

## Why Are Movies So Bad? or, The Numbers

by Pauline Kael

**1** The movies have been so rank the last couple of years that when I see people lining up to buy tickets I sometimes think that the movies aren't drawing an audience—they're inheriting an audience. People just want to go to a movie. They're stung repeatedly, yet their desire for a good movie—for *any* movie—is so strong that all over the country they keep lining up. "There's one God for all creation, but there must be a separate God for the movies," a producer said. "How else can you explain their survival?" An atmosphere of hope develops before a big picture's release, and even after your friends tell you how bad it is, you can't quite believe it until you see for yourself. The lines (and the grosses) tell us only that people are going to the movies—not that they're having a good time. Financially, the industry is healthy, so among the people at the top there seems to be little recognition of what miserable shape movies are in. They think the grosses are proof that people are happy with what they're getting, just as TV executives think that the programs with the highest ratings are what TV viewers want, rather than what they settle for. (A number of the new movie executives come from TV.) These new executives don't necessarily see many movies themselves, and they rarely go to a theater. If for the last couple of years Hollywood couldn't seem to do anything right, it isn't that it was just a stretch of bad luck—it's the result of recent developments within the industry. And in all probability it will get worse, not better. There have been few recent American movies worth lining up for—last year there was chiefly *The Black Stallion*, and this year there is *The Empire Strikes Back*. The first was made under the aegis of Francis Ford Coppola; the second was financed by George Lucas, using his profits from *Star Wars* as a guarantee to obtain bank loans. One can say with fair confidence that neither *The Black Stallion* nor *The Empire Strikes Back* could have been made with such care for visual richness and imagination had they been done under studio control. Even small films on traditional subjects are difficult to get financed at a studio if there are no parts for stars in them; Peter Yates, the director of *Breaking Away* a graceful, unpredictable comedy that pleases and satisfies audiences took the project to one studio after another for almost six years before he could get the backing for it.

**2** There are direct results when conglomerates take over movie companies. Heads of the conglomerates may be drawn into the movie business for the status implications—the opportunity to associate with the world-famous. Some other conglomerate heads may be drawn in for the women, too; a new social life beckons, and as they become social, people with great names approach them as equals, and famous stars and producers and writers and directors tell them they've heard from other studios and about ideas they have for movies. The conglomerate heads become indignant that the studios they run have passed on these wonderful projects. The next day, they're on the phone raising hell with the studio bosses. Very soon, they're likely to be directors and suggesting material to them, talking to actors, and company executives what projects should be developed. How bad is the judgment of the conglomerate heads? Very bad. They haven't grown up in a showbusiness milieu—they don't have the instincts or the information of those who have lived and sweated movies for many years. (Neither do most of the current studio bosses.) The corporate heads may be business geniuses, but as far as movies are concerned, have virgin instincts; ideas that are new to them and take them by storm may have failed grotesquely dozens of times. But they feel that they are creative people—how else could they have made so much money and be in a position to advise artists what to do? Who is to tell them no? Within a very short time, they are in

fact, though not in title, running the studio. They turn up compliant executives who will settle for the title and not fight for the authority or for their own tastes if, in fact, they have any. The conglomerate heads find these compliant executives among lawyers and agents, among television executives, and in the lower echelons of the companies they've taken over. Generally, these executives reserve all their enthusiasm for movies that have made money; those are the only movies they like. When a director or a writer talks to them and tries to suggest the kind of movie he has in mind by using a comparison, they may stare at him blankly. They are usually law school or business school graduates; they have no frame of reference. Worse, they have no shame about not knowing anything about movies. From their point of view, such knowledge is not essential to their work. Their talent is being able to anticipate their superiors' opinions; in meetings, they show a sixth sense for guessing what the most powerful person wants to hear. And if they ever guess wrong, they know how to shift gears without a tremor. So the movie companies wind up with top production executives whose interest in movies rarely extends beyond the selling possibilities; they could be selling neckties just as well as movies, except that they are drawn to glamour and power.

