Industry," by surveying the place of blockbuster franchises in the contemporary popular entertainment industry, showing how they are a product of a calculated effort to find economic advantage through globalized culture, cross-media integration, and technological innovation. The four chapters in part II, "The Rise of the Blockbuster," develop a chronological historical examination of the 1940s and 1950s to show how we arrived at our current situation. Chapter 3, "Delivering Blockbusters," documents the first uses of the term "blockbuster." The World War II origins, most strikingly, demonstrate how early usage was bound up with ideas about the public display of new technology. Chapter 4, "The Business of Big," traces the migration of the term, and its appended connotations, to the film industry, where big movies and spectacular exhibition formats came to be understood as key to the future economic viability of Hollywood, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. Chapter 5, "Hollywood's Return," recounts the competition among industry insiders as they vied to bank on the rising interest in blockbuster entertainment through the first years of the 1950s. Chapter 6, focusing on the later years of the 1950s, captures the moment in which the term stabilizes as a recognizable type of film for the general moviegoing public. That chapter, "Cosmopolitan Artlessness," presents how the blockbuster circulated simultaneously as the peak of cinematic achievement and as a symptom of everything that was wrong with Hollywood, its capitalist underbelly, and its investment in technological grandeur at the expense of tasteful film art. The chapter ends with a discussion of the deflation of the expectations for the blockbuster strategy in the late 1960s, only for it to return ever more mightily in the 1970s. Since then, it has dug in and remained a dominant part of the motion picture industry.

In the service of providing a fuller account of the longevity of the blockbuster strategy, part III, "The Technological Sublime of Entertainment Everywhere," moves away from the chronological narrative and returns to the second chapter's claims about the blockbuster in contemporary popular entertainment. Chapter 7, "The End of James Cameron's Quiet Years," is a detailed case study of perhaps the most influential film in recent history, *Avatar*. In it, the core approaches to technology, media integration, and popular franchise environments that had been in formation for decades reach absolute realization. Chapter 8, "The Technological Heart of Movie Culture," addresses the place of popular film in a wider culture that highly values technological devices and infrastructure. The chapter explores the variety of

technological aspects that shape film culture, including DVD supplementary material and the contemporary theatrical experience. Closing the book is an epilogue, "Exhausted Entertainment," which speculates on the impact of a blockbuster entertainment culture that celebrates technology as it does.

At one level, the chronological portion of this book in part II is a version of one of the most maligned and risky forms of historical research—the origin story. All it takes is some ephemera from Tuesday, after I insist it all starts on Wednesday, to ruin the argument. Obviously, I want to be more delicate than that and wish to tell a story of the conditions that helped launch a taken-for-granted set of meanings that converge around the term "blockbuster." To do this, I take cues from work on film noir, especially James Naremore's *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, which explores the historical development and mobility of that term to illuminate how "noir" describes so many different film styles and uses and yet is still understood as relatively coherent.[68] Stringer framed his edited collection on blockbusters with this approach, making the evocative observation that if "night" is the structuring term for film noir, the relevant term for blockbusters is "size."[69]

In considering how a set of ideas is talked about and explained by industrial participants, critics, and audiences, and how these conceptual arrays come to rest at a particular terminological location, we see that "blockbuster" displayed a high degree of indeterminacy in its early years in the 1940s. When we focus on how "blockbuster" circulated, a greater range of noncanonical films, objectives, and ideas about popular movies come into view, revealing an intricate effort on the part of industry agents, critics, and general audiences to make sense of the popular cultural environment and economy. In short, blockbusters are not only big-budget and high-grossing productions. The term is also shorthand for ideas about cultural value, economic success, and innovation, ideas that are acted on and that form the basis for future investment, artistic, and consumption decisions.

Media historian Lisa Gitelman astutely recommended that we see media as "socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning" and as "a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions that develop around and help define new media practices and technologies."[70] This approach allowed Gitelman to show that media are not so unified with clear boundaries between them. Instead, she pointed us to the overlapping characteristics and practices associated with media and technology from which culture emerges and is organized. She promised to approach media topics in a manner that "keeps things muddy" and encouraged media critics to do so as well.[71] Her

important point is that our media and cultural worlds emerge from deep historical contexts that structure, order, and prioritize people and practices, rather than from stable sets of singularly determining media qualities and features. Moreover, media technologies are not isolated agents of change, with set "affordances," but are themselves products of their time and place. To illuminate these functions, we can reverse-engineer their operations to gain access to culturally privileged ideas.

Extending this approach, I suggest that we treat cultural forms, and the discourses about cultural forms, as similarly produced through normative rules, default conditions, and negotiated meanings. In this respect, the various active languages about film give us access to what we agree the rules, norms, and contested features of popular entertainment culture are. "Blockbuster," so imbricated with our everyday language about popular cinematic practice, is one such active term, functioning as a mechanism through which the entertainment culture and industry has circulated and been understood for years. This book shows that as the term "blockbuster" settled in as a long-standing feature of industrial and popular film language, so too did a set of ideas about success, taste, economy, entertainment, and technology.

