

HOLLYWOOD'S BIGGEST HITS OF THE 1980s

The Blockbuster Decade — From *E.T.* to *Back to the Future*

Name: _____

Date: _____

Class: _____



A cinema auditorium — in the 1980s, blockbusters drew record crowds who lined up around the block for a seat

PART 1 — Key Vocabulary

Study these words before reading the passages below.

Word	Definition
<i>blockbuster</i>	a film that earns an enormous amount of money at the cinema and becomes a major cultural event
<i>box office</i>	the total income a film earns from cinema ticket sales
<i>sequel</i>	a film that continues the story of a previously released, usually successful, film
<i>franchise</i>	a series of related films sharing the same characters or world, often extended into spin-offs, games, and merchandise
<i>genre</i>	a category of film sharing similar themes, style, or audience — such as action, comedy, science fiction, or horror
<i>special effects</i>	techniques used in filmmaking to create scenes or images that would be impossible or dangerous to film in real life
<i>soundtrack</i>	the music featured in a film, often released separately as a commercial recording
<i>gross</i>	the total amount of money a film earns from ticket sales before any expenses are subtracted

VHS	short for Video Home System; a magnetic tape format for recording and playing back films at home, dominant throughout the 1980s
merchandise	commercial products — toys, clothing, posters, lunch boxes — based on a film or its characters, sold to fans
nostalgia	a warm, often idealised feeling of longing for a happier past, triggered by music, objects, or experiences from that time
cultural phenomenon	something that becomes so widely popular it significantly shapes society, language, fashion, or everyday behaviour

PART 2 — Vocabulary Matching

Match each word on the left to its correct definition on the right.

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. blockbuster | A. commercial products like toys and posters sold to promote a film |
| 2. sequel | B. a warm longing for a happy past, triggered by memories from that time |
| 3. franchise | C. a series of related films with shared characters, spin-offs, and merchandise |
| 4. VHS | D. a home video tape format that became dominant in the 1980s |
| 5. nostalgia | E. a film that earns enormous profits and shapes popular culture |
| 6. merchandise | F. something so popular it significantly reshapes society and everyday language |
| 7. cultural phenomenon | G. a film that continues the story of a previously released film |

Fill in the blank with the correct vocabulary word.

- E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* became such a powerful _____ that children everywhere wanted to befriend an alien.
- The _____ for *Top Gun* — featuring 'Danger Zone' by Kenny Loggins — sold millions of copies independently of the film.
- Ghostbusters* earned over \$220 million at the _____, making it one of the most profitable films of 1984.
- Back to the Future* was so successful that it was followed by two _____ films and a theme park attraction.
- The arrival of _____ technology allowed families to rent and rewatch their favourite films at home.

6. George Lucas kept the _____ rights to Star Wars and eventually earned \$42 billion from licensed products alone.



A vintage film projector — in the 1980s, the multiplex cinema became the central social space of suburban life

PART 3 — Reading Passage 1: The Birth of the Blockbuster

What Is a Blockbuster?

The word 'blockbuster' originally referred to a powerful bomb capable of destroying an entire city block. By the 1980s, it had acquired a very different meaning: a film so enormously popular that audiences lined up around the block to see it. The blockbuster era is widely considered to have begun in the mid-1970s, when *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) demonstrated that a single movie could earn hundreds of millions of dollars and dominate the cultural conversation for months. But it was the 1980s that turned the blockbuster into the engine of Hollywood — and the defining entertainment experience of a generation. By the end of the decade, the summer blockbuster release had become a calendar event, studios spent more on advertising than many governments spend on public health, and the biggest films were less like movies and more like national conversations.

The Box Office Champions

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982), directed by Steven Spielberg, became the highest-grossing film in history at the time of its release, earning over \$792 million worldwide — a record it held for eleven years. At the centre of the film is a lonely suburban boy named Elliott who discovers and befriends a stranded alien in his backyard. Unlike the action-driven hits of the decade, *E.T.* was not built around spectacle or destruction. It was built around friendship, loneliness, and the fear of losing someone you love — and it reduced audiences of every age to tears. Spielberg had understood something the studios had missed: raw emotion sells tickets just as reliably as explosions.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) introduced the world to Indiana Jones, a university archaeologist with a leather whip, a battered fedora, and an extraordinary gift for escaping impossible situations. Directed by Spielberg and produced by George Lucas, it blended relentless action with dry humour and exotic adventure into something close to cinematic perfection. Its North American gross was \$212 million — extraordinary for 1981 — and it launched one of cinema's most beloved franchises. Two years later, *Return of the Jedi* (1983) concluded the original *Star Wars* trilogy, earning \$309 million domestically and cementing the saga as the defining mythology of its generation: a story so deeply embedded in popular culture that its characters, dialogue, and imagery became common reference points across languages and continents.

