

# Films of the summer reflect mediocrity, escapism

By TOM MOORE

Summer and Christmas holidays mark the major points for film distribution. More new films premiere during these two periods because distributors figure that people have more leisure time than and perhaps are more apt to go to the movies. Judging by the profits racked up this summer by the likes of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Superman II*, *The Four Seasons*, *For Your Eyes Only*, *Stripes*, *Arthur* and half a dozen others, the distributors prediction holds true.

People are heading to the movies in droves and the always shaky movie business is sound for the moment. But unfortunately that doesn't hold true for the state of the art. American film, which has always muddled artistically, is on the verge of becoming more rigid and mediocre than it has ever been in the past. And this summer's films are evidence of that.

The summer of 1981 was a summer of escapist films, high in excitement and special effects and low in content. In the past — the studio days which ended over 30 years ago — movies were divided into A, B and lower levels according to the amount of money pumped into a production. The breakdown of the studio system brought a gradual blur-

ring of the line between A and B movies. Now you're getting very expensive, very polished and technically-awesome version of what used to be called a B movie. B movies are now being made with A budgets.

These slick resurrections of low grade movies are often very good like in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Superman II* and *Blow Out*. *Raiders* done by the celebrated Lucas/Spielberg team, and *Superman II*, directed by Richard Lester who also did the first two Beatles movies, are both superbly entertaining films. They don't have anything terribly relevant to say to their audiences — though I do think that the myths they embody tell much about our culture itself — but that isn't the point. They provide plenty of nail-biting excitement, chances to root for the good guy against the bad guy and opportunities to forget about the troubles of the real world for only a couple of hours. The characters in both *Raiders* and *Superman II* are a few cuts above those usually found in such action movies. Both make much of the comic possibilities of their characters. Harrison Ford in *Raiders* and both Christopher Reeves and Gene Hackman in the new *Superman*, are among the best performances given by males in American films this year.

The parts for women in *Raiders of the Lost*

*Ark* and *Superman II* were merely perfunctory. As is usually the case in such thrillers (and in American films of the past 15 years) the women are just plot devices in a story that revolves around men. But that is too large a problem in American films to examine in depth here.

Women fared better in Brian De Palma's *Blow Out*. Well, I guess women fared worse in *Blow Out* but they got bigger and more realistic roles than in *Raiders* and *Superman*. De Palma's film was another highly entertaining and engrossing thriller, but it is one of those rare films that has so much to say — in this case American politics and the paranoia they inspire — that it breaks free of the confines of its genre. *Blow Out* is a great film that can be enjoyed equally on many levels; it can be seen as a mere action film or as a sophisticated statement about American society.

But there are few big budget films that succeed at doing so much and this is the trouble with American film. For every *Blow Out*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Superman II* you get dozens of films like *Eye of the Needle*, *Clash of the Titans*, *Cannonball Run*, *Tarzan the Ape Man*, *Endless Love* or *For Your Eyes Only* (surely the worst Bond since the misbegotten *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*). Distributors keep aiming for the big films that will bring in a huge audience. Though they miss most of the time, the small margin of success provides such ample financial rewards that the film companies are bound to continue their slipshod ways.

To be a success nowadays a film really has to be calculated to appeal to a wide audience. For this it needs something everyone can enjoy: a thrilling plot, super special effects, a few big name stars. For such ingre-

dients it needs a big budget. And to make sure it succeeds it needs a huge advertising campaign.

Anything that can't be so conveniently packaged is doomed to failure in the movie market. Some of the best movies of the past two years have slipped into obscurity because they don't fit the mold — the comedy *Used Cars*, *Raging Bull* (a critical but not a commercial success), *Cutter's Way*, *Health* (which barely got released), *Melvin and Howard*, *Atlantic City U.S.A.*

The sad list goes on and on because movies like these are aren't easily marketable like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Such movies take time and care to find the audience they deserve. And even when they find that audience they rarely bring in the whopping profits that less risky ventures do.

A case can be made that the 16mm college market and cable TV, video discs, video tapes and the eventual exposure on commercial TV will bring these movies to the audience they deserve, but I don't buy it. Films like *Melvin and Howard* are bumped aside in the alternative outlets too in favor of more popular items such as *Ordinary People*.

American film has always been a business first and an art form second. But the horizons are narrowing. The summer of 1981 was good for American films. But this was many due to chance. Maybe next season we won't be so lucky. S

Tom Moore is Arts Editor of The Daily Tar Heel.

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