



SCREEN

Star Dreck

by Sam Karnick

Cobra; directed by George P. Cosmatos; screenplay by Sylvester Stallone; Warner Bros.

Sweet Liberty; written and directed by Alan Alda.

How did America's movies ever get so bad?

That seems to be the \$99,000 question for American film critics lately, from Siskel and Ebert to *American Film* to *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby, right on down to your local small-town newspaper. What's wrong with Hollywood today, and how can we—the Concerned Critics of America—put it right?

Summer is a bad time of year for most film critics. The movies are actually no worse than they are during the rest of the year, but they're bad in ways the critics don't like. Many of the releases are frankly juvenile, as is true throughout the rest of the year, but the ones released in the summer, when the kids are out of school, often make tremendous amounts of money. This sorely offends most critics, who envision an America composed of devotees of *Shoah*, *Ginger and Fred*, and the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

To be sure, some of these critics are being disingenuous, because what *really* bothers them is the politics of the films: the fact that audiences are flocking to see *Rocky IV*, *White Nights*, *Top Gun*, and the like, while avoiding critical favorites such as *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Desert Hearts*. But that doesn't bother me.

The real problem with Hollywood lies elsewhere, and it won't be solved easily. The problems have to do with the economic structure of the Hollywood studios, and, as might be expected, Washington has had a lot to do

with bringing them on. Since the late 1940's, when all of Hollywood's major studios signed a consent decree with the Justice Department—under threat of antitrust prosecution—the Hollywood studios have been forbidden to own theaters in which to show their product. What this accomplished, in conjunction with other factors such as the coming of television and changes in the tax code, was the utter destruction of the old Hollywood studio system which had resulted in the almost-universally acknowledged "Golden Age" of Hollywood cinema, the 1930's and 40's.

Without a guaranteed outlet for their products, the studios have since then been forced to woo theater owners, especially the all-important foreign markets, with splashy concepts, superstar actors, remakes, sequels, nudity, violence, and whiz-bang special effects. Anything, that is, besides good stories, innovation, and serious ideas. It's easy to chart the progression from the 1950's, when there was still a vestige of narrative sense in the average Hollywood film—leftover in the work of filmmakers trained during Hollywood's heyday—through the disorganized slop of the 1960's and the self-indulgent "artistry" and exploitation of the 70's, to the extremism and aimlessness of contemporary films.

But it would be foolish to blame the distributors, exhibitors, producers, or filmmakers for this situation. They are simply reacting rationally to a seriously distorted market. Producers can't get their films made if they can't get a studio to distribute them; distributors can't make money off their films if they can't get theater owners to rent them; and theater owners can only rent films which they feel stand a good chance of making money—i.e., films with elements with a good track record—stars, effects, etc.

If their behavior results in bad films, they can hardly be blamed for trying to make the best of a bad situation. A

look at a couple of recent major releases provides a good illustration of how Hollywood's warped economic structure works to create bad films.

On the surface, *Sweet Liberty* and *Cobra* couldn't be more different. Nor could their stars, Alan Alda and Sylvester Stallone. What is hidden by their differences in style and temperament, however, is their one all-important similarity: They are both bankable actors.

"Bankable," in Hollywood parlance, refers to a performer or property—such as a best-selling novel—a producer can take to investors and be assured of getting the money to go ahead with the project. Properties become bankable, of course, by making money. Both Stallone and Alda have made money for previous investors—Stallone much more than Alda, of course—and so both are bankable.

Now, if a producer has a bankable novel and raises money on that basis, he's in a very good position—"swimming in gravy," in Hollywood parlance—because a book never loses its temper and walks off the set; never calls in sick until it gets its way; never insists on approval of directors, writers, and co-stars; never needs a sumptuously appointed trailer in which to get dressed; never insists the payroll be packed with its relatives, etc., etc., etc. And, most important of all, a book *never, ever* insists on tampering with the finished screenplay.

But stars do. And they get their way. Because once a film goes into production, work is on a very tight schedule which can cost upwards of \$100,000 a day. And if the star walks off the set, the crew can't shoot. So the producers give him—or sometimes her—his way.

And end up with a film like *Cobra*. There is hardly a moment in *Cobra* in which Sylvester Stallone is not on-screen, gnawing on a matchstick and mumbling words of wisdom. Furthermore, none of the other characters are

ever given a chance to develop an identity strong enough to distract attention from the star. Instead, they are given totems: Cobretti's best friend eats junk food; the Girl, played by Stallone's wife, Brigitte Nielsen, is a fashion model; the bad guys wear leather jackets, ride motorcycles, and clink axes together in some sort of unexplained daily ritual; and Cobretti's rival cop continually tells him he's a loose cannon and should shape up.