**3** This does not prevent these executives from being universally treated as creative giants. If a studio considers eighty projects, and eventually twenty of them (the least risky) go into production, and two of them become runaway hits (or even one of them), the studio's top executive will be a hero to his company and the media, and will soon be quoted in *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, talking about his secret for picking winners—his intuitive understanding, developed from his childhood experiences, that people want a strong, upbeat narrative, that they want to cheer the hero and hiss the villain. When *Alien* opened “big,” Alan Ladd, Jr., president of the pictures division of Twentieth Century Fox, was regarded as a demigod; it's the same way that Fred Silverman was a demigod. It has nothing to do with quality, only with the numbers. (Ladd and his team weren't admired for the small pictures they took chances on and the artists they stuck by.) The media now echo the kind of thinking that goes on in Hollywood, and spread it wide. Movie critics on TV discuss the relative grosses of the new releases; the grosses at this point relative to previous hits; which pictures will pass the others in a few weeks. It's like the Olympics—which will be the winners?

**4** There are a lot of reasons that movies have been so bad during the last couple of years and probably won't be any better for the next couple of years. One big reason is that rotten pictures are making money—not necessarily wild amounts (though a few are), but sizable amounts. So if studio heads want nothing more than to make money and grab power, there is no reason for them to make better ones. Turning out better pictures might actually jeopardize their position. Originally, the studios were controlled by theater chains—the chains opened the studios in order to have a source of supply. But the studios and the theater chains were separated by a Supreme Court order in 1948 and subsequent lower court rulings; after that, the studios, operating without the protection of theaters committed in advance to play their product, resorted to “blind bidding” and other maneuvers in order to reduce the risk on their films. It's only in the last few years that the studios have found a new kind of protection. They have discovered that they can get much more from the sale of movies to television than they had been getting, and that they can negotiate presale agreements with the networks for guaranteed amounts before they commit themselves to a production. Licensing fees to the networks now run between \$3,000,000 and \$4,000,000 for an average picture, and the studios negotiate in advance not only for network showings and later TV syndication (about \$1,500,000 for an average picture), and for pay television (between \$1,000,000 and \$1,500,000), but for cable TV, the airlines, cassettes, and overseas television. And, of course, they

still sell to foreign distributors and to exhibitors here, and much of that money is also committed in advance, sometimes even paid in advance. So if a film is budgeted at \$8,500,000, the studio may have \$14,000,000 guaranteed and—theoretically, at least—show a profit before shooting starts, even if \$4,000,000 is allowed for marketing and advertising. And the studio still has the possibility of a big box-office hit and really big money. If a picture is a large-scale adventure story or has superstars, the licensing fee to the networks alone can rise between \$15,000,000 and \$25,000,000, and the total advance guarantees may come to almost double the budget. Financially, the only danger in an argument like this is that if the film goes seriously over budget the studio will lose money. That's why directors who have the reputation of always coming in on schedule are in steady demand even if they've had a long line of box-office failures and their work is consistently mediocre, and why directors who are perfectionists are shunned as if they were lepers—unless, like Hal Ashby, they've had some recent hits.

