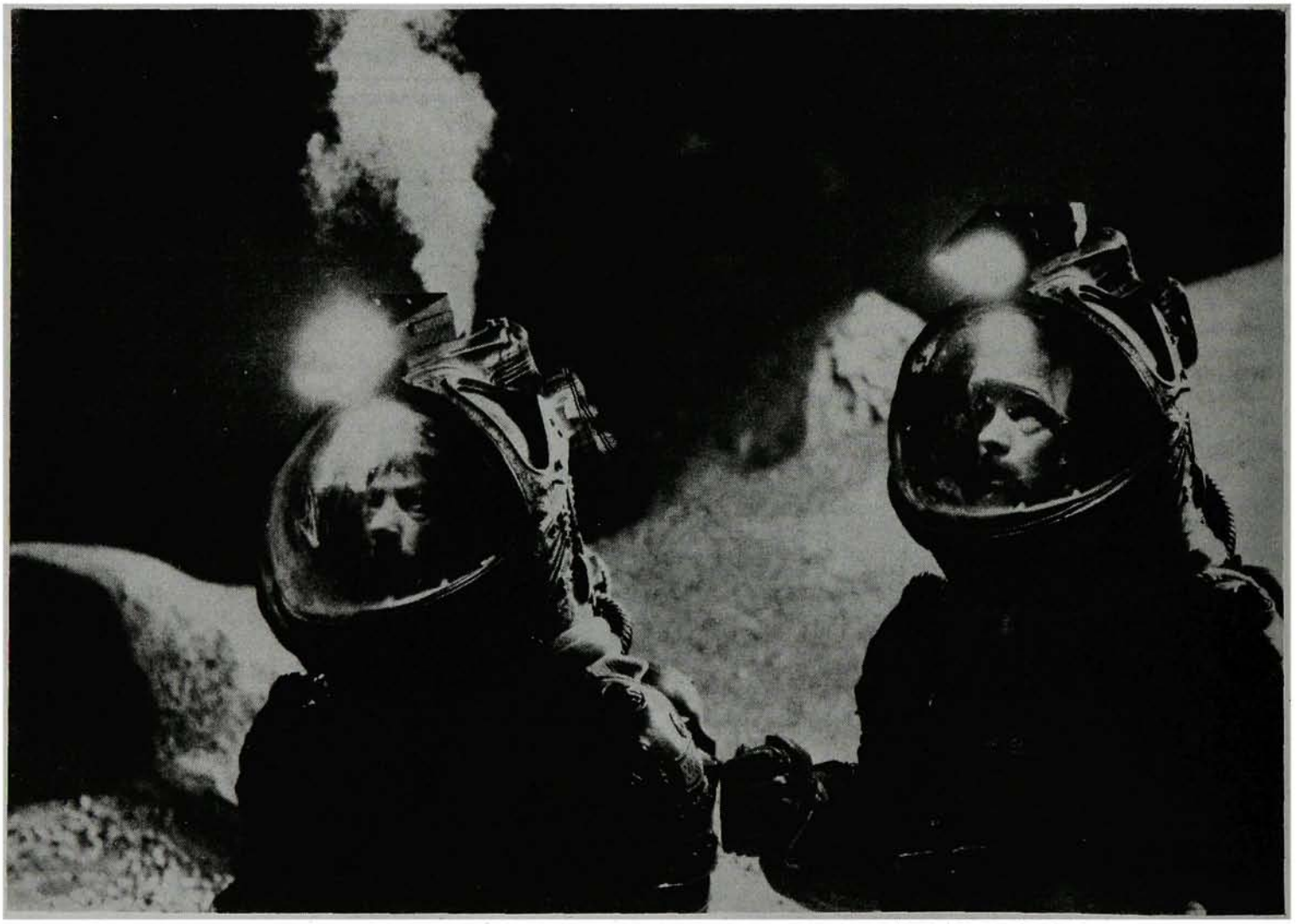
laser sidearms and radical chic

by james sanderson

The seventies — a movie decade characterized by exorbitant budgets, simple plots, and sensational effects: screenwriter James Sanderson considers some of the factors which influenced it, and what we might expect from the eighties.



