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A dispiriting decade

Ten years after the last golden age of cinema, all we're left with are recycled ideas and tired franchises



brand? A product? An event? A thrill ride? When was the last time you heard a film sold as a story? (I'm not making this up: comic books used to be based on movies, not the other way around.)

For studios, it's risk-averse math: They would rather gamble \$200 million on a potentially new billion-dollar franchise (or \$20 million on a comedy with broad appeal) than fork over \$40 million on an actor-driven drama that doesn't have an easily-graspable marketing hook.

That has left little room for "non-event" films to manoeuvre. Worse, the once-thriving independent film market has collapsed, meaning that until there's workable online distribution, productions financed outside the studio system face a brutal struggle to find audiences. Conversely for filmgoers, it's led to a prevailing sameness among blockbusters, brought on by ceaseless cloning of themes and concepts.

No one is going to begrudge terrific entertainments such as *X-Men* or *Spider-Man* or *The Dark Knight* or the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the *Harry Potter* films. But did we need the *Poiter* also-ran *The Spiderwick Chronicles*? Or *City of Ember*? Or *Cirque du Freak*?

This model, of course, is unsustainable. Nothing breeds apathy quite like familiarity. Yet wouldn't you know it — Hollywood's solution is yet another recycled idea: 3D, the magic bullet that will supposedly keep the theatrical experience alive, despite a multimedia landscape that is reshaping how films are marketed.

Case in point: In the era of Twitter, word of mouth spreads at the speed of text — dooming some (*Bruno*) and elevating others (*The Hangover*) after a single Friday screening.

That's good news, I guess. At least if the sky is falling, Chicken Little can tweet about it.

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"Audiences only want to see videogames. They don't want to see our movies anymore. They want to see us get arrested for DUI on TMZ."

— **Billy Bob Thornton**, at the 2009 Sundance film festival

"There's always been a struggle between art and commerce, but now commerce is just overwhelming. It's totally disheartening... You go, 'Why do I want to go out of the house anymore?'"

— **Michael Douglas**, at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival

\$142.8 million
— Opening weekend gross of **The Twilight Saga: New Moon**

To be fair — and for some perspective — Chicken Little may have been the world's first film critic. The sky is falling! It's the death of cinema! Michael Bay is Satan!

Not quite. Long before *Twilight* and *Transformers*, populist taste and critical opinion were typically at odds. And for as long as there have been actors, there have been complaints about a dearth of quality roles.

Still, even among optimists, it's difficult not to be discouraged by a decade that began so promisingly, and now concludes with a dispiriting shrug.

Ten years ago, 1999 proved to be one of the most compelling film-going years in a generation: *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Election*, *Magnolia*, *The Insider*, *Three Kings*, *American Beauty* and *The Matrix* were among the new works from daring talents behind, and in front of, the camera.

Cut to 2009, when even how Hollywood defines a film seems nebulous. Is it a

KEVIN'S PICKS

TOP 10 MOVIES

1. Amores Perros
2. The Lives of Others
3. Children of Men
4. The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford
5. Zodiac
6. Memento
7. Adaptation
8. Sexy Beast
9. Mulholland Drive
10. Million Dollar Baby



TOP 10 SCI-FI/FANTASY/HORROR

1. The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring
2. Wall-E
3. The Dark Knight
4. Pan's Labyrinth
5. 28 Days Later
6. Spider-Man 2
7. Let the Right One In
8. Iron Man
9. The Orphanage
10. The Ring



TOP 10 MALE PERFORMANCES

1. Heath Ledger (*Brokeback Mountain*)
2. Daniel Day-Lewis (*There Will Be Blood*)
3. Ben Kingsley (*Sexy Beast*)
4. Nicolas Cage (*Adaptation*)
5. Adrien Brody (*The Pianist*)
6. Heath Ledger (*The Dark Knight*)
7. Bruno Ganz (*Downfall*)
8. Philip Seymour Hoffman (*Capote*)
9. Russell Crowe (*A Beautiful Mind*)
10. Johnny Depp (*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*)



TOP 10 FEMALE PERFORMANCES

1. Amy Adams (*Junebug*)
2. Naomi Watts (*Mulholland Drive*)
3. Charlize Theron (*Monster*)
4. Vera Farmiga (*Down to the Bone*)
5. Anne Hathaway (*Rachel Getting Married*)
6. Hilary Swank (*Million Dollar Baby*)
7. Halle Berry (*Monster's Ball*)
8. Laura Linney (*You Can Count on Me*)
9. Helen Mirren (*The Queen*)
10. Ellen Page (*Juno*)