**5** The studios no longer make movies primarily to attract and please moviegoers; they make movies in such a way as to get as much as possible from prearranged and anticipated deals. Every picture (allowing for a few exceptions) is cast and planned in terms of those deals. Though the studio is happy when it has a box-office hit, it isn't terribly concerned about the people who buy tickets and come out grumbling. They don't grumble very loudly anyway, because even the lumpiest pictures are generally an improvement over television; at least, they're always bigger. TV accustoms people to not expecting much, and because of the new prearranged deals they're not getting very much. There is a quid pro quo for a big advance sale to television theaters: the project must be from a fat, dumb bestseller about an international jewel heist or a skyjacking that involves a planeload of the rich and famous, or be a thinly disguised showbusiness biography of someone who came to an appallingly wretched end, or have an easily paraphrasable theme, preferably something that can be done justice to in a sentence and brings to mind the hits of the past. How else could you entice buyers? Certainly not with something unfamiliar, original. They feel safe with big-star packages, with chase thrillers, with known ingredients. For a big overseas sale, you must have "international" stars performers who are known—such as Sophia Loren, Richard Burton, Candice Bergen, Roger Moore, Eastwood, Burt Reynolds, Alain Delon, Charles Bronson, Steve McQueen. And you should probably avoid complexities: Much of the new overseas audience is subliterate. For a big advance sale to worldwide television, a movie should also be innocuous: it shouldn't raise any hackles, either by strong language or by a controversial theme. And there must be stars, though not necessarily movie stars. It has recently been discovered that even Americans are actually more interested in TV personalities than in movies, and may be roused from their TV viewing to go see a film with John Denver or John Ritter. In countries where American TV series have become popular, our TV stars may be better known than our movie stars (especially the ones who appear infrequently). A 1979 Canadian film, *Running*, starring Michael Douglas, who has appeared in a TV series and was featured in *The China Syndrome*, cost \$4,200,000; by the time it was completed, the various rights to it had been sold for over \$6,000,000. The lawyer-financier who set production of *Foolin' Around*, which stars Gary Busey, said he would not have made the picture without the television insurance of a supporting cast that included Tony Randall, Cloris Leachman, and Eddie Albert. Nobody needs to have heard of these independently packaged pictures for them to be profitable, if it were not contractually necessary to open the film in theaters in order to give it legitimacy as a movie, it would be cheaper not to, because the marketing and advertising costs may outstrip the box-office revenue (unless that, too, was guaranteed). On productions like these, the backers don't suffer the gamblers' anxieties that were part of the film business in the '50s and '60s, and even the early '70s. Of course, those backers don't experience the gamblers' highs either. Movie executives now study the television Q ratings, which

measure the public's familiarity with performers, and a performer with a high rating (which he attains if he's been in a long-running series or on a daytime quiz show) is offered plum movie role even if this means that the script will have to be completely rewritten for his narrow range or bland personality.

**6** There is an even grimmer side to all this: because the studios have discovered how to take the risk out of moviemaking, they don't want to make any movies that they can't protect themselves on. Production and advertising costs have gone so high that there is genuine nervous panic about risky projects. If an executive finances what looks like a perfectly safe, stale piece of material and packs it with stars, and the production costs skyrocket way beyond the guarantees, and the picture loses many millions, *he* won't be blamed for it—he was playing the game by the same rules as everybody else.

If, however, he takes a gamble on a small project that can't be sold in advance—something that a gifted director really wants to do, with a subtle, not easily summarized theme and no big names in the cast—and it loses just a little money, his neck is on the block. So to the executives a good script is a script that attracts a star, and they will make their deals and set the full machinery of a big production in motion and schedule the picture's release dates, even though the script problems have never been worked out and everyone (even the director) secretly knows that the film will be a confused mess, an embarrassment.

**7** Another new factor makes a risky project still riskier; if a movie doesn't have an easily paraphrasable theme or big stars, it's hard to sell via a thirty-second TV commercial. (The networks pay a lot for movies, but they get much of it back directly from the movie industry, which increasingly relies on TV commercials to sell a film.) It's even hard for the studio advertising departments to figure out a campaign for newspapers and magazines. And so, faced with something unusual or original, the studio head generally says, "I don't know how to market it, and if I don't know how to market it, it will lose money." The new breed of studio head is not likely to say, "It's something I feel we should take a chance on. Let's see if there's somebody who might be able to figure out how to market it." Just about the only picture the studios made last year that the executives took a financial risk on was *Breaking Away*. And despite the fact that it cost what is now a pittance (\$2,400,000) and received an Academy Award Best Picture nomination, Twentieth Century Fox didn't give it a big theatrical rerelease (the standard procedure for a nominated film) but sold it to NBC for an immediate showing, for \$5,000,000. So a couple of weeks after the Awards ceremony, just when many people had finally heard of *Breaking Away* and might have gone to a theater to see it, it appeared, trashed in the usual manner, on television. The studio couldn't be sure how much more money might come in from box-offices, and grabbed a sure thing. In order to accept the NBC offer, the studio even bypassed pay TV, where the picture could have been seen uncut. It was almost as if *Breaking Away* were being punished for not having stars and not having got a big advance TV sale. And the price was almost insulting: last year, Fox licensed *The Sound of Music* to NBC for \$21,500,000, and licensed *Alien* to ABC for \$12,000,000, with escalator clauses that could take the figure up to \$15,000,000; Columbia licensed *Kramer vs. Kramer* to ABC for nearly \$20,000,000, and United Artists got \$20,000,000 for *Rocky II* from CBS. But how do you summarize in a sentence the appeal of a calm, evenhanded film about fathers and sons, town boys and college boys, and growing up—a modest classic that never states its themes, that stirs the emotions indirectly, by the smallest of actions and the smallest exchanges of dialogue?