Big budgets and special effects made for the "technological climax" sydrome in '70's films like *Alien*

In a dazzling maelstrom of special effects, films of the seventies are beginning to fade into the dusty galaxy of box office statistics. Around the world, audiences are eagerly awaiting a second decade of spectacular, expensive motion pictures. Since 1975, major American studios have made fewer and larger films, and recouped greater returns from them than ever before. Despite inflation, silver prices, or The Ayatollah, the trend seems likely to continue. Sequels to four budget giants of recent years, **Star Wars, Alien, Superman**, and **Star Trek**, are already in various stages of production or release. The screenplays of these films contain identifiable similarities — linear plots, exotic settings, stupifying special effects, and breathtaking climaxes. How high will budgets continue to soar? And what other subjects might be chosen to support the costs?

Admittedly, psychodrama, character study, and the complicated plot have enjoyed relative popularity during the past ten years. **M*A*S*H*, The Sting, Little Big Man, All The President's Men, One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest,** and **Kramer vs. Kramer** are but a few examples. But when viewed through the myopic perspective of the box office window, blockbuster films of the late seventies were unquestionably dominated by simplistic intention, big budgets, and special effects.

Perhaps the foundations of this trend were already in place when John Dean was deep-sixing the contents of Howard Hunt's safe. By 1976, encouraged by the success of extravaganzas such as **Airport, The Poseidon Adventure, The Godfather, The Exorcist,** and **Jaws**, (all top moneymakers in their years of release), studios scurried to jump on the bandwagon. They commissioned more elaborate special effects and selected flagship properties that catered to the syndrome. In a general way, these screenplays contained plots of a literary, rather than a cinematic origin. They were linear, uncomplicated, climactic, and even predictable once stripped of their technological wizardry. They represented a trend toward a more conservative formula, a formula tried and true, especially from the economic point of view.

It is a theory of Robert Altman's (and a great many other directors, to be sure), that film, as a medium, has yet to be fully understood by the people who control it. Screenplays, Altman observed, *could* be much more than visual extensions of literature; films much more than 'visual books'. This theory seems sound, if a little wistful. Basically, script plots are bound to deeply-rooted audience expectations of a literary nature: Introduction, Exposition, Climax, Aftermath. Obviously the relationship between film and literature is a venerable one. Consider, for example, the hundreds of classics optioned by studios in the first half of the twentieth century. **The Barrets of Wimpole Street, David Copperfield, The Best Years of Our Lives, Tom Sawyer, Anna Karenina**, and **Robin Hood** were all box office leaders in their years of release. Huxley, Steinbeck, G.B. Shaw, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Hemingway were all contracted, at one time or another, by Hollywood, even if their brilliance was not always captured on celluloid.

Yet it was not only through early adaptations that the literary plotform gained popularity. Original screenplays that fit the 'mould' reinforced faith in the four-point structure. It seems that screenwriting has grown up as a kind of dependent child, unable to free itself from its literary antecedents. Screenwriters have been recognized not for their dramatic innovations as much as for their abilities to bring good, old-fashioned stories to the screen in a subtle or sophisticated way. This is not to say, of course, that thousands of films have not offered us new and very different kinds of narrative experimentation. Plotforms peculiar to film — complicated time distortions, cinema vérité, and documentaries, are appreciated and well-known, particularly in Europe. But over the years, audiences have proven that they are much less interested in a new form of art, than a refinement of an old one — literature. This idea is especially obvious in the screenplays of the past ten years.

