

SHARE COULD THIS BE THE YEAR MOVIES STOPPED MATTERING?

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GILES KEYTE/UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

IF YOU WANTED to pinpoint the moment this year when it became clear that moviegoing had devolved from Culture-Conquering Pastime to merely Something to Do When the Wi-Fi's Down, consider the weekend of April 22 to April 24. On that Friday, with no other major new films opening in theaters, Universal Pictures released *The Huntsman: Something Something Swordfart*, a \$115 million sequel to a movie that made nearly \$400 million worldwide. The new *Huntsman* was accompanied by an omnipresent marketing campaign featuring four well-known stars (including Oscar winner Charlize Theron), not to mention a seemingly ceaseless cascade of ads like this one, in which Chris Hemsworth appears to have just won the gold medal for Confused Axe-Posing. It was impossible *not* to know *The Huntsman* was coming out, and that combination of wide-scale awareness and sheer star power—not to mention the relative lack of competition—made the movie look like a sure thing.

But by late Saturday night, *The Huntsman* was all but dead, having been slayed by two women: Beyoncé—who'd just *sorta*-surprise-released *Lemonade*, her new album—and “Becky with the good hair,” an anonymous, Jay-zoomin’ interloper who’d been called out on the Beyoncé song “Sorry,” and whose identity caused a weekend-long guessing-game online. And even if people *weren't* trying to figure out who Beyoncé was talking about,

they were spending the weekend watching a clip of Bruce Springsteen covering a song by the dearly beloved, recently departed Prince; or checking out Lin-Manuel Miranda's Earth Day freestyle; or debating whether or not Jon Snow—the blokey with the good hair—would still be dead by the end of that Sunday night's *Game of Thrones* premiere. They were doing anything *but* watching, discussing, or caring about the mega-sequel with the big stars and the impossible-to-miss marketing.

Like so many high-pedigree films released this year, *Huntsman* was quickly reduced to just another loud, expensive, desperate thingee hovering noisily and anxiously in the background of your digital life, hoping it could tear you away from Twitter or Snapchat or Spotify.

Granted, these kinds of apples-to-*Lemonade* comparisons are a bit unfair, especially when you consider that *Huntsman* made almost \$20 million in its opening weekend. And, sure—it was much easier to watch *Lemonade* on your phone than head out to a theater and get your Ther-on. But, really: *No one cared about this movie*—including, I'm guessing, most of the people who actually saw it. Like so many high-pedigree films released this year, *Huntsman* was pushed out of the pop-cultural conversation quickly and fiercely. It was reduced to just another loud, expensive, desperate thingee hovering noisily and anxiously in the background of your digital life, hoping it could tear you away from Twitter or Snapchat or Spotify. And it ended up in an

ambivalence-borne limbo, one that now includes several other recent *oof*-inducing films, including *Warcraft*, *Ben-Hur*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *The BFG*, and *Zoolander 2*.

Pastime Paradise

These movies didn't just fail; they almost seemed to never exist in the first place, having been dismissed or disposed of almost immediately upon impact. And even if they *did* do OK for a weekend or two, they never reached beyond their predictable (and increasingly stratified) core audiences. Instead, they were dumbo-dropped into our ever-expanding cauldron of content, where they played to their bases, while everyone else turned to the newest videogame, or the latest Drake video, or some random "Damn, Daniel" parody.

Movies bomb every weekend, of course. And the studios have been caulking their calendars with mediocre films for decades, resulting in lackluster blockbusters that were gently forced upon us, and to which we responded with a collective, "*Fine, whatever, it's not like there's anything better to do this weekend.*" Twenty years ago, you went out to see a movie starring Keanu Reeves as a physicist named Eddie Kasalivich not because it looked good, but because you kind of had no other choice. Even the worst film had a respectable half-life, and seemed to linger for years afterward.

Nowadays, though, there's likely something way more exciting than the latest alleged blockbuster waiting for you on your phone, whether it's a Frank Ocean record, a cornered Charmeleon, or some dank memes. And with social media providing us real-time updates of our passions and consumption, it's become clear that, in 2016, people are less passionate about films than ever before. Movies are still making tons of money, obviously, and still inspire giddy fandemonium (both good and bad) among the faithful. But it's hard to think of a year in which movies have felt quite as ephemeral, and so easy to ignore. It feels as though they've been pushed further on down our pop-culture hierarchy of needs. And this is disturbing news, whether you're a studio head looking to

make money, a balcony brat looking for a few communal cinematic thrills, or a sword-farter looking for an audience.

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DISNEY

Bootopia

Part of the problem with film culture in 2016, of course, is the films themselves. Despite the critical success of hits like *Zootopia* and *The Jungle Book*, or the superheroic hauls of *Deadpool* and *Captain America: Civil War*, it's hard to shake off (or rebut) the *Worst. Year. Ever.* grumblings that have been circulating among cinephiles all summer, thanks to movies like *Suicide Squad* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*—two of the worst-reviewed chart-toppers of the year—not to mention *Independence Day: Resurgence*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, and this spring's *Divergent: Allegiant*. Contrast that line-up with that of 2015, when by late-summer we'd already had *Ex Machina*, *Inside Out*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Straight Outta Compton*, *Amy*, and the dumb, fun *Furious 7*. (Ah, 2015! It's been a long day without you, my friend!)