**8** If a writer/director conceives a script for a fiery young actor—K., a young man with star potential who has not yet had a role that brought him to the

consciousness of the public—and shapes the central character to bring out K’s volatility and ardor, he is likely to be told by the studio head, “K. doesn’t do anything to me.” That rules out K., even if the studio head has never seen him (and chances are he wouldn’t remember him if he had). The studio doesn’t care if K. could become a star in this part; he wants R., because he can get a \$4,000,000 network sale with the impassive, logy R., a Robert Wagner type who was featured in a miniseries. And if the point is pressed, the studio head may cut off discussion with some variation of “I must know what I’m doing, or I wouldn’t be in this job.” If he is feeling expansive, he may go on with “I won’t say that you can’t make a good film with K., and some people—some critics and your friends—will like it. But a good picture—a successful picture is one that will make money.” If the writer-director persists, it’s taken as a sign of stupidity. A finer-grained executive—one of the rare ones who loves movies—may put it to him this way: *“I like K., I like you, I like the script. But I can’t recommend it. It’s an expensive picture, the subject matter makes it a long shot. And if I back too many long shots that don’t come in, I’m out on my ass.”* That’s the distillation of executive timidity, and maybe it’s better to get it from the coarser man: you can have the pleasure of hating him—you aren’t made to sympathize with his plight. Since all the major studios basically play by the same rules, the writer will wind up with a picture that is crucially miscast and has a vacuum at its center. By the time it is released and falls by the wayside, and he is publicly humiliated, K., disgusted at not having got the part, may have accepted a dumb role in a TV series and become a hot new TV personality, whom all the movie studios are propositioning.

**9** Chances are that even if the writer/director had been allowed to use K., he would have been completely enraged and demoralized by the time he started shooting, because the negotiating process can stretch on for years, and anyone who wants to make a movie is treated as a hustler and an adversary. “Studios!” said Billy Wilder, paraphrasing an old complaint about women. “You can’t make pictures with ’em, and you can’t make pictures without ’em!” Everybody in the movie business has the power to say no, and the least secure executives protect themselves by saying no to just about anything that comes their way. Only those at the very top can say yes, and they protect themselves, too. They postpone decisions because they’re fearful, and also because they don’t mind keeping someone dangling while his creative excitement dries up and all the motor drive goes out of his proposal. They don’t mind keeping people waiting, because it makes them feel more powerful. I’m describing trends; of course, there are exceptions—those who are known (and sometimes revered) for quick decisions, like David Picker in his United Artists days, and Daniel Melnick in his brief stints at MGM and Columbia, and David Begelman at Columbia and now at MGM. But most of the ones who could say yes don’t; they consider it and string you along. (Hollywood is the only place where you can die of encouragement.) For the supplicant, it’s a matter of weeks, months, years, waiting for meetings at which he can beg permission to do what he was, at the start, eager to do. And even when he’s got a meeting, he has to catch the executive’s attention and try to keep it; in general the higher the executive, the more cruelly short his attention span. (They’re television babies. Thirty seconds is a long time to them.) In this atmosphere of bureaucratic indifference or contempt, things aren’t really decided—they just happen, along bureaucratic lines. (Generally, it’s only if a picture is a hit that executives talk about having given it the go-ahead. They all angle for credit in the media.) During the long wait, the director has lost the cinematographer he wanted and half the performers; in order to get the necessary approvals, he has agreed to actors he knows are wrong, and he has pared down the script to cut costs, chopping out the scenes that once meant the most to him but that he knows he can’t get in the tight, ten-week shooting schedule he has been forced to accept. And then, at the last minute, a few days before shooting is to start, the studio is likely to slice the budget further—and he’s down to a nine-week schedule, which means trimming the camera moves that were

half the reason he'd been eager to work on the idea in the first place. Is it any wonder if the picture that comes out has a sour spirit?