Stallone as Cobretti is so good he's insufferable—a combination of Dirty Harry, Groucho Marx, and James Q. Wilson. Yet this cheerful do-gooder is the same man who later pours gasoline on one of the bad guys, drops a lighted match on him, and quips, "You have the right to remain silent."

It's not surprising that little drama can be generated by such characters: Who cares what happens to them? Stallone attempts to make up for the obvious lack of suspense by inserting a ludicrous chase scene or fistfight every few minutes, but it doesn't help. At the same time, the director amuses himself by packing the film with allusions to other movies, but with no discernible purpose.

In *Sweet Liberty*, Alan Alda makes another attempt to recover the spirit of old-fashioned romantic comedy (cf. his 1981 release, *The Four Seasons*). But for romance to work, we have to care about the characters, and in *Sweet Liberty* there's little to inspire affection. Alda offers his supporting players no more leeway than Stallone does, and the characters are no more well-rounded: Michael Caine plays a vain, lecherous movie star; Michelle Pfeiffer a manipulative seductress; the usually reliable Bob Hoskins a fawning screenwriter; and Lillian Gish, in a truly appalling role, plays Alda's aged senile mother. Alda, while momentarily seduced by the Hollywood glamour introduced into his North Carolina hometown, eventually proves his intellectual and moral superiority over everyone else in the film—except his girlfriend, whose goodness and devotion serve to make him look even better.

Alda succumbs to the temptation to inflate his part. As a college professor whose book on the Revolutionary War is being filmed as a comedy in his

hometown, Alda conspires to get the cast to do the film's climactic scene his way—the "right" way, of course. The scene turns out great, and even the film's director, heretofore his sworn enemy, is pleased.

This dubious business, furthermore, is in the service of an extremely dubious proposition: that freedom is the essential element of American society and any greatness we have ever achieved. No doubt, many people would be willing to argue for the importance of such other things as respect for the family, the prevalence of religious belief, and the emphasis on local issues over national ones, but it really doesn't seem very important to argue against frivolous nonsense.

The conclusion is inescapable that these films would have turned out quite differently had their producers had a choice. But big stars exert tremendous power in Hollywood, and it takes a lot of luck, tenacity, and conviction for a producer to buck the system. Some have it, and they make good films. Stallone himself has appeared in several good pictures. But most, as in any other industry, are neither geniuses nor persons of extraordinary character. It's not their fault if the medium they work in is subject to distorted market forces which make it extremely difficult for them to do their best work. And the stars can hardly be blamed for thinking they know better than their writers, directors, and producers. But a market system imposed from outside to remedy ills which haven't been felt for over 30 years is foolish, archaic, and unnecessary.

There is evidence that the big studios are finally beginning to hack away at the effects of the consent decree by buying theaters, television stations, and cable channels. These are probably necessary moves: The moviegoing audience is moving increasingly to cable and cassettes, where they can get the same films at a lower price. But the Hollywood studios can still save themselves by responding wisely to the challenges of their changing marketplace. That is, if Washington will let them.

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TELEVISION

Factional Fundamentalists

by Janet Scott Barlow

To judge by the tone, content, and amount of recent media coverage of Protestant Fundamentalism in general and television evangelists in particular, Fundamentalists are a collection of interchangeable religious parts that have grouped themselves into a united cultural force which grows stronger and more indivisible by the week. But the conclusion is incorrect because the information that supports it is skewed or incomplete. The fact is, Fundamentalists are sort of like pickles: They all start out as cucumbers, but after that it's Heinz 57 Varieties. What's more, the gherkins aren't always willing to share shelf space with the dills, and vice versa.

Nearly every variety of Fundamentalism is presented on religious television, and only victims of predetermined expectations or doctrinal illiteracy could decide that these varieties form either the makings or the product of a single batch. Under the Fundamentalist label are Positive Confessionists and Back to the Crossers, pre-Tribbers and post-Tribbers, will-of-God seekers and will-of-God knowers, prophesiers and false-prophesy denouncers.

Among the major television figures there is Paul Crouch, founder of TBN, who, called to use the "miracle of satellite" to bathe the world in Christian programming, schedules two "Praise-A-Thons" a year for that purpose, thus sparing viewers constant entreaties for money. There is Pat Robertson, the answered prayer of many Pentecostals, possessor of a Yale Law School degree, a personal political agenda, and the gift of tongues (take *that*, secular humanists). There is Jim Bakker of PTL whose daily talk show is an ongoing Christian soap opera, his personal vehicle for showcasing his latest project, begging money for his latest project, or lamenting his persecution by the enemies of his latest project. There is Jerry Falwell, who delivers political lectures in the guise of sermons. There is James