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Excess Hollywood: America & Capitalist Cinema

Rich Johnson

Week 10

CONCLUSION: SEX, LIES... AND (VIDEO) CAPES

1989 literally felt like the film industry had ran out of breath or at least were holding it until the '90s (or Hollywood 3.0) was taken over by a revolution in computer generated effects. Gross and brash as it may be, Brian Yuzna's *Society* felt like the ultimate end to the decade; an archetypal excessive movie *about* excess in all its sticky glory. The same year sees what is often considered Spike Lee's best work *Do the Right Thing* — a major black force on the film industry who captured not only the spirit of the time but delivered something far more personal and observant about urban tales and the reality of 'living'. It seemed amongst the last of the '80s blockbusters and sequels there was still something independent and political bubbling away.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Early influences/references:

Superman (1978)

Director(s): Richard Donner

Studio(s): Dovemeat Ltd. / Film Export, A.G. / International Film Production

Swamp Thing (1982)

Director(s): Wes Craven

Studio(s): Swampfilms

Main:

Do the Right Thing (1989)

Director(s): Spike Lee

Studio(s): 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks Company (Distributed by Universal Pictures)

Sex, Lies and Videotape (1989)

Director(s): Steven Soderbergh

Studio(s): Outlaw Productions



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***Batman* (1989)**

Director(s): Tim Burton

Studio(s): Warner Bros. (presents) / The Guber-Peters Company / PolyGram Filmed Entertainment

***Society* (1989)**

Director(s): Brian Yuzna

Studio(s): Wild Street Pictures / Screaming Mad George

References to:

***Roger & Me* (1989)**

Director(s): Michael Moore

Studio(s): Dog Eat Dog Films / Warner Bros.

***UHF* (1989)**

Director(s): Jay Levey

Studio(s): Cinecorp SAC / Imaginary Entertainment / Orion Pictures

***See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989)**

Director(s): Arthur Hiller

Studio(s): TriStar Pictures

***Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989)**

Director(s): Steven Spielberg

Studio(s): Lucasfilm Ltd.

Notes:

1989

A major part of ushering out the '80s is Reagan's final term as President coming to an end. Relations with Russia ranged from pushing them to the brink to cooperation.

George Bush Sr. is sworn in as the 41st U.S. president 20 January 1989.

On November 9th, 1989, the Berlin Wall, begins to crumble when German citizens are allowed to travel freely between East and West Germany for the first time. One day later, the influx of crowds dismantle it. At the time of his presidency Reagan demanded to "tear down this wall". The remark was ignored at the time, but after the wall fell in November 1989, it was retroactively recast as a soaring achievement.

A snapshot of movies includes a deluge of crass, throwaway efforts that pretty much sum up the era. There are the likes of Patrick Swayze's cornball effort *Roadhouse* but also multiple sequels

such as *Lethal Weapon 2*, *Ghostbusters II* along with *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the third entry in the franchise, which should have ended a perfect trilogy.

It doesn't get any more daft than Weird Al Yankovic in UHF.

A complete contrast to documentary filmmaker Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, his debut that tells the ultimate story of capitalism and where America failed during the '80s, Moore demanding answers when General Motors suddenly closes the doors of all its auto plants in his home of Flint, Michigan. With over 30,000 people out of work, Flint is economically devastated, and Moore aims to track down General Motors CEO Roger Smith. An absolute must watch.

Indie trailblazer...

"I remember reading somewhere that men learn to love the person that they're attracted to, and that women become more and more attracted to the person that they love." — Graham Dalton

Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* tells the story of a troubled man who videotapes women discussing their sexuality and fantasies, and his impact on the relationships of a troubled married couple and the wife's younger sister.

"Cinema is not about format, and it's not about venue. Cinema is an approach. Cinema is a state of mind on the part of the filmmaker. I've seen commercials that have cinema in them, and I've seen Oscar-winning movies that don't. I'm fine with this." — Steven Soderbergh

Soderbergh is one of the most successful independent filmmakers of all time. His career has hopped from genre to genre over the years from drama to sci-fi and popular heist movie remakes *Ocean's 11* (2001).

Inspired by his own failed relationship at the time, the film was written by Steven Soderbergh in eight days on a yellow legal pad during a cross country trip. Made for \$1.2 million it ended up grossing \$36.74 million worldwide.

The film explores neurosis and human sexuality. In order to achieve the film's lurking feel, Steven Soderbergh played with camera techniques. "I used the tracking shots because I knew that I had a very talky film and I didn't want it to be visually static," he told the Chicago Tribune. "Without detracting from the performances, I wanted to keep things moving. I also wanted a very predatory feel, the idea of encircling a character and getting closer. It seemed to fit a sort of languid quality that I wanted to have and that Baton Rouge-my hometown and the location of the movie-seems to have."

The antithesis to Hollywood, independent filmmakers have complete creative control. Soderbergh is somewhat of a throwback to the New Hollywood era.