The various trade articles in the aforementioned 1952 anniversary issue of *Variety* illustrate in miniature the methodological approach to be followed in this study. A keyword search did not give me these appearances of "blockbuster," nor would a search of that kind offer the contextual and discursive commentary that I have just presented. Reading—targeted, focused, and purposeful, but still reading—is the primary activity I engaged in during the course of the research presented here. And I do mean reading, actual reading, not machine reading, which, after all, as Johanna Drucker explained, is not reading at all but mechanical recognition.[72] Some algorithmic assistance was provided, and searching digitized databases of articles of all kinds helped me assemble a basic collection of materials. Other digital tools that provide portraits of a large number of sources have some usefulness, albeit quite limited. Google Ngram Viewer can provide broad date parameters, but that's about it. There, search terms are sought among millions of books, so it offers some advantages of scale. But the items searched are not curated, they are untended, and they are not organized for specific subject areas; it sweeps wildly over one publication format. Ngram Viewer might help confirm dates for the appearance of terms and their peak usage in books. But beyond that, few other conclusions can be drawn. As with any sky-high view, there is no illumination of discourses in operation, which is equally true of some of the other digital

humanities tools, like the distortions of topic modeling and the codification of data into surrealist graphic representations. Colorful renderings of data as Rorschach tests that we read with wild interpretive freedom, just like those psychological tests, tell us more about the thinking of the interpreter than about the world the image is supposed to represent.

The Arclight search app (projectarclight.org) improves on Ngram Viewer and comparable shotgun search mechanisms. Teams at Concordia University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison, led by Eric Hoyt and me, collaborated on this tool. The Arclight app provides portraits of the metadata for material in the Media History Digital Library (MHDL). For this reason, the results are more directly relevant to scholars and students of film and media than those of other, more general search mechanisms. Valuing simplicity and clarity of visual design, it allows a user to grasp quickly the overall historical appearance of keywords and can limit searches to specific publications and years available in the MHDL. Because an omnibus graphic of results has only so much value to historians, the Arclight app was built to allow the user to jump directly into the digitized material that constitutes the search results.[73] In a test of the scholarly potential of the app, Fenwick McKelvey and I conducted a study of film trade publication terms to see the degree of crossover in usage between business lingo and fan magazines. Concentrating on the 1930s, years that have relatively complete collections for select trade and fan publications in the MHDL, we found little evidence of crossover except for the term "contract." This suggested to us that today's sharing of business language is historically specific and that "contract" might be an important initial point of understanding about the film industry on the part of popular audiences.[74]

Used to identify what is to be found where and when within a specialized corpus, the Arclight app is valuable. And I have seen, and been told anecdotes of, its pedagogical advantage where students can see the rise and fall of media topics and be encouraged to explore further. This is the key point. The results one receives provide the starting point for historical parameters and investigation. The hard work of assembling material, locating additional sources not covered in the digital corpus, figuring out the contextual matters, and beginning to construct an argument that will illuminate and bring understanding still has to take place after the Arclight app or any other such tool returns results for your search terms. And this can only be done by reading.

Searching digital databases provides advantages that allow a researcher to increase reading speed. One can search for terms and topics in order to trian-

gulate a set of dates, locations, and publications within which closer reading will be advantageous. Digital databases, though, also amplify the expectation of coverage, drawing a wider field of evidence onto the lap of the researcher. You can cover more ground quicker in that first level of identifying relevant material, but you are now obligated to cover more ground. There are multiple hazards here, most significantly that all appearances can be mistaken as equivalent when, in fact, they are not. Some results will have appeared before a wider audience, and some will have appeared in venues of greater or lesser prestige and impact. Moreover, at a certain point, the kind of popular historical material this book rests on begins to turn up repetitions and redundancies; one can then safely conclude that key resonances and patterns of appearance and usage have been identified. A comprehensive accounting of all occurrences provides no additional insight; there is a diminishing value in one more global search. Certainly, there remains a risk that the next search will uncover the one detail that upsets the pattern, but with each instance included, the risk and influence of that potential anomaly decreases, becoming a comfortable uncertainty that all scholars must live with.

Thus, search mechanisms are best thought of as an initial layer of findings. They offer some possible general tendencies, and, most valuably, they offer date ranges within which closer examination and hunting might take place. The glitches of optical-character-recognition (OCR) software are significant enough that one must expect glaring gaps and misidentifications in digital searches. In the end, one must rely on a slow and time-honored method of historical examination: reading. You have to read—everything that you possibly can, as carefully as you can. And you must do so in context, reading related and unrelated parallel material. And then, with the hints and clues offered about key events, people, institutions, texts, venues, and so on, you must begin more targeted archival work, digging through hard-copy and digital documents.

