

# Episode 29: Harry Potter Ruined Modern Cinema

Multiple friends of mine have seen the new Marvel movie, *The Eternals*, this week and all of them have given it rave reviews like "it certainly was a movie" and "wow... there were actors in it, some of whom I like". I haven't seen it yet, and to be honest, I probably will not spend the money. But while I was talking to Wesley about it, they mentioned that one of the things they miss from modern cinema is the fact that nothing is ever a whole story anymore. Films are all either ending on cliff-hangers because it's the first or second film in a franchise, or it's taking place in some extended universe that requires knowledge of 19 other films to be enjoyable, or its primary drawcard is a 13-minute post-credits scene that sets up some mega-franchise that will eventually make \$15 billion and spawn 97 related movies and a video game.

While this is partially to do with Marvel and their new "movies behaving like TV" set up, I genuinely believe in my heart of hearts, that the real culprits in this scenario is the Harry Potter films, which started their terrible reign 20 years ago, and have somehow managed to not leave the cinema since, either through endless franchise opportunities or through the terrible legacy of the double-film climax. And I want to yell about that.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking

about how Harry Potter destroyed modern cinema.

OK, look. Before we get into this, I need to make sure we're all on the same page. This episode is not about whether you love or hate Harry Potter – because there's actually a lot of directions that could go and frankly a lot of them are real vortexes of horror. There is a whole episode's worth of content, for example, about the stranglehold that young adult fiction has on actual adults who are well beyond the target age group, the role the Potter novels played in cementing this phenomenon and my own thoughts on how that's made us overall less literate and able to comprehend complex morality in fiction.

Then there's the other, more pressing issue, of J.K. Rowling's meteoric rise as a figurehead for so-called 'Gender Critical' feminism – which is just garden variety transphobia with a shiny new name – that culminated in an essay by Rowling called TERF Wars in which she reiterates the same tired bullshit rhetoric about detransition numbers, attacks in public bathrooms, and lesbians afraid of dying out as the butches are forced into manhood, and the ranks of women diminish in the face of... more women... or something? I dunno. For the record, as a lesbian, can I just say – given that trans women are, in fact, women, and

also sometimes – gasp – lesbians, it's not like we're an endangered species. And no one is taking the butches away. The butches are still very much there. I checked. Anyway, it's a pretty incredible final move to dismantle her own legacy, but to be honest the dismantling itself started much earlier than most people care to admit. There's nothing I can say on that that hasn't been much more eloquently said by trans-women who have done everyone the service of going through the essay point-by-point and debunking it with actual statistics. I'll link some of those in the notes for this episode.

But lest you think ill of me for doing a Harry Potter episode when we all know Rowling is a horrible TERF, or because you love the Potter franchise and think it is salvageable from the clutches of its terrible TERF author, just know that this episode is not actually about the Harry Potter content. We can fight about whether art can be separated from artist and the real-world harm they cause like we're first year philosophy majors another time. This episode is actually about the long-lasting impact that the film franchise had on the way that movies are developed, structured and released. Film franchises obviously aren't a new concept. Wikipedia conflates a film franchise with a film series, defining them both as a collection of related films in succession that share the same fictional universe, or are marketed as a series. I prefer to draw a distinction between the two – a series, to me, needs to be watched in order. The story is told over the course of however many films, and pieces can be missed if watched out of order. A franchise, much like a

McDonalds, is something that is taking a world or a character, and rehashing it, either as a carbon copy, or as something more modern. The Scream films, for example, are a series. They make sense watched in order and they double down on their own meta-film commentary as they go. Godzilla, on the other hand, is a franchise. There are 36 Godzilla films in total, dating back to 1954, and that doesn't include any television content that's been produced in universe. Most of the films are Japanese, some are American. You can dive in at almost any point, because while they're all about a really big lizard, the plots are mostly unrelated.

Now obviously, this rule isn't hard and fast, and as the nature of the movie industry changes, the distinction between these two things becomes a little less clear. Sometimes it's just because something was an unexpected hit and suddenly there's a whole lot of money available to make more movies. The Fast and Furious films are technically a series, but realistically you can dive in at any point as long as you know that family means everything. And that's cos they started off as two primary films and spin-off that then expanded massively when it became apparent there was money to be made. It helps if you know the characters, but you could probably start watching around movie 5 and still get the gist. Or it could be something like Halloween, which incorporates both series and remakes, and retcons the later films to act as direct sequels to the originals. Halloween is really interesting, because the 2018 film ignored all previous sequels and instead looked at the intergenerational trauma of violent crime, which ultimately elevated it

from classic slasher to thoughtful reboot, while still keeping the original actors on board.