"Let me tell you the story of Right Hand, Left Hand." — Radio Raheem



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The film takes place in Brooklyn, New York. The story involves Salvatore 'Sal' Fragione (Danny Aiello) as the Italian owner of a pizzeria. When a neighborhood local, Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) becomes upset when he sees that Sal's 'Wall of Fame' exhibits only Italian actors, he flips. Buggin' Out believes a pizzeria in a black neighborhood should showcase black actors, but Sal disagrees - the wall ultimately becoming a symbol of racism and hate as tensions rise.

"I may have been born yesterday, but I stayed up all night." — Spike Lee

Spike Lee *really* highlights how white the '80s were and, by the end of the decade, begins to make his mark on black cinema. Spike Lee also plays the lead, Mookie with an early Samuel L. Jackson role. The film is full of power and vibrant imagery... colour and 'colourful' language of the streets.

In complete contrast we still have Richard Pryor and his partnership with Gene Wilder in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*. An hilarious film that not only shows 'colour' but also the barriers that go beyond the colour of skin – the barriers of communication becoming the main catalyst of the comedy.

"I feel like something's gonna happen. And, if I scratch the surface, they'll be something terrible underneath..." — Bill Whitney

Society (1989) was the directorial debut of horror producer Brian Yuzna. His productions are as subtle as a brick but have an independent vibe that is made all the more obvious by the films' outlandish approaches to themes. An approach that has often detracted from some genuine commentary.

"It's my love for cinema that fuels my work. If there is one thing then, that, as a scholar, as a film buff, I have always loved to do, it is to go and look for the origins and inspirations of films, and of course I am not referring only to horror. Understanding the influences that determined certain choices." — Brian Yuzna

Yuzna was most well known for producing H.P. Lovecraft adaptations during the '80s with the late director Stuart Gordon at the helm, including *Re-Animator* (1985) and *From Beyond* (1986).

You'll scream. You'll laugh. Half the time the film questions whether we actually saw what we thought we saw... and then when 'things' are revealed they make us want to look away. It's not the seriousness of John Carpenter's *The Thing* but more goofy in its concept... more throwaway. Tonally, the gross out moments and hilarity is a little jarring.

The film's 'climax' (pardon the pun) is an orgy of special effects known as 'shunting' – some of the last of the era, and some of the last practical effects before the advent of CGI. It is grotesque, but under its sticky surface, shows the corrupt and insidious mindset of liberal America where people are literally reshaped and absorbed into one collective.

Japanese special makeup effects artist Joji Tani, otherwise known as 'Screaming Mad George', created the insane effects. His style is as unhinged as it looks onscreen – obviously influenced by Salvador Dali, turning the surrealist painter's work into a schlocky feast for the eyeballs.



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Excess, heroes and super wealth...

"Where does he get those wonderful toys?" — Joker

The character of Batman – some irony that his alter ego, Bruce Wayne, is a rich man swimming in excess... but putting it to good use. It is, of course, a never-ending fight which will ultimately kill him.

It's over a decade since the last superhero movie... kind of. After *Superman: The Movie* (1978) the next DC property came in the form of Wes Craven's adaptation of *Swamp Thing* (1982). At the time a creature feature inspired comic book in the vein of the Universal Monsters. It would eventually become a major game changer in the history of comic books when writer Alan Moore delivered outstanding cosmic (and poetic) storylines. Read more about Swamp Thing in my [40th-anniversary piece](#) for *Fangoria*.

Batman obsessive Michael Uslan grew up wanting bring the Caped Crusader to the big screen. While still at University and visiting DC Comics they gave him the opportunity of working on some struggling titles, which led to him buying the rights of Swamp Thing and Batman. He has been an executive producer on all iterations of the character ever since from Tim Burton's original film, the animated series, video games and recent versions including Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012) and Matt Reeves' *The Batman* (2022).

"Anybody with artistic ambitions is always trying to reconnect with the way they saw things as a child." — Tim Burton

Tim Burton's version is very... 'Tim Burton'.

From the gothic atmosphere – credited as much to the work of production designer Anton Furst – to the dark and twisted characters. It is, by comparison to most recent iterations of the character, a cartoon.

At the time a complete contrast to the high camp of *Batman* '66. Fancy dress costumes replaced with black rubber, capturing a darker version of the character, specifically reinvented in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: Year One* (1987).

Jack Nicholson took top billing for playing Jack Nicholson... although he was *perfectly* cast, to the point you couldn't have imagined anyone else in the role.

... until Mark Hamill, Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix took on the role, the latter two winning Oscars.

Batman and the Joke are the yin and the yang: one twisting fun into chaos, the other harnessing fear to fight crime.

First appearance: *Detective Comics* issue #27, cover date May, 1939.



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Influenced by pulp heroes such as The Shadow and The Spider as well as swashbuckling hero, Zorro.

The era in which Batman was created echoes a great deal of what has been happening the past decade from economic crashes to corrupt governments and the rise in crime.

A lot of what has been discussed the past 10 weeks echoes today...

- (Cold) War
- All the parallels of excess, greed and corruption
- The rise (and fall?) of Trump
- Sequels and franchises evolving into IP (Intellectual Property)
- Superhero movies dominating the box office
- The excess of information technology predicted by cyberpunk

Next, consider stepping back in time with the next course...

OLD HOLLYWOOD: THE GOOD, THE BAT AND THE BEAUTIFUL, Wednesday evenings from May 10th.