

THE FILM JOURNAL

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Universal's *Back to the Future*,
A Steven Spielberg Presentation

In Focus:

THE FILM
JOURNAL

What's the Fuss?

We can readily understand the alarm of observers who are less aware of the intricacies of the motion picture business concerning the plunge of national box office figures from those of a year ago. But as we begin to enter the fourth week of the summer season, the downward trend should end and box office gross should equal last year's total or even surpass it.

The major reason for the tremendous disparity in grosses from 1984 to 1985 is that the major studios have more evenly spread the potential hits throughout the summer rather than concentrating the blockbusters early in the traditionally high-grossing 13-week period. Last year the industry, spurred by competition from the Summer Olympics, witnessed major openings in this earlier period by *Ghostbusters*, *Indiana Jones*, *Star Trek III* and *Gremlins*. This is a rare combination of top hits opening at one time. Yet, 1985 opened strong enough, with top honors going to *Rambo*, *A View To A Kill*, *The Goonies*, *Brewster's Millions* and *Fletch*. The important factor is the number of biggies that follow these five films. The major studios have put together a most impressive list of features for distribution this summer. On paper, it looks to be a bonanza. But only time will tell.

As we go to press *D.A.R.Y.L.*, *Prizzi's Honor*, *Cocoon* and *Return To Oz* will open. These films are to be followed by *Pale Rider*, *St. Elmo's Fire*, *Explorers*, *Silverado*, *Back To The Future*, *National Lampoon's European Vacation*, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, *Summer Rental*, *The Black Cauldron*, *Weird Science*, *Invasion U.S.A.* and lots more. The independent distributors also have a slew of films ready to go and will be watching the major releases for any signs of weakness. Between the two groups, nearly 75 features could open over the next two months.

There are other good signs in the industry that the casual observer may overlook. Production is running way ahead of the last few years. The MPAA reports that 10 percent more films opened by 5/31 this year than last. This increase translates into almost 450 films which will open in 1985 in the U.S. market. Gulf + Western Industries, parent of Paramount Pictures, is selling its Consumer and Industrial Products Group for \$1 billion in cash, with the proceeds being earmarked for future film production and distribution, and other entertainment media. Martin Davis, G + W's chairman, is quoted as saying that the company is "committed to expansion of our activities in entertainment and communications, where technological advances are generating many new opportunities in the production and distribution of motion pictures . . ."

Coca-Cola is rumored to be negotiating with Embassy Communications to purchase the company on behalf of Columbia Pictures. Tri-Star and Orion have announced

impressive line-ups for the immediate future which catapult each into major status. The U.S. marketplace is strong and production is at its peak. Everyone should stop worrying about a few weeks of box office fall-off. What's all the fuss?!

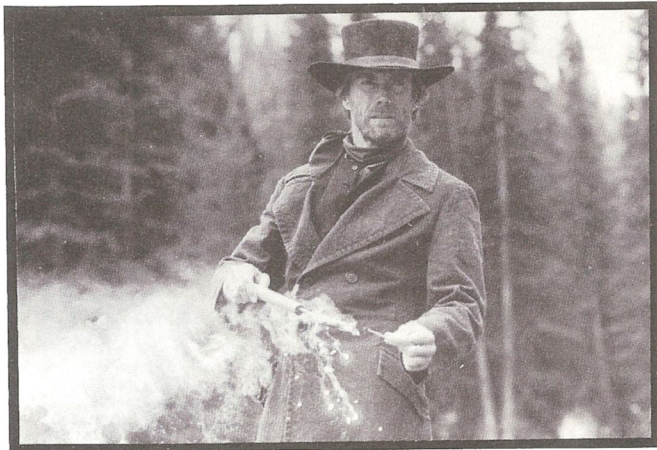
Whereas the trend of box office decline in the U.S. market should prove to be short-lived, the fall in film rentals from export may just be the beginning of a permanent decline. The export total declined nearly 22 percent from 1983 and more than 28 percent since its peak in 1979-1980. Several people point to the exchange rate (the strength of the American dollar) and the past performance of Universal's *E.T.* in the foreign market. We tend to believe that the increased popularity of videocassette recorders in areas where television broadcasting is sparse is the primary cause of the decline. Countries like Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and Taiwan are primary examples of this steady retreat. In most of these instances, penetration by VCRs is in the 20 percent range.

