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**STRATEGY OF NEIGHBORHOOD MOVIEGOING : THE CINEMAS 1-2-3-4-5**  
by JOHN H. DOOR

I recently have moved from Los Angeles, mecca of the movies, back to New England, where I was born and once dreamed about Hollywood. As I had missed the press screening in L.A., I decided to go to SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER in a local movie house, which turned out to be the Sack 1-2-3-4-5 in the Searstown shopping mall of Leominster, Massachusetts. It was snowing out, cold and windy; and Searstown was in the full throes of the Christmas shopping hysteria.

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER had opened everywhere across the country, it seemed, on the same day; and thus it was playing in Theater 3 as a first-run movie at \$3.75 a head. Escaping from the cold and small town isolation, I was looking forward to a couple hours of movie magic, glamor, excitement, and a blaring stereo disco beat. But this was not to be. Theater 3, it turned out, was one of those little "bowling alley" theaters, ancillary to the bigger Theater 1 (which had CLOSE ENCOUNTERS), with a very small screen and bad sound system turned down too low (perhaps to prevent the disco from travelling through the walls and competing with the UFO effects).

The movie had been hyped plenty with Coming-This-Christmas trailers appearing ludicrously (I thought) in the middle of summer, as if the releasing studio had nothing else event-worthy to promote all Fall. The movie, it turned out, needed all the hype it could get, but it really needed that big sound if I were to be so caught up in disco-mania as to accept John Travolta's dancing debut as an event.

The audience, a sparse collection of young couples, was rude. A drunk down in the second row kept yelling at the screen things like: "Hey Barbarino, you faggot! Yah think yah hit da big time, huh?" I found the drunk's continuing monologue an amusing diversion from the tedium on the screen, but everyone else in the theater did not agree, and it looked like a fight might break out between the drunk and another guy a few rows back who wanted to impress his date by quieting the offender. For a moment, all eyes in the theater were on the two squabbling locals and not on Mr. Travolta. So I cannot report, as movie-reviewers so often do, that all eyes were riveted on the screen.

This is not to disparage John Travolta's appeal. While I've never been able to make it through an episode of "Welcome Back Kotter," I was very impressed by Travolta's presence in the TV movie THE BOY IN THE PLASTIC BUBBLE. But the much-heralded, slimmed down, sleeked up version of Travolta in SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER did nothing for me. Perhaps it was too much an Alan Carr pre-packaged creation—a vanity vehicle that assumes the audience's adulation without feeling it necessary to earn it. As for Travolta's dancing, give me Cybill Shephard any day. Mastering a few arch and over-rehearsed dance routines did not convince me that I was watching a dancer of any natural talent. My disbelief was not suspended.

The movie has of course gone on to become a big hit, so mine must be a minority reaction. Maybe if the sound system at the Sack 1-2-3-4-5 had been better and the audience had danced in the aisles, I would have gone along with it. Good music can save mediocre movies, as amply proven by the memorable soundtrack of the forgettable CAR WASH.

One difference between watching TV and movies in Los Angeles and in small town New England is that people here seem to be less critical, more grateful for the gift of entertainment manufactured so far away from the day-to-day reality of their lives. For myself, however, I find a dull movie seen here all the more disappointing, because the absence of other stimuli in a quiet town places a greater dependence on the media for input from the outside world. I remember when I was growing up in New England in the 1950's there was never a movie I didn't like. I devoured every double bill that came to my local theater.

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**CINEMA 1-2-3-4-5**  
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The local theater then was the Strand in Clinton, Massachusetts—the town President Carter visited last year to so much media applause. But hard times have fallen on Clinton, as they have on many of the old mill towns of New England. On the day after Carter's visit, it was announced that the Colonial Press, a major local industry, was going out of business, thus placing a healthy percentage of the town on the unemployment rolls. As a result, the Strand is now boarded up during the weekdays. Its name has been changed inexplicably to the Kaleidoscope, and it runs films only on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings—one screening of one feature at 7:00 each night. This is in contrast to the old Strand policy of showing two double bills a week, changing programs on Wednesdays and Sundays.

But the era of the neighborhood theater double bill has clearly passed. The same 10 films are playing everywhere simultaneously in Massachusetts in the new shopping center multiple theaters. The bills never seem to change—there isn't enough product. Better to milk each event movie with thoroughly orchestrated local and national TV, radio, and print media promotional campaigns.

