

THE HOLLYWOOD PRESS KIT: A BRIEF HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

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The collection of press kits that Prof. John C. Tibbetts is donating to the Spencer Research library is an unusual and valuable body of resource materials. Generally, materials of this kind were produced for and limited to the press for purposes of print and broadcast media dissemination. They were not available either to scholars or the general public. Professor Tibbetts, however, before taking up a tenured position at the University of Kansas, worked for many years as a broadcast journalist for CBS Television and had access to these materials.

Because of their limited availability, these materials have been hitherto regarded as ephemera, ignored by the academic community, and consequently discarded. Moreover these items are not available on-line. As a result, such a body of research materials is almost impossible to access and/or locate-- unless a scholar visits an archive like the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences library in Los Angeles. (For example, I as a scholar had to go to the Warner Bros. archives at USC to view these types of materials, which proved to be essential for my dissertation research.)

Thus a collection of this size presents an unusual opportunity to expose researchers to a wide spectrum of films and marketing practices. It is a unique chance for future scholars to understand how Hollywood and other film producers generate publicity, market their films, and ultimately understand the nature of the films that they have produced. One of the key values to researching press kits is that it allows a scholar to see how a studio regards the nature of their product and more importantly it illustrates how studios work to shape the discourse and critical consensus around their films.

This collection consists of 875 examples of press kits that were produced by the major studios: MGM, Warner Bros., Walt Disney, 20th Century Fox, Sony Classics, Universal and Paramount from the late 1970s into the mid 2000s. It hardly needs be noted, that was this a period of tremendous social and cultural change in American society. Hollywood likewise was changing in its reflection of that society and its production, business, and marketing models.

Included in this collection are press kits for commercially generated films, critically acclaimed films, and even examples of small independent releases. This collection, and the films it represents like *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) what was once the highest grossing film at the box office, to smaller independent releases illustrates how Hollywood adapted its economic, craft, and star system models carried over from the classical Hollywood period to the more contemporary realities of producing films in the late 20th and early 21st century.

Each of the kits offers scholars an opportunity to examine how an individual studio designed its marketing plan to either correspond to the theme, look, or feel of an individual film in an attempt to ensure that the film would be received positively by critics who in turn could aid the financial fortunes of a film by helping to build and audience for a given film. For example, with the release of 20th Century Fox's *Fight Club* (1999) the press kit is designed to look like a catalogue which taps into the film's message that consumer culture is merely a surface distraction from larger problems in the

world. Embedded within the catalogue are lines of dialogue, director's thoughts on the material and a need to portray an image of 20th century masculinity as in crisis. This sense of masculinity in crisis also connects back to the subject matter of the film and the end result is to form an image of the film in the critic's mind that this is a film that addresses the dangers and complexities of masculine existence in the late 20th century. In effect, what this kit is designed to do is to create an ideal interpretation of the film that can then be used to help increase the film's chances of finding an audience and earning revenue at the box office.

Also included within most of these kits are detailed biographies of the people involved in the production as well as key details about the nature of the production itself. Much of this information may not be used but its inclusion reveals that in fact Hollywood is not afraid of demystifying the "magic of filmmaking" and the studios are comfortable with allowing audiences inside the filmmaking process. This type of information will be of use to scholars, who are trying to locate information about where certain films are shot, and how the look of a particular film was designed in conjunction with the needs of the studio and the desires of those involved in the production.

Perhaps the most useful element of most of these kits is the inclusion of production, publicity, and head-shot photos. These images provide the scholar with an understanding of what performer is valued by the company, what scenes are of importance to the company, and how these images are used by the studio to enhance the prestige and interest in any given film.

As of approximately 2005 the studios ceased production of these paper materials. Now the press are issued electronic formats. The age of the elaborately designed and packaged press kit has passed. They are now indispensable artifacts of Hollywood's Golden Age.

Finally, it is worth noting that in their concept and design many of these press books display highly imaginative visual formats and strategies in their packaging of film materials. In some cases they can be "read" as "cinematic" products on their own.

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