Although VCRs and their proliferation do affect the U.S. market, they have not taken the same toll. Foreign management of theatre companies has not responded as U.S. exhibitors have to these alternate forms of entertainment. Without readjusting to new technology, business is sure to decline. U.S. theatres have undergone a major facelifting in the past decade. From multiple-screen complexes, to plusher surroundings, to better picture quality and sound, the U.S. operator has revamped his way of doing business and found renewed success—much of which is evidenced by a building spree by the larger circuits over the past several years.

Competition from other entertainment forms has led to increased production from the major studios. More product spells success. As long as distribution companies maintain a reasonable clearance between first-runs in theatres and cassette sales, this new entertainment form should not be a primary cause of business decline.

Even cable programming services took a beating these past few months in the Nielsen ratings. The services were well off from their 1984 figures. HBO, likewise, sustained its biggest loss in the past eight months.

It's high time that the motion picture theatre industry take advantage of the technological advances in our business and upgrade its situations to make them appealing to patrons. When was the last time you attended shows at your own theatres, or had your equipment properly serviced and maintained, or requested your theatre equipment dealer to inspect your premises and make suggestions on how to improve things? If your answer to all of these questions is not an unequivocal yes, then you are not doing your job properly. People will respond to good movies shown in good theatres. The producers and distributors are doing their part now, so it's up to you to control your destiny and make it work for you.



Clint Eastwood in *Pale Rider*

new generation that hasn't heard it told before.

Eastwood plays a mysterious dark stranger who rides into a remote gold mining area of northern California claiming to be a preacher. The area is dominated by the baron who made the first strike, and he's determined to drive out the families of poor prospectors who pick the earth for nuggets rather than raping the ecosystem with hydraulic cannon to extract every last ounce efficiently, leaving devastation behind. Eastwood proves a handy ally for the settlers as he single-handedly defeats the goons and evens his own long-standing score with a corrupt killer-sheriff.

The set-pieces are deftly handled, including a splendidly mounted opening in which the baron's henchmen terrorize the miners, but the explosions of action are too widely spaced, while the dramatic development in between is at best familiar and at worst emotionally awkward. Eastwood makes a more persuasive and interesting Shane figure than Alan Ladd, but as a director he doesn't create the convincing social context George Stevens did. Eastwood's relationship with widow Carrie Snodgrass and her daughter Sydney Penny lacks emotional credibility, and the players are not felicitously cast. Eastwood's highly conscious myth-making has both appeal and flair, but the miners make unsympathetic beneficiaries of his character's heroism; they come across more as greedy and wimpy than as representatives of solid values of domestic civilization.

Pale Rider is most compelling when it concentrates on Eastwood's character, which is only a slight variation from his established persona. There isn't nearly enough of him—the movie meanders with repetitive, unsatisfying exposition, only achieving cohesion and magnetism when he's onscreen. As usual, Bruce Surtees has photographed with scintillating shadows, backlighting figures in the handsome vistas to darken our views of their faces.

It isn't clear that classic westerns can be remade for contemporary audiences. Movies always reflect the time in which they are made, and I would love to see an '80s perspective on this sturdy genre. Eastwood's last western, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), was a splendid example, avoiding self-consciousness in its approach. Perhaps there was too much riding on *Pale Rider* for it to be a comfortable work. Eastwood's considerable talent as actor and director is an undeniable asset to our cinema, but in this outing he drifts afield. He's too much an original to borrow so much without showing strain.

—Myron Meisel

BACK TO THE FUTURE

(PG)

(UNIVERSAL)

Color/1.85/Dolby

114 Mins.

Cast: Michael J. Fox, Lea Thompson, Christopher Lloyd, Crispin Glover, Thomas F. Wilson, James Tolkan, Wendy Jo Sperber, Marc McClure, George DiCenzo.

Credits: Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Produced by Bob Gale and Neil Canton. Executive producers: Steven Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall. Written by Zemeckis and Gale. Director of photography: Dean Cundey. Music: Alan Silvestri. Special visual effects: Industrial Light & Magic. Time travel effects: Ken Ralston.

