

Hollywood, the family audience and the family film, 1930-2010

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Abstract

This thesis is the first in-depth, historical study of Hollywood's relationship with the 'family audience' and 'family film'. Since the 1970s, Hollywood family films have been the most lucrative screen entertainments in the world, and despite their relatively-unexplored status in academic film criticism and history, I will argue that the format is centrally important in understanding mainstream Hollywood cinema.

How have 'family films' become so globally dominant? One answer is that Hollywood's international power facilitates the global proliferation of its products, but this explanation, in isolation, is insufficient. I will argue that Hollywood family films are designed to transcend normative barriers of age, gender, race, culture and even taste; they target the widest possible audiences to maximise commercial returns, trying to please as many people, and offend as few, as possible. This they achieve through a combination of ideological populism, emotional stimulation, impressive spectacle, and the calculated minimisation of potentially objectionable elements, such as sex, violence, and excessive socio-cultural specificity. Initially, the audience for family films was predominantly domestic, but with the increasing spending power of international audiences, family films are now formulated on the belief that no market is inaccessible. For this reason, they are inextricably linked with Hollywood – the only film industry in the world with the resources and distribution capacity to address a truly global mass audience.

The 'family film' originated in early-1930s Hollywood as a mixture of propaganda and commercial idealism. Hollywood cinema was already an international cultural phenomenon, but was founded upon a claim to universality that was undermined by the predominance of adult-orientated films. The family film was the result both of external pressures to make films more morally-suitable for children, and the desire to engage a more middle-class mass audience. Films targeting the so-called 'family audience' were excellent propaganda for Hollywood, suggesting superior production, inoffensiveness and broad appeal. Although such movies have not always commanded the mass ('family') audiences for which they are intended, they have flourished in the domestic and international media marketplace since the 1970s, and their commercial and cultural dominance appears likely to extend further in the years to come.

Whilst the idea of a universally-appealing film remains an impossible dream, mainstream Hollywood has pursued it relentlessly. It is the Holy Grail for mainstream producers, and has attained considerable importance in U.S. – and increasingly international – culture, as audiences flock to see films which appear to transcend run-of-the-mill screen entertainment by providing universally-intelligible aesthetic and/or emotional satisfaction. This thesis maps the history of the Hollywood family film, documenting the motivations and strategies involved in its emergence and development, analysing the form creatively and ideologically, evaluating its place within global mass entertainment, and underlining its considerable importance.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis grew out of an M.A. dissertation I submitted to Newcastle University in September 2007 relating to the ‘adult children’s film’, which in turn was inspired by a chance television viewing of the 1990s family comedy *Mrs Doubtfire*. I still remember being struck by the way it balanced appeal for adults and children, and the way this led me to formulate an idea for a larger project. I should start by saluting this film for setting the wheels in motion, while pondering the strange, seemingly-inconsequential coincidences in life that lead one down a particular path.

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Introduction: Entertainment for the Masses

The Hollywood ‘family film’ is the most commercially-successful and widely-consumed cinematic entertainment in the world.¹ It is best defined as a movie designed to appeal not only to a literal ‘family’ made up of adults and children, but to as wide an audience as possible. Disney executive Andy Bird argues that:

‘The Family Film’ is a film that can be enjoyed by the whole family together, as well as a film that can be enjoyed by a broad audience demographic. The true test [...] is if a child and his/her grandparent could go together and equally enjoy a film.²

Hollywood’s immense global success with ‘family’-orientated productions stems from this broadness of appeal: the ability to please as many, and offend as few, consumers as possible. Mainstream commercial cinema, I will argue, has always sought types of films capable of attracting mass audiences, thereby maximising returns, and while not all movies that succeed in attracting mass audiences are family-orientated, productions capable of playing successfully to all ages and social groups stand a much greater chance of success. Because it promises vast audiences and huge economic rewards, a successful family film is the Holy Grail for commercially-minded producers. Having emerged during the early-1930s as an attempt to secure mass audiences and cultural respectability in the U.S., Hollywood family films have since broadened in scope and magnified in commercial potential as a result of changes and advances in technology, aesthetics, popular culture, demographics, media conglomeration and international markets.