But we've experienced long stretches of mediocrity before (Remember 2011? A few unpleasant reminders: *Cowboys & Aliens*, *Tower Heist*, *We Bought a Zoo*, *Green Lantern*.) What's further diminished the power of movies in 2016 is the fact that while your local marquee was being programmed by de Sade, nearly every single other art form was experiencing a commercial and creative summit—starting with television, cinema's long-time rival for our affections (and our screen time). You could spend 10,000 hours watching TV this year, and still not be caught up on all the good stuff: There's the multi-faceted melodrama of *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson*; the deft and funny prime-time politics of *black-ish*; the Spielberg-spielunking throwback-thrills of *Stranger Things*; the layered legal proceedings of *The Night Of*; the creative-class squabbling of *Difficult People*; and the uncomfortably relatable real-talk of *Girls* (hardly



BROAD GREEN PICTURES

Screen Gems

By now, I imagine, there's a large number of movie lovers who are angrily scanning the remaining sections, looking for any mention of the great movies of 2016. I haven't forgotten about you—nor have I forgotten about the many films that prompted me to walk out of the theater this year with the glazed, guilty smile of an overfed sea lion. In addition to the overstock of great documentaries, from *Weiner* to *Gleason* to *De Palma*, we've had the laconic, sun-starched neo-Western *Hell or High Water*; the moving, humane *The Lobster*; the river-of-dreams drama *Embrace of the Serpent*; the unsettling cult-classic *The Invitation*; the perceptive improv-world comedy *Don't Think Twice*; and the grody punk-rock escape-thriller *Green Room*.

There have been smaller-scale surprises, as well, from a Hall & Oates-indebted musical-drama (*Sing Street*) to a Spielberg-indebted sci-fi chase-flick (*Midnight Special*) to a lively little shark movie (*The Shallows*). Also encouraging? The arrival of some much-needed new-star power, with breakout turns by *Hail, Caesar!*'s dandy cowpoke Alden Ehrenreich (now better known as the next Han Solo); *The Fits*' sparkle-motivated dance-champ Royalty Hightower; and pretty much the entire cast of Richard Linklater's happily shambolic *Everybody Wants Some!!*

And, before you mistake me for someone who puts on their fancy-pants one leg at a time, I'll also note that I rocked back and forth happily in my chair during *Civil War*, laughed continuously at the messy but good-hearted *Ghostbusters*, and was apparently the only person who legit loved *Jason Bourne*.

Yet I'd argue that, save for *Winter Soldier*, pretty much *none* of these movies reached the people who weren't already inclined to see them. Movie fandom in 2016 feels increasingly niche-driven and tribal, no matter what kind of movies you watch, or how big they are:

The indie-produced dramas, docs, and suspense thrillers will always pull in their loyalists, with mainstream viewers taking years to catch up, if at all (unless, of course, said indies were released by A24, which got people into theaters for potential tough-sells like *The Witch* and *The Lobster*). Meanwhile, many of the year's big-budget sequels made *just enough money* to justify a future follow-up, as evidenced by the grosses for *Star Trek Beyond* (\$147 million), *X-Men: Apocalypse* (\$155 million), and *Bourne* (\$141 million)—all drop-offs from their previous entries. In 2016, a movie's considered a success, barely, if it manages to reach the already-converted.



JOE LEDERER/ZOTH CENTURY FOX

Something to Talk About—Or Not

It wasn't always like this. For the past couple of years, even as TV's dominance loomed, there were still a few zeitgeist-igniting movies that all but broke into your living room, kicked you in the Roku, and demanded that you run to a theater: beyond the aforementioned *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Straight Outta Compton*, we had *Boyhood*. *The Lego Movie*. *Inside Out*. *Gone Girl*. *Gravity*. *Guardians of the Galaxy*. *The Martian*. *Creed*.

Some of these were late-in-the-year Oscar-contenders, but many of them arrived in spring or summer, and *all* of them were culturally crucial—the kinds of films you *needed* to see, even if you had to sneak in, just to understand what everyone else was talking about. They stuck around for months after their release, spurring spoofs and endless memes. But, more importantly, they spurred the kind of uncomfortable but essential conversations that movies have the power to provoke on a grand scale. *Straight Outta Compton* dovetailed with, and amplified, a still-ongoing re-examination of how black Americans view the police. *Inside Out* confronted depression and anxiety in a way most grown-up movies would never attempt. And *Wolf of Wall Street*, depending on how you looked at it, was either a celebration of or a condemnation of the excess and hubris that's become all but expected of modern money-making culture.