**10** It may just barely come out anyway. If there's an executive shakeup during production or after the film is completed (and shakeups take place every few months), the new studio head has nothing to gain if the film succeeds (he can't take credit for initiating it); he may find it to his strategic advantage for the film to fail. The executives—bedhoppers, who go from one berth to another—have no particular loyalty to the studio, and there isn't the lower echelon executive stability to launch a film initiated during the old regime with the same care as one initiated during the new regime. It all depends on signals that come from the top.

If a big star and a big director show interest in a project, the executives will go along for a \$14,000,000 or \$15,000,000 budget even if, by the nature of the material, the picture should be small. And so what might have been a charming light entertainment that millions of people all over the world would enjoy is inflated, rewritten to enlarge the star's part, and overscaled. It makes money in advance and sends people out of theaters complaining and depressed. Often, when people leave theaters now they're bewildered by the anxious nervous construction of the film—by the feeling it gives them of having been pieced together out of parts that don't fit. Movies have gone to hell and amateurism. A third of the pictures being made by Hollywood this year are in the hands of first-time directors, who will receive almost no guidance or help. They're thrown right into a pressure-cooker situation, where any delay is costly. They may have come out of sitcoms, and their dialogue will sound forced, as if it were all recorded in a large, empty cave; they may have come out of nowhere and have never worked with actors before. Even if a director is highly experienced, he probably has certain characteristic weaknesses, such as a tendency to lose track of the story, or an ineptness with women characters; he's going to need watching. But who knows that, or cares enough to try to protect the picture? The executives may have hired the director after "looking at his work" that is, running off every other reel of one of his films. They are busy people. Network executives who are offered a completed movie commonly save time by looking at a fifteen-minute selection from it—a *precis* of its highlights—which has been specially prepared for them. God forbid that they should have to sit through the whole thing.

**11** What isn't generally understood is how much talent and hard work are wasted—enough, maybe, to supply the world with true entertainment. A writer who is commissioned to adapt a book and turns in a crackerjack script, acclaimed by the studio executives, who call him a genius, then stands helplessly by as the studio submits it to the ritual lists of the stars and the directors in they can get the biggest guarantees on. And as, one by one, the stars and directors who aren't right for the project anyway take months to read it and turn it down, the executives' confidence in the script drains away. If a star expresses tentative interest, contingent on a complete rewrite, they will throw out the snappy script and authorize a new script by a sodden writer who has just had a fluke hit, and when the star decides to do something else anyway, they will have a new script written for a different star, and another and another, until no one can remember why there was ever any interest in the project. It may be shelved then, but so much money has already gone into it that in a couple of years some canny producer will think it should be brought back to life and reworked to fit a hot new teenager from television who eventually will decide not to do it, and so on. To put it simply: A good script is a script to which Robert Redford will commit himself. A bad script is a script which Redford has turned down. A script that "needs work" is a script about which Redford has yet to make up his mind. It is possible to run a studio with this formula; it is even

possible to run a studio profitably with this formula. But this world of realpolitik that has replaced moviemaking has nothing to do with moviemaking. It's not just that the decisions made by the executives might have been made by anyone off the street, it's that the pictures themselves seem to have been made by anyone off the street.

**12** The executives are a managerial class with no real stake in the studio; they didn't build it, it's not part of them, and they're moving on—into a bigger job at another studio, or into independent production (where there's more money), or to form their own companies. The executives just try to hold things together for the short period that they're going to be around; there isn't even an elementary regard for the conservation of talent. And, as in any chaotic bureaucracy, the personalities and goals of those at the top set the tone for all the day-to-day decisions; the top executives' apathy about the quality of movies infects the studio right down the line. The younger executives who are pushing their way up don't want to waste their time considering scripts that may not attract a star. For them, too, a good picture is a picture that makes money, and so after *The China Syndrome* clicked at box-offices, they could be heard talking about what a wonderful craftsman its director, James Bridges, was, and after *The Amityville Horror*, with its unbelievably clunky script by Sandor Stern, showed big grosses, they wanted to sign up Stern as a writer/director. At the bottom as at the top, the executives want to score; they want a hit, not just for the money but for the personal pleasure of the kill.