Action, Comedy, and Everything Between

Not all of the decade's biggest hits were set in space or ancient ruins. *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) proved that comedy could anchor a massive action film, earning \$234 million domestically and transforming Eddie Murphy into the most bankable star in Hollywood. *Ghostbusters* (1984) combined comedy, horror, and science fiction — a mix many studio executives considered commercially suicidal — and earned over \$220 million, producing one of the most recognisable theme songs in film history. *Top Gun* (1986) made Tom Cruise an international megastar and — notoriously — caused a measurable spike in applications to the US Navy's fighter pilot training programme in the months that followed its release. *Back to the Future* (1985) sent a teenager named Marty McFly back in time in a DeLorean sports car converted into a time machine, blending comedy, adventure, and science fiction into a story so precisely constructed that film students still study its screenplay as a model of narrative architecture: every scene plants a detail that pays off later, creating a clockwork precision rare in any genre. *Rain Man* (1988) and *Platoon* (1986) demonstrated that serious, adult dramas could also reach the very top of the box office, signalling that the blockbuster decade had room for more than spectacle.

Comprehension Questions — Passage 1

1. What did the word 'blockbuster' originally mean, and how did its meaning change by the 1980s?

2. How much did *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* earn worldwide, and for how long did it hold the record as highest-grossing film?

3. According to the passage, why was E.T. surprising or unusual for a blockbuster film?

4. What did *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) prove about the blockbuster formula?

5. The passage says studios considered the *Ghostbusters* concept 'commercially suicidal.' Why?

6. The passage describes the *Back to the Future* screenplay as 'narrative architecture.' What does this phrase mean, and what example does the passage give?

PART 4 — Reading Passage 2: Beyond the Screen



VHS cassettes — by 1985, more American households owned a VHS player than a dishwasher

The VHS Revolution

When people first saw *E.T.* or *Ghostbusters*, they had essentially one option: go to the cinema. But during the 1980s, a technological revolution changed everything. The VHS cassette — short for Video Home System — allowed families to rent films from a video store or record them from television, then watch them at home on their own schedule. By 1985, more American households owned a VHS player than a dishwasher. The video rental business became a billion-dollar industry almost overnight: Blockbuster Video, founded in 1985, grew to more than 9,000 stores worldwide within a decade. Films that were modest performers at the cinema could find enormous second audiences on home video, while the biggest hits could be rewatched endlessly — which is why millions of children of the 1980s could recite entire films line by line from memory by the time they reached secondary school.

Merchandise and the Marketing Machine

Before the 1980s, most studios treated film merchandise as a minor afterthought. George Lucas changed the industry permanently. When negotiating the original *Star Wars* deal in 1977, Lucas surrendered a portion of his directing fee in exchange for retaining all merchandising rights. The studio agreed, certain that no one would buy toys based on a science fiction film. They were spectacularly wrong. *Star Wars* merchandise — action figures, model spacecraft, lunch boxes, pyjamas, and eventually theme park rides — has generated an estimated \$42 billion in revenue since 1977, dwarfing the films' combined box office income many times over. Lucas's negotiation changed Hollywood. By the mid-1980s, major studios were commissioning toy prototypes and clothing ranges before cameras had even begun rolling on a film. The *Ghostbusters* logo, the DeLorean time machine, the glowing red eye of the Terminator — these became commercial icons as powerful as any brand identity in the corporate world.

The Stars of the Decade

The 1980s created movie stars on a scale that has never quite been repeated. Eddie Murphy, Tom Cruise, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael J. Fox, Sigourney Weaver, and Meryl Streep commanded salaries and cultural attention that made them seem less like entertainers and more like forces of nature. Schwarzenegger — an Austrian former competitive bodybuilder who had barely spoken English a decade earlier — became the highest-paid actor in Hollywood on the strength of *The Terminator* (1984) and *Predator* (1987). Sigourney Weaver became the first genuine female action hero of modern cinema through the *Alien* franchise, earning a Best Actress Academy Award nomination for

Aliens (1986) — one of the very first times in the award's history that a performance in a science fiction action film had been recognised in that category. Ellen Ripley, her character, became one of the most analysed figures in feminist film criticism and remains a benchmark for strong female characters in Hollywood against which every subsequent generation of action heroines is measured.