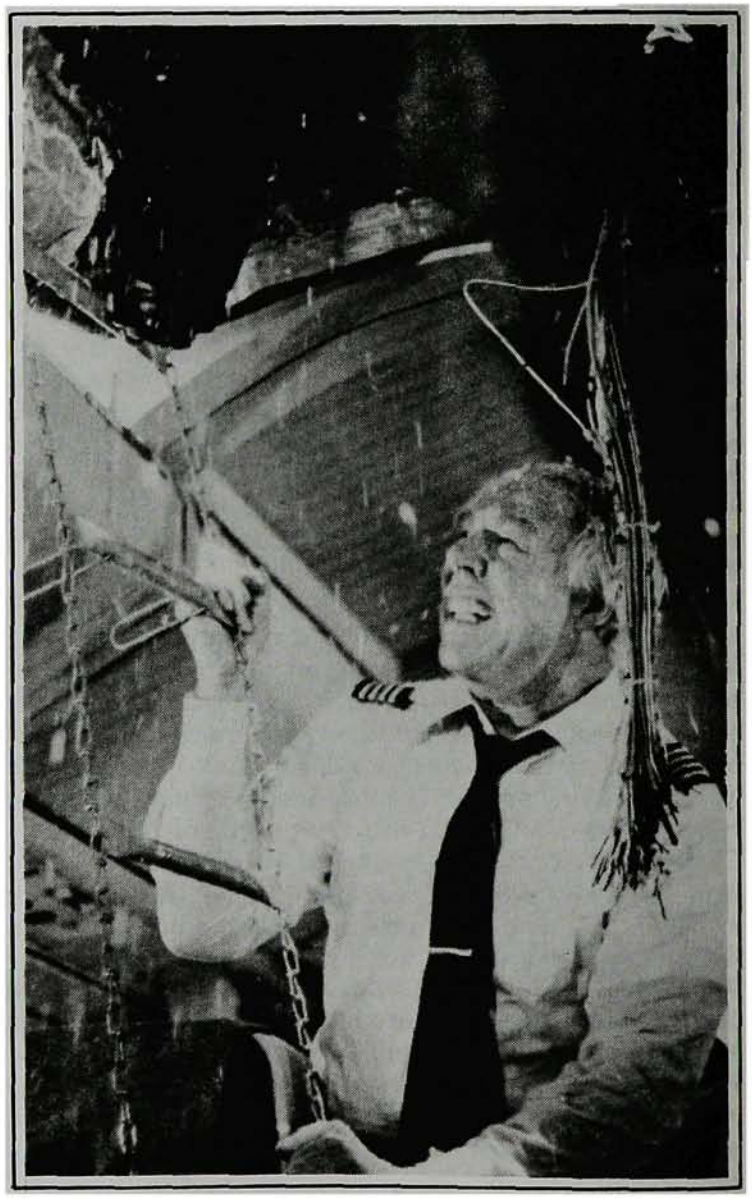
Historically, the seventies was a decade of conservative cynicism which was to spawn laser sidearms, roller disco and radical chic. Films that were box office leaders, particularly since 1975, were characterized by plots that steadfastly adhered to the four-point literary form, embellished by revolutionary cinematic techniques. It seems apparent that specific reasons were responsible for the success of these simplified plots:

- First, upheavals in the sixties had already brought rebellion onto the feature screen. By the end of that decade, many 'new' and 'daring' social issues had already been sucked into the vapid maw of prime time television and become available for free.

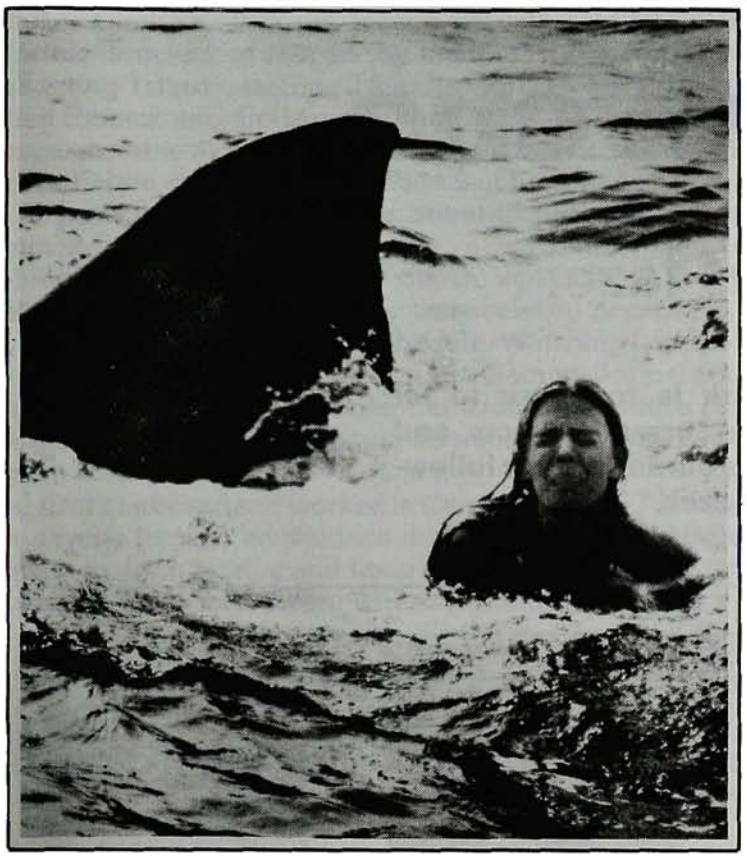
James Sanderson is a feature screenwriter in Toronto.