However, despite wide awareness of family films, the format remains ill-defined and

¹ Of the top ten highest-grossing films of all time worldwide as of summer 2010 (unadjusted for inflation), only *Titanic* (#2) and *The Dark Knight* (#6) are not family films. All of the remainder (#1 *Avatar*, #3 *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, #4 *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*, #5 *Alice in Wonderland*, #7 *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, #8 *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End*, #9 *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and #10 *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*) are designed for ‘all-age’ appeal. *Box Office Mojo*, ‘All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses’. <<http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>> [accessed 24/6/2010].

² See appendix.

under-served by academic history and criticism. This thesis attempts to redress the balance by examining why family movies are so enduring, and analysing the ways in which they have developed industrially, culturally and artistically into their current position of dominance.

By definition, family films must appeal to majority, rather than minority tastes. Numerous commentators both inside and outside of Hollywood have argued that its films, whether through economic policy, artistry or a combination of both, possess a 'universal' appeal. While I would qualify this statement in two important ways – firstly with the assertion that *no* entertainment is truly universal, and secondly with the acceptance that broad-appeal productions are not *exclusively* Hollywood's domain – I would broadly agree with this position. What has not really been examined until now is how Hollywood historically has achieved its international success in *creative* terms. This is the importance of studying the family film. To resolve the apparent paradox of how such a seemingly child-orientated format – many family films are, after all, widely considered to be entertainments primarily for children – is capable of securing mass audiences domestically and internationally, it is necessary to consider the desires of the majority. The dominant consumers of Hollywood movies are young people, in mind as well as body; they are energised by entertainment that is easy to understand, and easy on the eyes. This necessitates that products intended for the mass market are orientated towards so-called 'childish tastes'.³ An appreciation for what society considers to be 'childish' – the regressive, the comforting, the ideologically affirmative, the intellectually undemanding – is, and always has been, very prevalent in adults. Many family films are

³ Not my description of choice, and scarcely accurate, but the term will suffice for now, pending more rigorous analysis of the appeal of family films later in this thesis.

specifically designed to *regress* audiences to an unsophisticated, ‘childish’ state of intellectual and emotional uniformity. This form of undifferentiated address (rather than the ‘dual address’ more customary in children’s literature) is best suited to addressing global mass audiences nominally divided by a range of cultural and ethnic barriers.

The family brand

The ‘family film’ derives from the broader category of ‘family entertainment’, a term applied to such broad-appeal recreational and escapist pursuits as the theatre, the fairground, the theme park, the live sporting occasion, mainstream radio and network television.⁴ In each case, the ‘family’ appellation denotes the intersection of broad appeal, inoffensiveness and potential mass audiences, and is actively encouraged by the purveyors of such entertainments. Although this ‘family’ signification appears relatively straightforward when applied to leisurely or sporting pursuits, its relationship with the mass media is particularly ambiguous. In common usage, ‘family film’ is still often viewed as synonymous with ‘children’s film’, but using the two terms interchangeably is misguided, as family films have always attempted to address a dual audience of children *and* adults. Moreover, in English-speaking countries, where the term is most prevalent, ‘family film’ is not merely a descriptor, but a signifier of expense, distinctiveness and a peculiarly North American form of mass entertainment. Over the course of several decades, as this thesis will demonstrate, Hollywood has engineered the term into a hugely

⁴ Theatre and television have long been widely marketed and received as such, but for an interesting examination of the modern theme park as an example of ‘family entertainment’, see ‘Theme Parks: The American Dream and the Great Escape’, *The Economist*, Saturday January 11th, 1986, p. 83-84.

lucrative brand, roughly meaning ‘high-quality American entertainment for everyone’.⁵

It is widely acknowledged in Hollywood today that if a product is successfully ‘branded’ as ‘family entertainment’, its commercial prospects are significantly boosted.⁶

Over time, the meanings of the term ‘family film’ have shifted. During the studio era (the period in Hollywood production history spanning the early-1920s to the early-1950s), it was largely descriptive: literally a ‘film for all the family’. However, even then, the family film was explicitly constituted as an attractive counterpoint to the adult-orientated films then predominating, with powerful connotations of quality and mass audience suitability. In the late-1950s, with the emergence of a patented youth culture, and the blockbuster success of innumerable broad-appeal movies in the 1970s and 1980s, the family film became increasingly valuable to producers, and particularly during the past 30 years, in the Western media, the idea of the ‘family’ has become increasingly commodified. Despite this historical shift in commercial and critical understanding of what ‘family film’ actually means, there is still no absolute consensus on the matter. Even contemporary family films use different strategies of audience address: some (a minority) are aimed at ‘families’ in the belief that a broader spectrum of audiences will inevitably follow; others (a majority) address global mass audiences, in which ‘families’ are merely a small – though attractively marketable – component. The first understanding is more commonly associated with lower-budget productions (which are often produced by smaller, domestically-orientated film industries unable to match Hollywood’s production values and global distribution), and the second to Hollywood’s

⁵ My own terminology varies between ‘brand’, ‘label’ and ‘format’; the family film, I would suggest, is all of these things, as seen from different perspectives – commercial, critical, and popular.