Why We Still Watch Them

Decades after their original release, 1980s blockbusters are not merely remembered — they are actively rewatched, remade, and rebuilt into new franchises. The reasons go deeper than simple nostalgia. Many of these films were exceptionally well made: disciplined, tightly wound screenplays; practical special effects that still hold up visually because they were captured in camera rather than generated by computer; and stories built around genuine emotional stakes rather than pure sensation. Steven Spielberg described his approach as always asking one essential question during production: 'Is the audience feeling something?' That question — deceptively simple — separated films like *E.T.* and *Indiana Jones* from the hundreds of imitators that followed and failed to match their success. The 1980s taught Hollywood a lesson it has spent forty years slowly relearning: audiences will always return to stories that make them feel.

True or False

Write T for True or F for False.

1. ____ *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* held the record as the highest-grossing film for twenty years after its release.
2. ____ *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was directed by George Lucas and produced by Steven Spielberg.
3. ____ VHS technology allowed families to record and rewatch films at home, transforming how people consumed cinema.
4. ____ George Lucas sold his Star Wars merchandising rights to the studio in exchange for a higher directing fee.
5. ____ Star Wars merchandise has generated more money in total than the films' combined box office income.
6. ____ Arnold Schwarzenegger was originally from Austria and began his career as a competitive bodybuilder.
7. ____ Sigourney Weaver received an Academy Award nomination for a science fiction action film — a rare occurrence at the time.
8. ____ According to Spielberg, making the audience feel an emotion was more important than visual spectacle.

Comprehension Questions — Passage 2

1. What was VHS, and how did it change the way people watched films in the 1980s?

2. What business decision did George Lucas make with Star Wars? Why was the studio's reaction 'spectacularly wrong'?

3. How did Arnold Schwarzenegger's background make his rise to the top of Hollywood unusual?

4. What made Sigourney Weaver's Academy Award nomination for *Aliens* historically significant?

5. According to Spielberg, what single question separated successful blockbusters from their imitators?

6. Why, according to the final section, do people still watch 1980s blockbusters today — beyond simple nostalgia?

PART 5 — Fill in the Blank

Use the word bank to complete each sentence.

merchandise · soundtrack · gross · sequel · franchise · special effects · VHS · nostalgia · box office · cultural phenomenon · blockbuster · genre

1. George Lucas kept the _____ rights to Star Wars, eventually earning an estimated \$42 billion from licensed products around the world.

2. The _____ for *Top Gun* — featuring Kenny Loggins, Berlin, and Giorgio Moroder — sold millions of copies worldwide and became as famous as the film itself.

3. *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* set a record for the highest global _____ of any film in history when it was released in 1982.

4. *Back to the Future* was so successful that it spawned two _____ films, a Universal Studios ride, and a stage musical.

5. Star Wars grew into a global _____ that eventually included cartoons, comics, novels, video games, and theme parks on three continents.

6. The alien in *E.T.* and the T-800 in *The Terminator* were created using practical _____ — no computers were involved in generating the images.
7. The arrival of _____ technology transformed the industry by allowing people to rent films and watch them repeatedly at home.
8. People who grew up watching 1980s films often feel powerful _____ for that era — a warm longing the industry actively taps into through remakes and revivals.

PART 6 — Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or your class. There are no wrong answers — support your view with evidence and examples.

1. Spielberg said a great film must make the audience *feel something*. Think of a film that made you feel a strong emotion. What specific scene or technique created that feeling? Do you agree with Spielberg's view?
2. George Lucas gave up part of his salary to keep the Star Wars merchandising rights and earned \$42 billion from toys and licensed products. Was this fair? Should the studio have received a share of that money? Defend your position.
3. The VHS tape allowed people to watch films at home instead of only at the cinema. How do today's streaming services compare to the VHS era? Has the ability to watch anything, anywhere, at any time made cinema better or worse as an experience?
4. Many 1980s blockbusters are being remade or rebooted today. Can you name one? Do you think remaking classic films is a good creative decision, or does it damage the memory of the originals? Use a specific example to support your view.
5. The passage says that by the mid-1980s, studios were designing and commissioning merchandise before filming had even started. What effect do you think this had on the kinds of stories that got made and the risks that directors were allowed to take?



