

ENCORE!

The Oregon Daily Emerald's Entertainment Guide

Decade closes with field of movies that lack in artistic merit

By Thomas Prowell
Emerald Editor

It's inevitable. As the last month of the Reagan decade collapses, you're going to be deluged with self-important entertainment critics of every stripe trotting out their "10 Best of the '80s" lists.

You'll see it in *The New York Times Book Review*. You'll read it in *Rolling Stone*. You'll be subjected to it on the *Today* show. But before you take arms against a sea of outrageous infotainment please consider this:

Go easy on the poor movie reviewers.

They probably had the hardest job of all. After culling over the last ten years trying to find the 10 greatest cinematic achievements of the 1980s, they're going to come up short.

One of their movies might be a Brian De Palma film. Another might have a roman numeral in the title. Looking through the rubbish for a movie that rises above the muck, they may promote some goofy, independent foreign film that you've never heard of.

The problem they're facing is that the 1980s was not a great decade for movie-making. A look at the Best Picture Oscars through the years confirms this. Who remembers *Ordinary People* (1980)? Who can explain the attraction of *Chariots of Fire* (1981) or *Out of Africa* (1985) now?

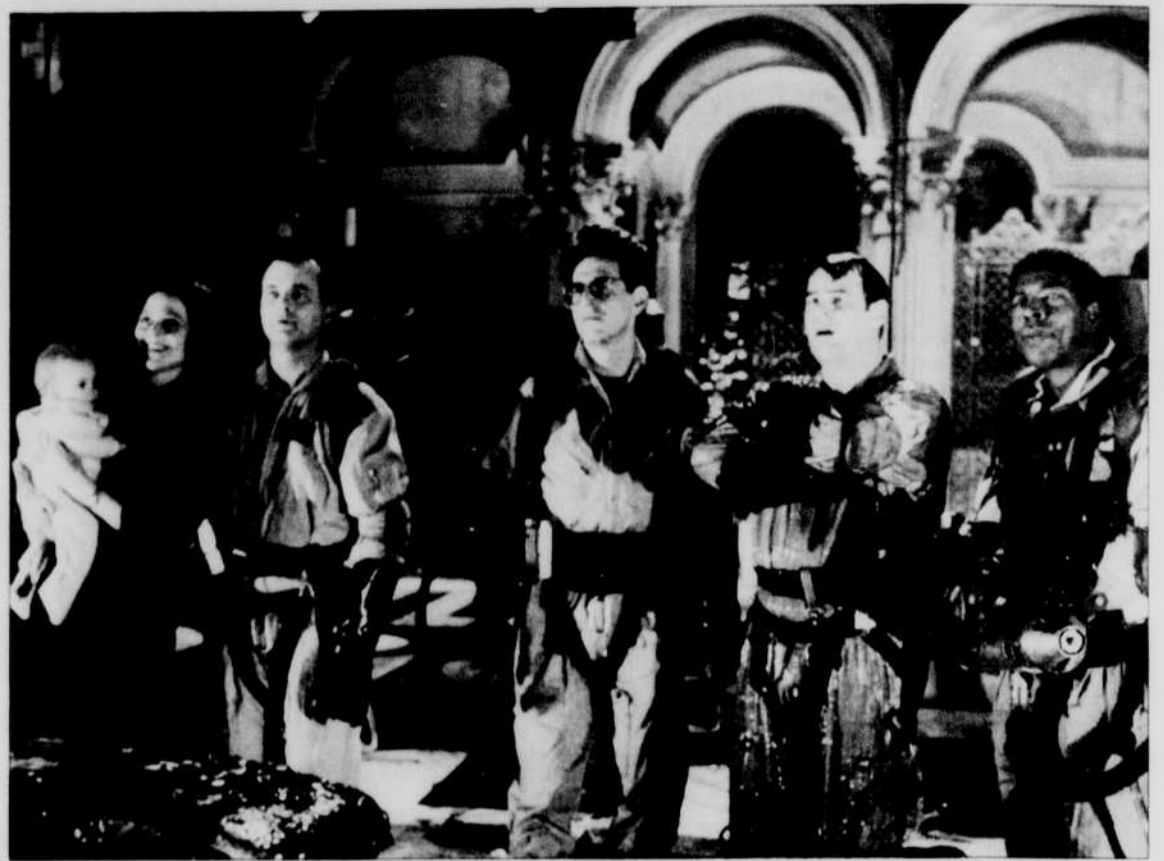
While movie-making suffered, it was instead a great decade for the movie-making industry, which raked in money as it never has before. And sadly the two trends are linked — as profits increased, the quality went down.