⁶ Conversely, of course, when unsuccessfully applied to products *lacking* in mass appeal, the powers of the brand are limited.

mass-appeal blockbusters levelled towards the global market. The historical shift in the way family films are understood and represented largely stems from the fact that while Hollywood has expanded considerably since the 1930s – both creatively and economically – the rhetorical and ideological appeal of the ‘family’, in Western societies, at least, has remained relatively stable. This means that although family films themselves are subject to continual change, the ‘family’ brand has remained a patented antidote to mass entertainment containing contentious material, such as strong violence, swearing and sex.

In Hollywood, at least, the label ‘family film’ has always served to obfuscate the true nature of the products it purports to describe. After all, it sounds far more intimate than ‘total entertainment’ (a term coined by Hollywood executives to describe family blockbusters) or ‘multi-demographic programming’ (which would be more accurate). The brand serves to associate multimedia products with something respectable, comforting and universal, pre-empting a possible charge of vacuous corporatism. It also responds to anxiety-producing social changes in post-industrial societies the world over, in which extended and nuclear families have been supplanted by more fragmented, less permanent social structures. Given that most of the biggest international markets for Hollywood entertainment (Japan, Western Europe, and Australasia) are economically-developed and post-industrial, it is unsurprising that films which nostalgically and defiantly evoke utopian family ideals retain an immense amount of cultural capital.⁷ This association with an image of family unity makes an afternoon at the multiplex watching the latest blockbuster seem as warm and comforting as a night in front of a log fire.

⁷ Peter J. Dekom, ‘The Global Market’, *The Movie Business Book*, ed. Jason E. Squire, New York: Fireside, 1992 (pp. 418-430), p. 420.

Meanwhile, broad-appeal family-adventure franchises such as *Indiana Jones* (1981-2008) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-) represent the ‘new’ types of family film, which are presented as so pleasurable that they transcend normative boundaries of age, sex, race, taste and culture. Generally propelled by simple but appealing narratives which satisfy the senses rather than the intellect, they foreground impressive visual and aural spectacle, and, as a result of a successful Hollywood strategy of reconfiguration, they are no longer widely regarded as films merely for children.⁸ Increasingly, teenagers and young adults can safely partake without worrying about kudos, partly because of the relative absence of embarrassingly cloying sentiment. A suitable metaphor might be a theme park, in which sensual pleasure takes precedence over sophistication; in which those willing to ‘loosen up and have a good time’ will have exactly that, and in which the thrills are exhilarating but safe and inoffensive. The ‘family film’ therefore addresses Western social anxieties regarding the condition of the ‘family’ institution, but also appeals to a very different audience group concerned only with escapism.⁹

⁸ A note about so-called ‘children’s films’: it is now well-publicised that Hollywood studios test their films with a variety of audiences prior to release to ensure cross-demographic appeal. It is not good business practice to make films solely for children. Of course, other film industries operating under different economic and cultural imperatives *do* make children’s films.

⁹ There is an important point to be made here regarding the overlap between contemporary family-adventure movies and ‘blockbusters’: although the similarities are obvious, there are very important differences. Many of the biggest contemporary family films are blockbusters, but not all blockbusters are family films. ‘Blockbuster’, as a description, is crudely reductive. It says little about the generic orientation of the films it describes, besides denoting large-scale, big-budget pieces of mainstream cinema. Blockbusters may be animations, fantasies, horror movies, disaster movies, action movies, adventure movies – the list goes on. The only qualifiers are expensive production, aggressive marketing and commercial success. Because universally-appealing films possess greater box office pull, blockbusters are more likely to be family- than adult-orientated, but some – including the rebooted *Batman* franchise (2005-), or adult superhero narrative *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009) – are too violent or frightening for family suitability. There is another important distinction: the term ‘family film’ is used as a brand to increase the commercial potential of the product; the term ‘blockbuster’, conversely, has a critical rather than commercial derivation, and its associations are far less positive.

