Patrick Goldstein:

The Big Picture

Close-up on what went right, wrong

There was a golden age in Hollywood. And then there's today, when domestic box office is down for the third straight year and consumer spending on home video has dropped for the first time in a quarter of a century. Everyone has a theory about what's gone wrong. But for me, it wasn't the movies themselves — there were more than enough good ones to go around. It was time.

Box office may be down, but sales of iPods, XBoxes, cellphones, MP3 players, TiVos and plasma screen TVs are going up. Make that ... skyrocketing. People are spending more time every year with entertainment — nearly every new consumer electronics gadget exists to provide it. But with today's entertainment coming in all sorts of shapes and sizes, two-hour movies are simply no longer the first-choice package.

We live in a world where time has become a commodity, just as valuable as the money in our pockets. And when there are a multitude of other easily accessible leisure options, people aren't going to spend two hours in a theater, subjected to ridiculously expensive popcorn and endless commercials, not to mention that rude cellphone-tooting guy in the next row, unless they believe that there's something irresistible on the screen.

The bombs of 2005 ("Stealth," "XXX: State of the Union," "The Raid," "Son of the Mask" and "Doom," to name but a few) were, if nothing else, eminently resistible. When their trailers came on screen, you could almost hear a collective hiss, like air from a tire. "Perhapsssssss ... on video."

For years, Hollywood had a virtual monopoly on our time. Having this cultural stranglehold made the studio proprietors heedless and, if truth be told, slightly contemptuous of their audience too. Making matters worse was a little-noticed sociological twist: Once the province of blue-collar entrepreneurs, the studios have been overrun by a generation of born-to-affluence Ivy Leaguers with lots of education but little instinct for storytelling and little emotional identification with their audience.

A business built on passion became a business of packaging. For years, studios knew, in a pinch, they could use their marketing muscle to buy an opening weekend. But people have their own playlists now. Suspicious of the studio's marketing cons, eager to sample more enticing alternatives, the audience has rejected laziness and mediocrity with a vengeance.

When studios put out a movie that feels like a "programmer" (the studio euphemism for "a piece of crap") moviegoers simply turn to the Internet or their PlayStation and make better use of that two-hour slice of their life. (One of the great unanswerable questions of the day is — would "King Kong" have done 600-pound gorilla business if it had been 117 minutes instead of 187 minutes long?)

The studios that looked especially good last year — Warner Bros. and 20th Century Fox — were the ones with a plan. At Warners, Chairman Alan Horn and production chief Jeff Robinov had a simple credo: You can't have great films without great filmmakers. They made big franchise films ("Batman Begins" and "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory") without dumbing them down and insulting the audience. As Horn explains: "We found a way to persuade gifted directors

YEAR-END REPORT

Box office: A history of ups and downs

Moviegoers speak

Trouble at the box office?
No wonder.

When I went to see King Kong at AMC Rolling Hills (Christmas Day) the film was so out of focus you couldn't make out facial expressions when the actors were more than 10 feet away. Next time I will wait for the DVD.

submitted by: Art
6:36 PM PST, January 9, 2006

some movies were worth paying the ticket price, but the ones that weren't, we still had to pay 10 bucks to see it. If they want to boost up sales, lower the ticket prices, or else people with turn to other ways to spend their time.

submitted by: jane
4:39 PM PST, January 9, 2006

Read more comments or post your own

Recent Columns:
Close-up on what went right, wrong
Jan 10, 2006
like Chris Nolan and Tim Burton that we cared about the stories, took the characters seriously and wanted these films to be more than just special-effects extravaganzas."

Acting up just goes with the territory
Jan 2, 2006


A good film held hostage by bad PG
Dec 20, 2005

WARNER BROS.: Marrying A-list filmmakers to scripts that could travel the globe, the studio had a monster year here and overseas, proving that fiscal responsibility can coexist with classy filmmaking. Only three of its 17 releases, notably the latest "Harry Potter" installment, "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire," were fully financed by the studio; the others were co-productions with various financing partners and private equity funds, enabling Warners to lay off risk but build value in its library. The studio also made a deal with producer Graham King ensuring access to Leonardo DiCaprio and Johnny Depp, two of this era's true stars and magnets for top filmmakers.

Grumpy charms shine through Dec 13, 2005


20TH CENTURY FOX: Easily the most entrepreneurial studio in town. Fox's unsentimental approach to movies reflects the tough, opportunistic mind-set of owner Rupert Murdoch. The studio's top executives are savvy (if not always well-loved) pros,风云飞翔 willing to walk away from any deal that's too rich or too risky. (Perhaps that's why you could spend years on the lot without ever bombing into a first-dollar gross filmmaker.) This year's biggest hits were bankrolled by George Lucas ("Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith") and Regency ("Mr. & Mrs. Smith"). But the studio also had major failures with "Fantastic Four" and "Robots," while impressing critics with "Walk the Line" and "The Family Stone," a pair of Fox 2000 films that delivered quality at a modest cost.