Who allowed this to happen? Well, in part, we did. Because when there was good, visionary work out there, say, a film like *Brazil* (1985), we were out watching *Back to the Future*. Consider this year. *Do the Right Thing* and *sex, lies and videotape* caused stirs, but did they gross as much as *Batman*?

The sad thing about all this is: Sometimes we think we're having a good time seeing this stuff. How else can one explain 1988's incredibly-stupid-but-still-a-huge-hit-film, *Twins*. Or this year's winner in that non-Oscar category, *Look Who's Talking*?

Rather than wasting time and trees trying to find the ten most interesting films of the decade, it might be more instructive if we consider the four most interesting film industry stories, to see if there's a way out of the mess. If you're tired of the crap you see on the screen, wait until you see what's behind the scenes.

Industry Mergers It's not just the stuff of Wall Street. Frighteningly, big corporations such as Sony and Time-Warner are buying out the smaller picture companies and independents.



Courtesy photo

Ghostbusters II is one of a series of sequels movie companies produced during the last decade to bolster revenues hampered by takeovers and mergers.

In fact, the media giants aren't buying just picture companies, they're buying everything. Publishing houses, record labels, television corporations — it all gets gobbled up.

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This provides the means for hype. You saw the *Batman* logo, with its little symbol, everywhere because Warner could put it everywhere.

We'll ignore the implications of a few giant conglomerates controlling all the means of information for now. Whether or not companies have any hidden agendas, they all have one public one — to make money.

And when you consider the debt payouts these huge takeovers and leveraged buyouts are burdened with (Sony paid \$3.4 billion for Columbia), the

agenda becomes *make money now*.

When making dough now is the main objective, companies will take sure investments before risky ones. And in movies, the safe investments are in

Sequels. They've hit the '80s in untold numbers. They've bred. They'll be the ruin of Kenneth Branagh's reputed new masterpiece *Henry V*, because moviegoers will assume they've missed *Henry's I-IV*.

Cutting through the hyperbole, we know that sequels have always been around. And we know a sequel is never as good as the first film, but if we liked the first, we pay to see the sequel anyway. We're social critters; we want to revisit old friends. We liked *Ghostbusters*, and we hope there's some of the old magic left for *Ghostbusters II*.

With the industry mortgaged to the hilt, every studio is looking for the breakthrough blockbuster. Everyone wants a through-the-roof film like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the sur-


est way to get that through-the-roof film is to remake it. Again. And then one more time. Who can afford to take a chance on a Spike Lee or a Gus Van Sant?

Video I love the stuff, but I think the growing home video craze is also responsible for the downfall of the American movie. Consider: going out to the movies now is a big event. It costs five, six, maybe seven dollars. There's parking to hassle with, concessions to pay too much for (or smuggle in). We want to take a date, because we're afraid we'll look silly if we're by ourselves. We don't want to have a bad time, so like the movie industry, we don't take chances.

When we stay at home, everything is different. We can park our butts on the couch. We can be alone.

One more beef with the growing video racket: It's responsible for the one movie news event of the '80s that is truly evil, something despicable even beyond the conspiracy-theory conglomerates merging into Big Brother:


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