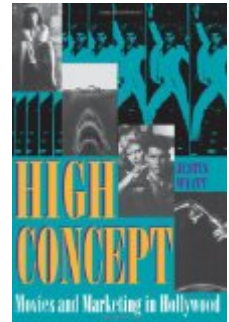


Justin Wyatt. *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Texas Film Studies Series). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-292-79091-9.



Reviewed by Steven Mintz

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During the late 1970s, Justin Wyatt, a professor of radio, television, and film at the University of North Texas and a former market research analysis in the film industry, argues, a new approach to commercial filmmaking emerged, summed up by the phrase "high concept." The essence of high concept, he explains, "is a striking, easily reducible narrative which also offers a high degree of marketability" (13). Typically, high concept films combined several elements: a narrative that could be summarized in a single phrase; an image or song that the potential audience associated with the film; "total look" style of cinematography characteristic of television and magazine advertisements and music videos; pre-sold stars or subject matter; character typing rather than character exposition; and merchandising tie-ins.

Villified by critics as the proof of Hollywood's creative bankruptcy and the growing dominance of the industry's marketing apparatus, high concept was in fact, according to Wyatt, the product of specific historical, institutional, and economic forces. The most important, he argues, were industry conglomeration and diversification; the fi-

nancial failure, in the late 1970s, of auteur filmmakers and experimental, iconoclastic, antimyth films; changing film distribution patterns (emphasizing saturation advertising and releases); and reliance on market research. Wyatt offers an extremely interesting discussion of the ability of models to predict box office gross and reduce risk and uncertainty within the movie marketplace.

Ironically, during the late eighties and nineties, when Hollywood became even more closely intertwined with other media (through conglomerates like Time Warner or Sony) and more heavily dependent on talent agencies, high concept filmmaking declined. Wyatt attributes this primarily to the aging of the baby boom audience; the increasing cost of producing and marketing high concept films; and a growing conviction among studio executives that audiences wanted original, inventive stories. Thus high concept (strictly defined) may turn out to have been a relatively brief episode in Hollywood's history, when the balance between economics and art clearly shifted in the direction of economics.

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