I've mentioned horror films and monster movies because it used to be that these were the types of genres that attracted multiple sequels and expansions into ludicrous crossover films. They're niche enough that the average viewer doesn't expect "Real Cinema" even if the originals are considered classics, and anyone willingly watching something called like *Nightmare on Halloween Street 5: The Friday the 13th Chainsaw Massacre* is going in expecting to find their joy in an orgiastic splatter-fest of movie gore, rather than a carefully planned out crossover event that ties in neatly with the rest of the film series. But in recent years, it's become increasingly apparent that there's gold in them there hills... I mean... there's money in franchising. Like huge money. And so, we're looking at a huge suitcase of films which are connected, loosely or otherwise. I just took a look at the local chain cinema - of the 15 films playing, 9 of them are either sequels or part of a larger franchise. Two, possibly three of them are Marvel films. One of those is *Venom*... I can't keep up with the whole Sony vs. Marvel showdown so I dunno where Tom Hardy's monster sex romp fits in. Let's just say three comic book movies. One's a Bond film, and another is the next instalment in the Halloween franchise. My point is... not a lot of original content on show.

But what's that got to do with Harry Potter, something was essentially a self-contained series before the recent *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* series expanded it into 'cinematic

universe', franchise territory? Well, way back in 2007, the final Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was released and while it was decidedly chunkier than the others, it did mean that there was an end in sight for the film adaptations too. See, Warner Brothers had taken the then-unprecedented step of purchasing the rights to the first four novels before the series had been fully finished. The first film came out in 2001, 5 years after the release of the first book, but a full 6 years before the final instalment. The rights were purchased from Rowling for an alleged £1 million. It was essentially a large gamble that it would make money. But make money it did. Just so very much money. \$8.8 billion over the course of 8 films.

Yes, that's right. 8 films. "But Alex," I hear you say, "Not to reveal myself as a fully-fledged Harry Potter nerd, but aren't the only 7 books in the Potter series?" Great point! There are only 7 novels in the series. There are 8 films because, according to the then-president of the Warner Bros. Pictures Group, Jeff Robinov, the studio felt that "the best way to do the book, and its many fans, justice is to expand the screen adaptation of '*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*' and release the film in two parts." Extremely generous of Warner Brothers to display such dedication to capturing the essence of the Potter novels in meticulous onscreen detail. Definitely not an extremely transparent way to extend the cash-in period for a wildly popular and profitable series.

From what I can see, there wasn't a huge amount of backlash to the idea of having the final novel split in half. Some mild

suspicion maybe. But not a lot of "Hey! This seems like a cynical cash grab!" Maybe people really thought the studio wanted to give a beloved franchise the send-off it deserved. Even if that genuinely was the intent, the split proved that you could effectively double your box office money – Part One made over \$296 million at the US box office alone, Part Two made over \$381 million. This is off the back of an alleged \$250 million budget to cover both films. So, it was essentially another educated gamble on Warner Brothers' part, which paid off in a massive way. Why settle for a measly \$300 million when you could make twice that? You just know that some movie executive got the world's fattest bonus that year.

Now, all could have been well in movie land, except in the background of the Potter hype, another teen phenomenon was taking place. The Twilight Saga had become a best-selling sexy sparkly vampire phenomenon that had gotten a spicy film adaptation with two young, hot and definitely-in-love stars at the helm. The novel series was four books, released between 2005 and 2008. The first film was released in 2008 – the film rights having been purchased in advance of the final novel's release, as with the Potter series. As the third film was gearing up for release, rumours began to swirl. Summit Entertainment was going to split the final instalment – Breaking Dawn – in two. This, of course, turned out to be true, though they did so with less fanfare than Warner Brothers. They simply confirmed that the rumours were true, that the final instalment was being split due to the novel's overall length and went right ahead and released two films.

Now, not to give Rowling too much credit, but if we're comparing writing ability, the Potter novels are significantly more detailed and better-written than the Twilight Saga. If we want to give to give Warner Brothers the benefit of the doubt, there's absolutely no room to do so with Stephanie Meyer, I'm sorry. There is no way enough things happen in that novel to warrant splitting it into two parts. It's an obvious attempt to replicate the phenomenal money-making success of the final two Potter films. And it worked. They essentially doubled their returns. The same thing happened again with The Hunger Games trilogy – Mockingjay was split into two parts. I'm sure if the Divergent series hadn't been such a flop at the box office, they would have done the same for its final instalment too – but it turns out its very difficult to take something seriously when the primary basis for one of the made-up social classes that supposedly divide your Young Adult protagonists is that they jog very fast to catch the train. I digress, but you should watch the first Divergent film, if only to be like "well that certainly is a wildly impractical way to get aboard a moving vehicle". Anyway, point is, it caught on. As long as you did some general hand-waving about capturing the essence of the book or something, people were willing to accept that they would have to pay twice to see the complete story.

And then shit started to go awry. I actually wrote about this phenomenon back in 2012, when this podcast was still a blog, because it was announced that Peter Jackson's adaptation of The Hobbit would be split into not two, but three films. Back then, I called it the "Harry Potter Split Effect" and, while I was willing to

be a little bit more accommodating, I was still pretty annoyed, especially at the way 'artistic integrity' was used to prop up something that to me felt like a pretty shameless desire to rake in the dollars while the getting was good.