The strategy seems to pay off. The day after Christmas, I went to the Cinema 1-2-3 in a new shopping plaza in Worcester, Massachusetts. The place was mobbed; the lines endless. I could understand this for STAR WARS, which was in Theater 1; but it surprised me that the 7:00 show of THE CHOIRBOYS in Theater 2 was also sold out. I went out for a couple of beers, then came back for the 9:15 showing of THE CHOIRBOYS, waited dutifully in line with an exclusively young crowd, then was herded on into another small bowling alley-shaped theater, filled to capacity, and, it turned out, poorly ventilated.

I had gone to THE CHOIRBOYS not because it sounded like it was going to be very good, but because I still remembered director Robert Aldrich's more glorious days (THE LEGEND OF LYLAH CLARE, WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE) and, besides, THE CHOIRBOYS was the only one of the 10 features then milking New England that I hadn't already seen. I expected to be disappointed and was not disappointed in my expectation. Normally, I would admire such willful bad taste, but Aldrich's grandstand play to the lowest common denominator lacked the wicked insight of intelligence slumming. At first, the audience got off on the amorality and dirty language; but after a couple hours in the stuffy bowling alley, Aldrich's misunderstanding of contemporary sordidness had grown quite dull, all shock value having been dissipated; and several people walked out, while the rest of us fidgeted in our seats.

Older directors have frequently been accused of growing out of touch with their times; but, in retrospect, they seem to have seen their times all too clearly (such as Hawks' portrait of the plastic 60's in RED LINE 7000 and Griffith's Depression street realism in THE STRUGGLE). So perhaps future generations will come to admire THE CHOIRBOYS as accurate commentary on the cesspool 70's. But, seen today, Aldrich's amorality-for-effect plays only as another Hollywood descent into what Saul Bellow has termed "the moronic inferno."

Rounding out my holiday entertainment was THE GAUNTLET at the Cinema Showcase 1-2-3-4 in Worcester, where the benefits of a reasonably sized and proportioned theater, well ventilated, with good sound and a large screen, did nothing to enhance my appreciation of the movie. The premise of THE GAUNTLET is that a movie with Clint Eastwood as a cop makes lots of money. It is sort of an extension and updating of the old premise that a movie with John Wayne as a cowboy makes money. THE GAUNTLET is a particularly silly, comic book level working out of this premise. It was not meant to be taken seriously (although this should not have excused its writers from maintaining narrative logic).

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**Cinema 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-7-8-**  
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It makes no difference whether critics like or dislike a movie such as THE GAUNTLET. Their opinions will have no effect on the gross of the picture, nor make any dent in the self-esteem of its filmmaker/star. Clint Eastwood's image (call it reactionary, macho, or heroic) appeals to a large (presumably) male population in New England as elsewhere; and his fans will readily accept any vehicle in which he appears, provided only that it reinforces the values he has come to represent. He is a proven commodity. This picture adds nothing to his reputation. It is safe, attempting not too much. It is a product of greed, not commitment. It does not need to be intellectually honest or aesthetically adventuresome. That Eastwood, as director, chooses to attempt so little may lower one's esteem for him as a filmmaker, but not as a businessman. Whatever promises he seemed to show in the past as a lyricist (THE OUTLAW JOSIE WALES) or action director, is contradicted by the visual banality of THE GAUNTLET.

It is not flattering to the times that such sloppy pictures as SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, THE CHOIRBOYS, and THE GAUNTLET are financially successful. Because of their successes, they will retain, to historians, a certain sociological value. But to the history of the film medium, they are but more and more distant echoes of formal/narrative structures that long ago reached their ideal fulfillment. Seen in the context of the marketing and exhibiting retrenchment that the shopping plaza theater complexes represent, further demonstrates the generalized lowering of expectations that so characterizes the 70's. Movies will be remembered as a phenomenon that began with Griffith in 1915, flourished into the 50's, gradually died out through the 60's, then atrophied while being replaced in prominence in the 70's by the electronic media.

The recent deaths of Charlie Chaplin and Howard Hawks rest as tombstones on the now long past Golden Age of Hollywood. The masters are dead; long live their legacy!

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D.S.