Looms big as "future" box office insurance to exhibitors.

Spielberg team comes up with innovative twists and turns on simple time-travel concept, resulting in a well-paced, upbeat film with truly warm and compassionate characters. Like *Cocoon*, this one will bridge the market from young to old. 85-92

Could a 1985 teenager survive in a 1955 world? This question is answered—and then some—by director Bob (Romancing the Stone) Zemeckis and his gifted cast in Steven Spielberg's time-travel odyssey *Back To The Future*. The hero of this saga is Michael J. ("Family Ties") Fox as Marty McFly, whose ambitions are always dragged down to ugly reality by a cruel teacher and a non-supportive family (i.e. wimpy dad, vodka-belting mom and loser siblings). His only escape is the time he shares with Christopher ("Taxi") Lloyd, who could be the town Wizard if Hill Valley were Oz. Lloyd the Professor creates a "time machine" out of none other than a stainless-steel, gull-winged DeLorean sports car. "A DeLorean?" young McFly complains. "Why not?" exclaims Edsel-minded Lloyd. Add some stolen plutonium as fuel, throw in a group of double-crossed terrorists, and you have the perfect movie mixture for old-time Saturday matinee fun. Unexpected visitors require the flaky inventor's young sidekick to retreat by DeLorean to his hometown of 30 years past. Upon arrival he finds his 1985 home is no more than farmland waiting for development. Young Marty even has the opportunity of meeting the teenage lovers who are destined to become his parents.

The movie is jam-packed with scenes that are pure, out-and-out-fun, cleverly showing the difference a brief 30 years can make in a youth's everyday lifestyle. Imagine a teenager of today going to a 1955 soda fountain for a Tab, only to be lectured by the soda jerk that he can't get a "tab" until he orders something. So he orders a Pepsi Free and is told he'll have to pay for his Pepsi! No wonder extraterrestrials don't visit Earth; even English-speaking humans, given a few years' time-span, can't communicate. *Back To The Future* is one of the warmest movie treatments of the ways times change. But will it reach today's sometimes jaded young moviegoer? Well, this reviewer attended a recruited high school screening, and the 15-year-old girl next to me was on the edge of her seat, hanging on to every word in those "1955" scenes. Obviously, the Spielberg team performed admirably as her tour guide "back to the future."

—Steve Gould

COCOON

(PG-13)

(20TH CENTURY FOX)

Color/1.85/Dolby

120 Mins.

Cast: Don Ameche, Wilford Brimley, Hume Cronyn, Brian Dennehy, Jack Gifford, Steve Guttenberg, Maureen Stapleton, Jessica Tandy, Gwen Verdon, Herta Ware, Tahnee Welch, Barrett Oliver, Linda Harrison, Tyrone Power Jr.

Credits: Directed by Ron Howard. Produced by Richard D. Zanuck, David Brown, Lili Fini Zanuck. Screenplay by Tom Benedek. Story by David Saperstein. Director of photography: Don Peterman. Production designer: Jack T. Collis. Edited by Daniel Hanley, Michael J. Hill. Music: James Horner. Visual effects: Industrial Light & Magic.

A compassionate tale of older Americans wrapped in a sci-fi bundle, *Cocoon* could open to strong business if audiences take its gentle tone to heart. 85-93

Cocoon, actor-turned-director Ron Howard's first film since the hit comedy *Splash*, is a science fiction film with a difference. While other movie fantasies let hardware, special effects and ornate art direction overwhelm the actors, in *Cocoon* it's the performer who takes center stage. (Even *E.T.*, with its non-flesh-and-blood scene-stealer, can't make that claim.) Howard, who in *Splash* brought charm and humanity to what could have been just another fish story, obviously has had a ball directing his cast of mostly veteran players—their contributions turn *Cocoon* into something special.