Peter Jackson's announcement, made on Facebook, stated that the team "were really pleased with the way the story was coming together, in particular, the strength of the characters and the cast who have brought them to life. All of which gave rise to a simple question: do we take this chance to tell more of the tale? And the answer from our perspective as the filmmakers, and as fans, was an unreserved 'yes'."

To quote myself at age 22 – and you'll forgive the deeply cringe-worthy tone here: "I'm sure the smell of money didn't hurt either...THREE films!?! The Hobbit is one book and one story, Peter. Yes, it is set in J.R.R Tolkien's very large Middle Earth universe. Yes, Tolkien himself said that it was 'a tale that grew in the telling.' Yes, there is a lot of ground to cover. But I would just like to point out, Peter, that you made THREE Lord of the Rings films from the THREE MUCH LONGER AND MORE CONVOLUTED Lord of the Rings novels. And let's be honest, you could have cut some of that shit out. The ending of Lord of the Rings: Return of the King has about 25-minutes' worth of unnecessary farewells that could have been much shorter if you'd just had Sam and Frodo make out."

I stand by that last bit. Sam and Frodo giving into their exceedingly obvious desire for each other would have really sped up the ending of Return of the King

and maybe I wouldn't have had to sit through a full 45 minutes of my dad's snoring in the cinema. Anyway, my blog post ended with an impassioned plea for Peter Jackson to call it off if it seemed like the trilogy as a whole wouldn't be good, because it was my favourite childhood book and I desperately wanted it to be good. Making it a single film was, interestingly, what Guillermo Del Toro said they should do before he exited the film in 2010 due to production delays. Anyway, I am a huge brained genius and the Hobbit trilogy was as bad as I had predicted it probably would be – in expanding the universe to visually elaborate on every minute detail in the book, they managed to drain all of the magic out of it. They're excessively long and deeply boring – so caught up in trying to get every single aspect of the world-building right that they forget that most people really care about the plot. As whole, the trilogy received pretty mixed reviews, and by the third film, critics were resorting to increasing their star rating simply because the finale was shorter than the others. Which is a great sign.

But it made just an absolute boatload of money. Off the back of a \$700 million budget, the trilogy made almost \$3 billion. That's just in the box office. It doesn't include all the endless merchandising opportunities that grow off the back of a huge franchise like that. And I don't think that would have happened if they'd tried to adapt The Hobbit prior to the 2011 release of the final Potter film. If it had been made back in the early 2000s when the original Lord of the Rings trilogy was released, it would likely have been a single and (reasonably) succinct film that

probably would have been better overall. The Potter split taught movie studios that existing IPs with dedicated and excitable fan bases were a gold mine that they could stretch out for decades. And I think that's what has ultimately led us to behemoths like the Marvel Cinematic Universe. People were willing to accept expansions or alterations to original content, and their enthusiasm didn't wane when they had to wait for more and more films to get the full story. So, suddenly we have a box office full of films that are all playing in the same universe and are connected in a way that will allegedly only become apparent when we've spent our ticket money on 15 movies to see 6 cameos and 12 post-credits sequences that will explain what the hell the big finale is about.

I've mentioned on this podcast before, that despite the apparent market saturation with big blockbusters like Marvel, there hasn't actually been a significant dip in the number of mid-sized films being made. What I do think is interesting is that there seems to have been a knock-on effect where apply the same Potter/ Marvel logic to mid-size films with varying degrees of success. Things that were perfectly fine, original mid-size film ideas, now have built-in contingencies in case it seems like there could be more money to be had. Even things adapted from existing comic book properties that could have been easily contained in a single film are now being milked for all they're worth. Take The Kingsman for example. It's based on a short-run comic book series and it could have been a totally fine standalone film. It could have even enjoyed a fun single sequel. Guess how many films we're

getting? Five. Five Kingsman films. Oh, and an eight hour limited TV series. Did you want that? Did you need it? No! I'd be lying if I said the whole thing didn't bum me out a little. If you've made a perfectly fine and succinct film, you don't need to keep building it out. It doesn't need to have episodic TV logic or be split in half for artistic integrity or whatever. Sometimes, I just wanna sit in the dark, and watch my stories and have that be the end of it. I don't think that's a huge ask. Fuck Harry Potter. Ruinous bloody franchise.

Oh, I wrote this episode so fast. Just at the speed of light. It turns out I'm still mad about this like 9 years later. The Hobbit should have just been one film god-fucking-dammit. A one-for-one ratio is fine for adapting books! Not everything needs to go on the screen! Almost none of these sequels improve on the original. The exception, of course, as always, is Magic Mike XXL, which is high art and I won't be accepting criticism. If you would like to explain how much you hate what capitalism has done to your beloved magic movies (or how much you love Magic Mike XXL), talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Peace!

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