The family film as represented by Hollywood

Unsurprisingly, much that has been said and written about the family audience and family film has emerged from Hollywood's propaganda machine. Discourse has intensified over the last 30 years to the point where trade papers and newspapers are now filled with easily-digestible, media friendly sound-bites testifying to the strength and importance of the 'family' audience. However, during the silent and studio eras, comparatively little was said publicly regarding 'family films' and 'family audiences'. To an extent, this reflects the fewer opportunities for public statements and less media interest in quotable industry sound-bites before the dawning of the age of global mass communications. More importantly, though, it reflects the fact that there are now acknowledged alternatives to 'family entertainment', whereas during the studio era, according to the film industry, there was not: all films, irrespective of content, were made by Hollywood, which represented itself, and was widely received, as a 'family' institution.

During the 1910s and 1920s, Hollywood producers nonetheless resisted child-orientated content. Those in Hollywood who insisted that all films ought to be suitable for children (general suitability), such as Will H. Hays – the head of the film industry's trade organisation (see Chapter 1 for further details) – were arguing against the box office, which at that time favoured adult-orientated sex and crime dramas. Producers were accustomed to the paradox of 'family entertainment' made for adults, and, as a result, they saw no middle ground between films for adults and films for children. The notion that a film might be addressed to *both* seemed commercially undesirable, with the worrying possibility that blandly anodyne films would alienate the loyal audiences who enjoyed more ribald fare. Two factors in the early-1930s forced producers to begin

making family-orientated films on a broader scale. The first was a series of educational reforms which saw film studies adopted in schools nationwide; this created considerable demand for wholesome family films which could be used as educational aids in schools. The second factor was the Hollywood Production Code – a restrictive system of self-regulation designed to prevent salacious movie content, which was established in 1930 but made mandatory in 1934. Introduced by Hollywood to pre-empt the threat of federal censorship, the Code made the majority of films suitable for the consumption of children.

The Production Code was introduced and then tightened to satisfy moral and educational movie reformers, whose voices carried considerable weight in the day. Some producers were aggrieved that such groups were dictating production policy. They interpreted these external pressures as exhortations to produce films *exclusively* for children; an unpalatable proposition for an industry accustomed to the belief that it served the requirements of *every* social group. Correspondingly, the family movies produced during the mid-1930s – literary adaptations, child-star films, fantasies – attracted slightly derogatory labels from producers, such as ‘Pollyanna Pictures’ and ‘sweetness-and-light films’.¹⁰ Emphasising the ‘childish’ qualities of such films reinforced the fallacy that they foolishly pitched childish material at an adult-orientated market (and probably also reflected macho distaste towards child-friendly material).

It was not until the mid-1950s that producers and exhibitors began embracing the full public-relations value of the ‘family film’. By this point, the façade that cinema was universal entertainment was fast disintegrating. Teenagers were emerging as important consumers of popular culture, and independent producers, in particular, were eager to

¹⁰ Hall, ‘Attack on Movies Stuns Hollywood’; Douglas W. Churchill, ‘Sweetness and Light: Hollywood Reverts to Elsie Books, to Pollyanna and to Kate Wiggin’, *The New York Times*, Sunday July 22nd, 1934, p. sm1.

take their money. The emergence of the teenager as a) consumer and b) social group provoked widespread alarm. Hollywood's identity as a producer of generic 'family entertainment' was, for the first time, seriously threatened, prompting industry insiders to begin speaking out in support of family films. Hays's successor, Eric Johnston, was held responsible by many for the growing preponderance of 'adult' content, and was forced to defend the Production Code, arguing defiantly that the movies provided more 'family entertainment' than any other media, 'including the newspapers, magazines, theatre, radio and television'.¹¹ His successor, Jack Valenti, echoed this sentiment, arguing in 1969 that there was no shortage of family films, 'just a shortage of family audiences'.¹² Film stars such as Ginger Rogers and Jerry Lewis, saddened by the slow death of a Hollywood they knew and understood, nevertheless bemoaned the absence of family films, by which they meant entertainments free of 'adult' content rather than specifically appealing to children.¹³ In retrospect, it seems clear that the film industry was frightened of losing its hold over popular culture. After all, the decline of socially-respectable, conservative, adult-orientated material was surely lamented in part because it portended the growth of an insurgent youth culture previously kept under tight adult supervision. In the 1960s, producers were faced with the difficulty of competing with family-orientated television shows, and family films grew increasingly nostalgic and adult-orientated. Those that were produced – including *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964), *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964) and *The Sound of Music* – were old-fashioned and overblown, which only made them less appealing to younger viewers. It was a vicious circle, and

¹¹ Thomas M. Pryor, 'Johnston Backs Production Code', *The New York Times*, Saturday May 21st, 1955, p. 11.