**13** Part of what has deranged American life in this past decade is the change in book publishing and in magazines and newspapers and in the movies as they have passed out of the control of those whose lives were bound up in them and into the control of conglomerates, financiers, and managers who treat them as ordinary commodities. This isn't a reversible process; even if there were Supreme Court rulings that split some of these holdings from the conglomerates, the traditions that developed inside many of those businesses have been ruptured. And the continuity is gone. In earlier eras, when a writer made a book agreement with a publisher, he expected to be working with the people he signed up with; now those people may be replaced the next year, or the whole firm may be bought up and turned into a subdivision of a book-publishing house or a leisure-activities company. The new people in the job aren't going to worry about guiding a writer slowly; they're not going to think about the book after this one. They want bestsellers. Their job is to develop them or manufacture them. And just as the studios have been hiring writers to work on a screenplay they are now beginning to hire writers to work on novels, which the publishers, with the help of studio money, will then be used to promote to bestsellerdom at the same time that they are being made into movies. The writer Avery Corman has suggested "the horrifying prospect of a novelist being fired from his own book." It won't horrify the ones who are commissioning these new books, pre-novelizations.

**14** There are certain kinds of businesses in which the public interest is more of a factor than it is in the manufacture of neckties. Book publishing, magazines and newspapers, movies and television and live theater—these are businesses, of course, but traditionally the people who work in them have felt privileged (by birth or ability or talent or luck, or by a combination of those factors). That has been true not only of the actors and journalists but of the entrepreneurs and the managers. There have always been a few businessmen in these fields who had the sensibility of artists (without the talent or the drive); if they had a good critical sense and a generous nature, they were appreciators of artists and didn't resent them. And so they became great producers in the theater and movies, or great book and magazine editors. Contemporary variants of

these people insist on being celebrity artists themselves, and right now they all seem to be writing and directing movies.

**15** In movies, the balance between art and business has always been precarious with business outweighing art, but the business was, at least, in the hands of businessmen who loved movies. As popular entertainment, movies had something of what the vulgarian moguls had—zest, a belief in their instincts, a sentimental dedication to producing pictures that would make their country proud of their contribution, a respect for quality, and the biggest thing: a willingness to take chances. The cool managerial sharks don't have that; neither do the academics. But the vulgarians also did more than their share of damage, and they're gone forever anyway. They were part of a different America. They were, more often than not, men who paid only lip to high ideals, while gouging everyone for profits. The big change in the industry today is reflected in the fact that people in the movie business no longer feel it necessary to talk about principles at all. They operate on the same assumption as the newspapers that make heroes of the executives who churn out hits and don't raise questions about their quality.

**16** When the numbers game takes over a country, artists who work in a popular medium, such as the movies, lose their bearings fast. There's a pecking order in filmmaking, and the director is at the top—he's the authority figure. A man who was never particularly attractive to women now finds that he's the padrone: everyone is waiting on his word, and women are his for the nod. The constant, unlimited opportunities for sex can be insidious; so is the limitless flattery of college students who turn directors into gurus. Directors are easily seduced. They mainline admiration. Recently, a screenwriter now directing his first picture was talking about his inability to find a producer who would take some of the burden off him; he said he needed a clone—someone who would know what was in his mind and be able to handle a million details for him. But anyone observing this writer-director would know that he needs a real producer, and for a much more important reason: to provide the sense of judgment he has already lost. *Nobody really controls a production now, the director is on his own, even if he's insecure, careless, or nuts. There has always been a megalomaniac potential in moviemaking, and in this period of stupor, when values have been so thoroughly undermined that even the finest directors and the ones with the most freedom aren't sure what they want to do, they often become obsessive and grandiloquent, like mad royalty. Perpetually dissatisfied with the footage they're compulsively piling up, they keep shooting—adding rooms to the palace. Megalomania and art become the same thing to them. But the disorder isn't just in their heads, and a lot of people around them are deeply impressed by megalomania.*