It takes a zombie to speak out Dec 6, 2005


DISNEY: As it enters the post-Michael Eisner age, the studio remains as enigmatic as ever, daring enough to make its TV shows available on iPods, so corporately timorous that it locked itself out of the Oscar race by making academy members watch its films on those crazy Cinea DVD players. The studio took a big loss last fall, largely because of poor video sales and Miramax flops, but it has a smash with "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe" and several surprise hits, including "The Pacifier," "Flightplan" and "Chicken Little," which made up for such under-performers as "Herbie: Fully Loaded" and "Sky High."


DREAMWORKS: The days when this studio was a perennial incubator for Oscar films are over, but it had an impressive year internationally, a feat that no doubt played a big role in its sale to Paramount, which desperately needs to revamp its overseas distribution. "Madagascar" was a hit overseas, with the studio also seeing good global numbers from "The Ring 2," "Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit" and even "The Island," which was written off as a flop here but rebounded overseas, leaving "Just Like Heaven" as the studio's biggest loser.


UNIVERSAL: What could possibly go wrong when you have a slate topped by four films all made by Academy Award winners? Oops! Ron Howard's "Cinderella Man" and Sam Mendes' "Jarhead" were costly duds, while Steven Spielberg's "Munich" desperately needs a best picture nomination to gain box-office traction. That leaves Peter Jackson's "King Kong," a critically lauded epic that has mysteriously failed to do epic business. The rest of the year was not so stellar, with low-budget hits ("The 40 Year-Old Virgin") offset by misses big ("Doom") and small ("Serenity"). Chairman Stacey Snider has kept General Electric's cost-cutters at bay, but with her contract expiring this year, the longer she goes without re-upping the more wonderers will wonder what the future holds.

Performance: C-minus. Quality: C-plus. Overall: C.

NEW LINE: Another bumpy post-"Lord of the Rings" year for the studio, which returned to its youth-oriented comedy roots with mixed results. "Wedding Crashers" was the year's biggest and best comedy, and it single-handedly transformed the industry's attitude toward R-rated comedies (expect a gaggle of imitators soon). But aside from "Monster-in-Law," the rest of the slate fizzled, with "Son of the Mask" and "Domino" being costly losers, offset only by a pair of critic favorites, "A History of Violence" and "The New World."


PARAMOUNT: No one can accuse Brad Grey of undue caution, as the new chairman has boldly overhauled this cobwebby studio, bringing in new executive talent and buying DreamWorks, which could help jump-start movie production at a time when the cupboards are nearly bare. In a year of transition, the studio had several flops, notably "Elizabethtown," mitigated by an Adam Sandler hit ("The Longest Yard") that was followed by the mammoth "War of the Worlds." Grey can only hope the DreamWorks deal will lead
to more Spielberg blockbusters to come, though it speaks volumes that Spielberg couldn't even be persuaded to move his office from the Universal back lot to Paramount.

**Performance:** C.  **Quality:** C.  **Overall:** C-minus.

**MIRAMAX/WEINSTEIN CO.:** Harvey Weinstein has been lying low lately, perhaps embarrassed by the last months of his reign at Miramax, which resembled one of those "Everything Must Go!" bankruptcy sales. Nothing was too old or decrepit, including "The Great Raid" and "Mindhunters," two films (shot in 2002!) that stumbled out of the Miramax vaults like zombies from a crypt. Weinstein had one nice hit ("Sin City") and has a couple of classy new films in release from his new company, but even longtime Harvey fans have diminished expectations for his new studio's future.

**Performance:** D.  **Quality:** C-minus.  **Overall:** D-plus.

**SONY:** When it comes to ineptitude, this studio belongs right up there with the 1962 Mets (who lost 120 games) and the 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers (who went 0-14). Marketing chief Geoff Ammer got the ax, but he was a sacrificial lamb for an Amy Pascal-led production team that appeared out of touch with reality, consistently misjudging the marketplace ("Bewitched"), failing to exercise any fiscal restraint ("Fun With Dick and Jane") and releasing movies ("Zathura") on dates when they were doomed to fail. To add insult to injury, the Academy Award hopes of its costly "Memoirs of a Geisha" are evaporating, insuring it will be a money loser too.

**Performance:** D.  **Quality:** D.  **Overall:** D.

"The Big Picture" appears Tuesdays in Calendar. If you have questions or criticism, e-mail them to patrick.goldstein@latimes.com.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.