A cinema marquee — in the 1980s, seeing a blockbuster on opening weekend became a shared social ritual for millions of people

PART 7 — Opinion Essay

Prompt: Steven Spielberg once said that a great film must first make its audience *feel something*. Using evidence from both reading passages and your own ideas, write an essay arguing whether you agree that emotional connection — rather than special effects, star power, or action sequences — is what truly makes a film great. Write at least three paragraphs: an introduction with a clear thesis statement, a body paragraph drawing on specific examples from the passages, and a conclusion that addresses at least one counterargument.

Sources & Further Reading

Academic & Critical Sources

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Schatz, T. (1993). "The New Hollywood." In Collins, Radner & Collins (Eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Routledge.

Acland, C. (2003). *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture*. Duke University Press.

Books

Biskind, P. (1998). *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Simon & Schuster. · Shone, T. (2004). *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer*. Free Press.

Videos

"The Blockbuster Era" — CrashCourse Film History (YouTube) · "How George Lucas Invented Modern Movie Marketing" — Vox (YouTube) · "The VHS Wars Explained" — HISTORY channel (YouTube)

ANSWER KEY — HOLLYWOOD'S BIGGEST HITS OF THE 1980s

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Part 2 — Vocabulary Matching

1. E — a film that earns enormous profits and shapes popular culture
2. G — a film that continues the story of a previously released film
3. C — a series of related films with shared characters, spin-offs, and merchandise
4. D — a home video tape format that became dominant in the 1980s
5. B — a warm longing for a happy past, triggered by memories from that time
6. A — commercial products like toys and posters sold to promote a film
7. F — something so popular it significantly reshapes society and everyday language

Part 2 — Fill in the Blank

1. cultural phenomenon
2. soundtrack
3. box office
4. sequel / sequels
5. VHS
6. merchandise

Part 3 — Comprehension: Passage 1

1. Originally: a bomb capable of destroying an entire city block. In the 1980s: a film so popular that audiences lined up around the block to see it.
2. Over \$792 million worldwide; it held the record for eleven years.
3. It was built around friendship, loneliness, and emotion rather than action or spectacle — unusual for a film earning that much money.
4. It proved that comedy could anchor a massive action film — and made Murphy the most bankable star in Hollywood.
5. No film had successfully combined comedy, horror, and science fiction before — studio executives had never seen that mix succeed commercially.
6. 'Architecture' implies the screenplay is built like a structure — every detail placed deliberately. The passage says every scene plants something that pays off later, creating clockwork precision.

Part 4 — True or False

1. F — E.T. held the record for eleven years, not twenty.
2. F — Raiders of the Lost Ark was *directed* by Spielberg and *produced* by Lucas (not the reverse).
3. T
4. F — Lucas kept the merchandising rights himself, surrendering part of his directing fee instead.
5. T — An estimated \$42 billion in merchandise vs. significantly less in box office.
6. T
7. T — Best Actress nomination for *Aliens* (1986), one of the first times an action performance received that recognition.
8. T

Part 4 — Comprehension: Passage 2

1. VHS was a home video tape system. It allowed people to rent or record films and watch them repeatedly at home — transforming film from a one-time cinema event into something people could revisit endlessly.
2. He surrendered part of his directing fee to keep all merchandising rights. The studio thought this was worthless — but merchandise has generated ~\$42 billion, far more than anyone imagined possible.
3. He was born in Austria, had barely spoken English a decade earlier, and began his career as a bodybuilder — none of the conventional routes to Hollywood stardom.
4. Action or science fiction performances had almost never received major acting nominations. It was one of the first times in Oscar history that a role in that genre received a Best Actress nomination.
5. "Is the audience feeling something?" — He always asked whether a scene was producing a genuine emotional response in the viewer.
6. Many were exceptionally well made: tight screenplays, practical effects that still hold up visually, and stories built around genuine emotional stakes rather than spectacle alone.

Part 5 — Fill in the Blank

1. merchandise
2. soundtrack
3. gross
4. sequel
5. franchise
6. special effects
7. VHS
8. nostalgia