**17** What our directors need most of all, probably, is a sense of purpose and a subject that they can think their way through. Filmmakers want big themes, and where are the kinds of themes that they would fight the studios to express? It's no accident that the two best recent American movies are both fantasy fairy tales—childish in the fullest, deepest sense. Working inside a magical structure, Carroll Ballard in *The Black Stallion* and Irvin Kershner in *The Empire Strikes Back* didn't have to deal with the modern world; they were free to use the medium luxuriantly, without guilt. You can feel the love of moviemaking—almost a revelry in moviemaking—in their films, as you can also in Walter Hill's *The Long Riders*, despite its narrative weaknesses and a slight remoteness. But we don't go to the movies just for great fairy tales and myths of the old West; we also hope for something that connects directly with where we are. Part of the widespread anticipation of *Apocalypse Now* was, I think, our readiness for a visionary, climactic, summing-up movie. We felt that the terrible rehash of pop culture couldn't go on, mustn't go on, that something new was needed. Coppola must have felt that, too,



but he couldn't supply it. His film was posited on great thoughts arriving at the end of a confrontation and a revelation. And when they weren't there, people slunk out of the theaters, or tried to comfort themselves with chatter about the psychedelic imagery. Trying to say something big, Coppola got tied up in a big knot of American self-hatred and guilt, and what the picture boiled down to was: White man is the devil. Since then, I think, people have expected less of movies and have been willing to settle for less. Some have even been willing to settle for *Kramer vs. Kramer* and other pictures that seem to be made for an audience of overage flower children. These pics express the belief that if a man cares about anything besides being at home with the kids, he's corrupt. Parenting ennobles Dustin Hoffman and makes him a better person in every way, while in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* one can see that Alan Alda is a weak, corruptible fellow because he wants to be President of the United States more than he wants to stay at home and talk with his daughter about her adolescent miseries. Pictures like these should all end with the fathers and the children sitting at home watching TV together.

**18** The major studios have found the temporary final solution for movies: in technique and in destiny, their films *are* television. And there's no possibility of a big breakthrough in movies—a new release of energy, like the French Wave, which moved from country to country and resulted in an international cross-fertilization—when movies are financed only if they fall into stale categories of past successes. But once the groups that are now subsidizing studio-made films begin to weary of getting TV shows when they thought they were buying movies, there should be a chance for some real moviemaking. And when the writers and directors have confidence in what they want to say, if they can't find backing from the studios they ought to be able to find backers outside the industry who will gamble on the money to be made on a good picture, once it is completed. It's easier to make money on movies now: there are more markets, and we know now that the films sell themselves. A much longer commercial life than early moviemakers could have said. The studios may find that they need great moviemakers more than moviemakers need them. Billy Wilder may be right that you can't make movies with 'em, but of course he's wrong that you can't make pictures with them. There are problems both ways, but there may be fewer problems without them, and with less rage.

It would be very convincing to say that there's no hope for movies, that audiences have been so corrupted by television and have become so jaded all they want are noisy thrills and dumb jokes and images that move along in an undemanding way, so they can sit and react at the simplest movie and there's plenty of evidence, such as the success of *Alien*. This was a tedious haunted-house-with-a-gorilla picture set in outer space. It reached out, grabbed and squeezed your stomach; it was more gripping than entertaining, but people didn't mind. They thought it was terrific, because at least they'd felt something: they'd been brutalized. It was like an entertainment contrived by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* by the Professor of Feelies in the College of Emotional Engineering. Yet there was also a backlash against *Alien*—people were angry at how mechanically they'd been worked over. And when I saw I saw *The Black Stallion* on a Saturday afternoon, there was proof that children who have grown up with television and may never have been to a good movie can respond to the real thing when they see it. There was a hushed, attentive audience, with no running up and down the aisles and no traffic to the popcorn counter, and even when the closing credits came on, the children sat quietly looking at the images behind the names. There may be a separate God for the movies, at that.