- Second, social change and rebellion became less fashionable. Ex-Hippies clogged the financial district sidewalks and office buildings. Peace power gave way to an Orwellian clamour for instant gratification. Perhaps it was a cynical desire to escape; one that seemed vaguely unsated even after you coked-up and ducked through the exit of Studio Fifty-Four.
- Finally, and most important, the technology of film production took off. Vastly improved mattes, computerized special effects, and cinematic improvements such as the Steadicam brought the realms of fantasy and realism closer together.

The results of these developments can be seen in the big-budget screenplays for which the decade will undoubtedly become famous. These were films costing upwards of twenty million dollars, films in which distributors *had* to have confidence. Conservatism enjoyed a renaissance, and four-part plotlines (or strings of them together, as in **Star Wars**), seemed safe. No longer did



Success spelled 'sequel' for recent film giants like *Star Wars, Superman, Jaws...* Third on the *Airport* runway was *"The Concorde" — Airport '79* above



No average fish story for the frantic Cindy Grover in *Jaws II*

minute characterization, close attention to the division of knowledge, powerful subplotting, or concerns of probability rate top priority when big money was involved. Instead, heroes killed the monster, saved the world, rescued the heroine, and rode, or more accurately, flew, happily off into the sunset. Exotic setting and subject, fearsome, often natural forces of evil, and shattering climaxes became vehicles for mind-boggling special effects.

As an aside, it seems to be this last story element, the 'technological climax,' that provides the strongest bond between the budget giants. The climax lent itself perfectly to the support of new special effects. Time-tested situations could be dragged out, dusted off, electronically redressed, and made, sometimes delightfully, to work! The very nature of the climax itself was studied and exploited for unconscious payoffs — sometimes sexual. If this analysis seems oversensitive, consider a sequence in *Alien* in which the heroine supposedly vanquishes a space monster that has killed her crewmates. Alone in a small space shuttle, she makes her escape. Soon, close shots of her, panting and dishevelled, are intercut with a tremendous light show and a thunderous sound track as the mother ship (and with it the monster), self-destructs a few space miles away. Rarely have audiences been treated to such a simple and wholesome event so strangely and cleverly compelling. Without delving too deeply into the murky waters of subliminal seduction, suffice to say that the climax in Paramount's **Star Trek** also warrants a careful psychological examination. . .

The Eighties

If it is true that special effects and big budgets did foster a return to the literary plot in its simpler forms in the seventies, then what of the years to come? It seems reasonable that the technology of film production will continue to offer new and exciting ways to tell time-tested stories. The Translux Corporation of New York is already developing special theatres which will create space flight conditions during science fiction films, through the use of hydraulic lifts and G force simulation. Undoubtedly this kind of 'effects engineering' will be watched closely by directors, producers, and particularly screenwriters in the years to come. Some other risky predictions:

- Perhaps, among the budget giants at least, more elaborate plotlines will be tried. Greater risks taken with stories in which evil, for example, is made more fearful by devious action than by blind and simple power.
- Perhaps special effects will be used more to amplify character than to provide an extravagent climax.
- Perhaps subject focus will shift from future to past into the equally appealing, yet largely unexplored realm of historical magic. Alchemists, shamans, magicians, and visionaries of the 'sword and sorcery' genre seem likely to appear.
- And perhaps when Malrak ZAPS Kia with an immobilization ray in 1985, he will have something more astonishing in mind than just another grand scheme to take over the world.

We will see. ■