It may seem strange to make a case for reading as method. This is obvious to many, I'm sure. Yet in recent years the turn toward an embrace of machine reading has encouraged an impression that the larger the corpus, the faster the scanning of that corpus, and the less direct human interpretive intervention with the corpus, the better the research. So prevalent, and for some accepted, are these claims that we need more statements to the contrary, ones that point out the limits and the end point of such algorithmically tainted research, namely, humanities without humans.

My previous book, *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence*, was the product of years of consultation and article accumulation as directed

by such resources as the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.[75] Only after the work was in manuscript form were various historical periodical databases readily available, and robust enough, for digital search mechanisms, which then played a supplementary role, helping me verify my coverage right at the end of the project. But the work still required, and today would still require, years of reading and hunting, most of which came from hunches and suppositions rather than the clear and direct insertion of a keyword into a magical rectangular box.

This current work, initiated with feet more surely rooted in the era of digital databases, has benefited from the online resources that have been bulked up. And more archives have taken up an idea of access and begun to offer more of their materials to people in digitized forms. The online documents provided by the Margaret Herrick Library, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), the Library of Congress, and others have been important to the research presented in these pages.

And yet I can't say that with these digital resources this research progressed any more rapidly, nor that the results are more comprehensive and better armed against counterclaims. Once those initial layers of digital materials had been processed and considered, the more obscure work had to be sought. I probably spent as much time with microfilm as with the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database. I probably traveled to as many archives and specialized holding institutions as I have for my previous books. Popular culture is not consistently included in archives, official corporate documentation, or libraries of media productions. It includes a vast set of publicity, advertisements, and various ephemera, much of which is rarely systematically held on to for future consultation, let alone lovingly curated for digital formatting. Seeking such documentation becomes a major task, one that invariably leads us away from the digital realm back to the material culture of museums, archives, and junk shops.

Part of this methodological approach arises from the conceptual backbone of this book. "Blockbuster" is a term, but more centrally it is a "nodal point," a meeting place for ideas and understandings about popular entertainment and industry. It works to fix an array of ideas about business, capital, and popular culture. And it can only be studied in context, and grasped as part of a living and dynamic cultural environment, an approach to cultural analysis outlined best by Raymond Williams.[76] The appearance of the term is at best symptomatic of something else to explain. It is, in a sense, a "command metaphor," broadcasting its meaning to wide audiences, and with it a general under-

standing of popular entertainment. Motivating this conceptual approach is the fact that "blockbuster," as much as it locates the very idea of these large-scale films, is an impediment to our thinking and appears to confirm our worst fears about commodity culture without nuance, without contradiction, automatically shutting down analytic advantage.

As will be elaborated, the ascendancy of the term was part of the rise and stabilization of a hit-driven approach to the movie business. This "block-buster strategy" increased the investment in, and hence the risk of, any single film, increased the amount of marketing required, and decreased the number of films in the American film business. As risk and investment grew, more media, technologies, and consumer products were brought on board to both sell and ride along with the fortunes of the primary blockbuster work. Decades later, the blockbuster film itself became less and less of an economic and cultural focus, and more of an engine for the development of a brand, a franchise, or a product line. Sure enough, even in the first years, when the blockbuster strategy was taking shape in the 1950s, there was considerable pushback, notably from exhibitors, some of whom felt that a steady stream of reliably performing films was preferable to riskier and less predictable hits, and from critics, who eventually saw the blockbuster as lacking in the personalized artistic merit that could be found in smaller productions. The exhibitors' complaint had an impact, and distributors contradictorily promised an ongoing supply of extraordinary hits, films that would keep elevating the expectations for audience interest and financial success. This book documents the stabilization of the blockbuster strategy, first by taking account of the initial popular usage of the term "blockbuster," then by exploring its adoption by the movie business, and finally by presenting the underlying claims and assumptions about entertainment and cultural value that it helped to organize, ideas that continue to inflect our popular media universe today.

From our vantage point, the blockbuster's stable and powerful presence gives it the appearance of timelessness. "Blockbuster" carries with it an implied understanding of budgets, financial expectations, cultural success, affective impact, and audience appreciation. It radiates influence over how we see popular entertainment and how corporate decisions are made to build and profit from that cultural milieu. It has the effect of flattening history and transforming the conditions of our cultural universe into a static realm. But this vernacular about film culture was built by a number of forces, including the orchestrated traffic between corporate agents, cultural and industrial commentators, and moviegoing audiences. As Bourdieu directed, "the sociology

of art and literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work or . . . of belief in the value of the work."[77] Or, in the case of the blockbuster, what is produced is ultimately a belief in its limited cultural value.

We turn now to a portrait of the economic edifice of new media technology in which the blockbuster, especially in its franchise incarnation, plays a leading role and has helped to stabilize and expand an industrial regime of entertainment.