There's been no such reach-across-the-aisle movie in 2016, at least not yet (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens* doesn't count, as it came out last December). A few movies come very close, like *Deadpool*, a naughty superhero flick with a knotty history—it was all but dead before some leaked test footage came along—a fan-stoking marketing campaign that gave it a riotous, grass-roots vibe, and the kind of positive reviews most other superhero flicks couldn't muster. And we also had *Zootopia* and *Finding Dory*, two socially conscious animated comedies from Disney that broke records and won over critics. But despite their wide reaches, they were all constrained from true cultural-crossover success: *Deadpool* was a hard-R kill-'em-all sexcapade, while *Zootopia* and *Dory* were animated movies largely marketed toward families; fairly or not, such elements were likely a turn-off for a sizable number of adult moviegoers. All three were hits, but they felt cordoned-off from the culture as a whole.

In 2016, movies are too often just a product-turned-talking-point—something to be added to the queue and watched *after* the argument winds down, or simply never watched at all.

Of course, there *have* been a handful of widespread, weeks-long conversations about movies this year—conversations in which *everyone* seemed to want to speak up. But for the most part, those talks have tended to focus less on the films themselves, and more about the various social and pop-cultural quandaries they represent: Does the gloomy reception for *Batman v Superman* mean we're tiring of sad-sack superheroes? Are the #OscarsSoWhite? Should women be allowed to fight ghosts? (Sigh.) How could anyone possibly watch *The*

Birth of a Nation, given Nate Parker's recently revisited past?

Such heated back-and-forths speak to the soft power of cinema in 2016: It can still occasionally energize and irk us, and prod us into debate, but often for reasons that have nothing to do with what's on the actual screen. In 2016, movies are too often just a product-turned-talking-point—something to be added to the queue and watched *after* the argument winds down, or simply never watched at all.

2016's Shot at Redemption

Still, I hold out hope that movies will make a fourth-quarter resurgence this year—a strong possibility, given that the studios increasingly hoard their better films for the fall and winter. The next few months will see new films from such directors as Martin Scorsese (*Silence*), Ang Lee (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*), Ava DuVernay (*The 13th*), Andrea Arnold (*American Honey*), Adam Wingard (*Blair Witch*), Mira Nair (*Queen of Katwe*), Antoine Fuqua (*The Magnificent Seven*), Steve James (*Abacus: Small Enough to Jail*), Kenneth Lonergan (*Manchester By the Sea*), and Damien Chazelle (*La La Land*). There will also be a new *Star Wars* movie, a Tupac biopic, and even a Western with John Travolta and Ethan Hawke.

All of these have the potential to be great, or at least make for goony good fun; a few might even help define the year, recalibrate the culture, and remind people that they love movies. Because they still do—they're just ingesting them and appreciating them in as many non-movie mediums as possible. Look at how much of modern television is informed by film: *Stranger Things* is a slavish cinephile mishmash of everything from *The Goonies* to *The Thing* to *The Breakfast Club*. HBO's *The Night Of*, with its outer-borough strivers and cop-land politics, is the kind of TV drama Sidney Lumet would have

killed to direct, while *Mr. Robot* nods to everyone from Stanley Kubrick to Carol Reed. And the best episode of *Girls* this season (and maybe my favorite episode of TV this year) was "The Panic in Central Park," a downbeat tale of rekindled affections that takes place over the course of a single night; it was inspired by the great, grim 1971 junkie-drama *Panic in Needle Park*, probably the most depressing non-*Gigli* movie Al Pacino ever made.

Even musicians have been absorbing the DNA of Hollywood, whether it's in terms of aesthetics—the sweeping, naturalistic, shot-in-secrecy visuals that accompanied *Lemonade* gave it the feel of a Terrence Malick project—or logistics: Big albums are now heralded by splashy trailers, and the shift of new-release days from Tuesdays to Fridays means a major record can dominate the weekend conversation the way films once did. And when Ocean released his much-anticipated *Blonde* over the weekend, it was accompanied by a 'zine that included a list of his favorite movies, a deep-digging roundup that demonstrates that, to young artists, film is just as important as ever (somewhat tellingly, there weren't any 2016 movies included—but then again, the guy's been busy).

Clearly, film still has an impact—it's just that, in 2016, that impact feels diffuse, and is certainly difficult to ascertain. Which is why we need one of those mass-audience, culture-shifting flicks more than ever: Not only do they bring us together, physically and emotionally, they supply us with images and ideas that trickle down and influence *all* art, even if it takes years for that influence to be felt. Maybe, in the next few months, that kind of movie will arrive, and restore film back to its peak pop-culture powers. If so, it will give 2016 a cheer-worthy comeback story, one with big names, a killer third-act twist, and plenty of suspense. Who knows? Maybe they'll even make an awesome TV series about it someday.

Correction appended [9:07 A.M. PST/8/26/2016]: A previous version of this story incorrectly referred to Captain America: Civil War as Captain America: Winter Soldier.

Discussion Questions:

- ① According to the author, why do movies matter less today?
- ② What does he mean by "absorbing the DNA from Hollywood?"
- ③ What is your experience with movies? Do they matter less to you today than they did in the past?