In the tradition of *Close Encounters*, *E.T.* and *Starman*, *Cocoon* is another tale of benign aliens visiting Earth. Here, they are Antareans, an advanced race of immortals who have come back to retrieve the life-preserving cocoons of 20 colleagues they were forced to leave behind when their colony on Atlantis sank. Four Antareans have temporarily settled in a handsome estate near a retirement community in St. Petersburg, Florida, and rented a

CALENDAR OF FEATURE RELEASES

Sotto Sotto Dir. Lina Wertmuller
Police Dir. Maurice Pialat

TROMA

(212) 757-4555

Current When Nature Calls Dir. Charles Kaufman
Current Zombie Island Massacre Rita Jenrette
Coming Dreams Come True
Nuke 'Em High
The Toxic Avenger Andree Maranda
Igor and the Lunatics
Ocean Drive Weekend

20TH CENTURY FOX

(213) 277-2211/(212)977-5500

Current Prizzi's Honor [ABC] 130-R Jack Nicholson, Kathleen 85-94
Turner
Current Cocoon 120-PG-13 Dir. Ron Howard 85-93
Current The Gods Must Be
Crazy 109-PG Marius Weyers 84-134
Current Secret Places 96-PG Marie-Theres Relin, Jenny 85-83
Agutter
Current Almost You 96-R Brooke Adams, Griffin Dunne 85-83
July The Man With One Red Shoe Tom Hanks, Carrie Fisher
Aug. Bad Medicine Steve Guttenberg, Alan Arkin
Oct. The Doctor and the Devils Timothy Dalton, Twiggy
Oct. Plenty Meryl Streep, Sting
Oct. The Boy in Blue Nicholas Cage
Dec. Enemy Mine Dennis Quaid, Lou Gossett Jr.
Dec. Jewel of the Nile [ID] Michael Douglas, Kathleen 85-83
Turner
Coming A Breed Apart Rufger Hauer, Kathleen Turner
Death of an Angel Bonnie Bedelia
Joshua Then and Now Alan Arkin
Key Exchange Brooke Adams, Daniel Stern
The Secret Diary of Sigmund 85-83
Freud Bud Cort, Klaus Kinski
Power [Lorimar] Richard Gere, Julie Christie
The Fly [ID] Prod. Mel Brooks
Gizmo Richard Dreyfuss
Alien II Sigourney Weaver
Gunbus Michael Pare
The Manhattan Project John Lithgow
Half Moon Street Dir. Bob Swaim
Robot [ID] Prod. Rupert Hitzig
Spacecamp [ABC] Dir. Harry Winer
Sweet Dreams [ID] Shelley Long
Whereabouts [ID] Dir. Peter Bogdanovich
Cat Chaser
My Darling Clementine [ID] Burt Reynolds
Highlander [ID] Sean Connery
Military University Dir. Herb Margolis
The Name of the Rose Michael Caine
Sea Trial Jack Thompson, Barbara 85-83
Hershey
Commando Arnold Schwarzenegger
The Sicilian [ID]
Titles [ID] Michael Keaton
Lucas Dir. David Seltzer
Ford Fairlane [ID] Prod. Joel Silver
Jed Harris—The Curse of Genius 85-83
[ID] Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci
The White Hotel [ID] Dir. Jonathan Demme
Handcarved Coffins [ID]
Sgt. Bilko [CBS] [ID]

UNITED FILM DISTRIBUTION

(516) 579-8400

July Day of the Dead Dir. George Romero
Coming Compromising Positions Susan Sarandon, Judith Ivey
Flicks Pamela Sue Martin, Marlin 85-83
Mull

UNIVERSAL

(213) 985-4321/(212) 759-7500

Current The Breakfast Club 95-R Emilio Estevez, Molly Ringwald 85-28
Current Mask 118-PG-13 Cher, Eric Stoltz 85-47
Current Gotha 94-PG-13 Anthony Edwards 85-79
Current Brewster's Millions 97-PG Richard Pryor 85-88
Current Fletch 96-PG Chevy Chase 85-87
July E.T. [reissue] 114-PG Henry Thomas, Dee Wallace 82-75
July Back to the Future Eric Stoltz, Christopher Lloyd 85-92
Aug. Weird Science Dir. John Hughes

Sept. Brazil Dir. Terry Gilliam
Sept. Singles Dir. Art Linson
Fall The Best of Times Robin Williams, Kurt Russell
Fall Touch and Go Michael Keaton
Fall The Glenn Miller Story [reissue] James Stewart
Nov. Legend Tom Cruise, Tim Curry
Dec. The Money Pit Tom Hanks, Kathleen Turner
Dec. Out of Africa Robert Redford, Meryl Streep
Coming Biloxi Blues [ID]
Brighton Beach Memoirs [ID] Matthew Broderick
Car Pool [ID] Dir. Brian DePalma
Creator Peter O'Toole, Mariel 85-83
Hemingway

The Real Thing [ID] Dir. Sydney Pollack
Psycho III Anthony Perkins
An American Tail Scr. Steven Spielberg
Fletch and the Man Who Chevy Chase
Dagnet Dan Aykroyd
Nuts [ID] Dir. Mark Rydell
Mounties [ID] Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd
Sweet Liberty Alan Alda, Michael Caine
The Talisman
Biko [ID] Dir. Richard Attenborough
Shadow [ID] Scr. Bob Zemeckis, Bob Gale
Bug Jack Barron [ID] Dir. Costa-Gavras
E.T. II [ID] E.T., Henry Thomas, Drew 85-83
Barrymore
Kind Hearts and Coronets [ID] Dustin Hoffman (tent.)
Morons From Outer Space Dir. Mike Hodges
Plunders of the Gigabyte [ID]
Restless Natives Dir. Michael Hoffman
The Cat [ID] Prod. Topper Carew
Brass Angels [ID] Dolly Parton
American Built [ID] Prod. Rocky Lang

WARNER BROS.

(818) 954-6000/(212) 484-8000

Current Lost in America (Geffen) 90-R Albert Brooks 85-38
Current Police Academy II: Their First 85-94
Assignment Steve Guttenberg
Current Pale Rider 113-R Clint Eastwood, Christopher 85-91
Penn
Current The Goonies 114-PG John Matuszak 85-95
Current Ladyhawke 121-PG-13 Matthew Broderick 85-62
July Sesame Street Presents: Follow 85-83
That Bird Jim Henson
July Mad Max Beyond
Thunderdome Mel Gibson, Tina Turner
Aug. National Lampoon's Vacation 85-83
in Europe Chevy Chase
Aug. Pee Wee's Big Adventure Pee Wee Herman
Aug. American Flyers David Marshall Grant
Sept. Target Gene Hackman, Matt Dillon
Oct. Eleni [CBS] Kate Nelligan, John 85-83
Malkovich
Oct. First and Goal Goldie Hawn
Fall The Clan of the Cave Bear Daryl Hannah
Fall Better Off Dead John Cusack
Fall After Hours Teri Garr, Rosanna Arquette
Fall Mishima Dir. Paul Schrader
Dec. Spies Like Us Dan Aykroyd
Dec. The Color Purple Dir. Steven Spielberg
Dec. Revolution Al Pacino, Donald Sutherland
Coming Beauty School
Cage Rider [ID] John Cougar Mellencamp
Friend Dir. Wes Craven
Greystoke II Christopher Lambert
Rat Boy Dir. Sondra Locke
The Morning After Jane Fonda
The Protector Jackie Chan
Hotter Than July [ID] Prod. Rocky Lang
Forest From the Trees [ID] Prod. Zanuck/Brown
The Little Shop of Horrors [ID] Dir. Frank Oz
Parallels
Battle of Palm Springs [ID] Scr. Monica Johnson
Caribbean Crossing [ID] Dir. John Badham
Dead Solid Perfect Prod. Zanuck/Brown
Full Metal Jacket [ID] Dir. Stanley Kubrick
National Lampoon's The Bet [ID]
The Mission Robert DeNiro, Dir. Roland 85-83
Joffe
The Lightship Robert Duvall, Klaus-Maria 85-83
Brandauer
First Sun on a Blue Day [ID] Sally Field
Swept Away [ID] Prod. David Wolper
Razorback Gregory Harrison
Ronnie Finkelhof, Superstar [ID] Prod. Zanuck/Brown
The Sisterhood [ID]
Streetdandy [ID] Scr. Tom Hedley
Surprise Party Prod. Zanuck/Brown
Turtle Summer Glenda Jackson, Ben Kingsley
Isn't it Romantic [ID] Scr. Wendy Wasserstein
Un Sao De Noeuds Isabelle Huppert
Club Paradise Robin Williams, Rick Moranis
Police Academy III [ID]