¹² 'Valenti Hits Audience Hypocrisy', *The Los Angeles Times*, April 28th, 1969, p. G17.

¹³ Hedda Hopper, 'Why Not More Family Films? Ginger Asks', *The Los Angeles Times*, April 29th, 1956, p. D3; Jerry Lewis, 'Children, Too, Have Film Rights', *Variety*, January 5th, 1972, p. 32.

when the Production Code was replaced by a new movie rating system in late 1968 which openly acknowledged audience fragmentation and paved the way for the unrestricted proliferation of ‘adult’ films, the downward spiral appeared complete.

Between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, then, the family film came to be perceived as a relic of a bygone age. Still venerated by the old guard because it symbolised a much-missed mass audience, some younger filmmakers rejected the format outright. Director Richard Sarafian, for example, protested when *Run Wild, Run Free* (1969) was labelled a ‘family film’.¹⁴ Given that Sarafian’s movie actually *was* a family film of a very traditional sort, his reaction illustrates how damaged the brand had become. Family films were certainly no longer regarded as significantly profitable, much less capable of galvanising mass audiences. Independent producer Robert B. Radnitz managed to carve a niche with relatively low-budget, naturalistic family films such as *A Dog of Flanders* (James B. Clark, 1960), *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (James B. Clark, 1964) and *Sounder* (Martin Ritt, 1972). Becoming something of a pro-family film spokesman, Radnitz eagerly publicised his own ‘Golden Rule’: ‘Show me a child’s book an adult won’t pick up and enjoy and I’ll show you a book a child won’t pick up and enjoy’.¹⁵ Radnitz was ahead of his time in other ways. In 1971, he formed a production company with toy manufacturer Mattel, foreshadowing the kinds of mergers and synergies proliferating in Hollywood today.¹⁶ His prominence, however, reflected not so much the commercial and artistic value of his films as the lack of competition. Perhaps

¹⁴ Norman Goldstein, ‘Family’ Tag Irks Director of ‘Colt’, *The Los Angeles Times*, November 12th, 1968, p. C17.

¹⁵ Cecil Smith, ‘Fight Goo, Glurp and Glop with Involvement Says Robert L. Radnitz’, *The Los Angeles Times*, April 16th, 1972, p. N2; Philip K. Scheuer, ‘Films for Children Urged by Radnitz’, *The Los Angeles Times*, October 14th, 1963, p. D9.

¹⁶ ‘8 Family-Oriented Feature Films Set’, *The Los Angeles Times*, July 16th, 1971, p. E10.

the clearest evidence of Hollywood's failure to engage with its audiences was United Artists' early-1970s collaboration with Readers' Digest on a series of 'traditional' family musicals. The producers explained:

Millions of Americans do not currently go to the movies, or go far less frequently than they might. We are convinced that the majority of these people will attend intelligent and entertaining motion pictures that are designed to appeal to the entire family.¹⁷

In fact, mainstream audiences were dissatisfied with movies promising 'wholesome' and 'traditional' enjoyment. It took directors such as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas to advance Hollywood's conception of family entertainment in accordance with developments in society and popular culture.

During the mid-1970s, the 'family' brand was a damaged commodity. George Lucas privately regarded *Star Wars* as a 'children's movie', but initially kept these thoughts to himself for fear of prejudicing its box office prospects.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Lucas and Spielberg were responsible, in large part, for rehabilitating the idea of family entertainment among marketers and fellow producers by reconfiguring its meanings. When a mainstream director such as Lucas announces that he has made a 'children's film', he does not mean that the movie is literally *for* children. He refers not to the probable audience base, but to the composition of the movie itself, which invites an emotionally and intellectually unsophisticated audience response. Despite their popularity across a wide audience demographic, the films of Lucas and Spielberg were not marketed as 'family' productions. Nevertheless, they were often released during public holiday periods in order to draw the largest volume of family audiences. In the

¹⁷ Gary Arnold, 'Readers Digest to Co-Produce Family Films', *The Washington Post*, June 28th, 1972, p. E6.

¹⁸ Peter Kramer, "It's Aimed at Kids – The Kid in Everybody': George Lucas, Star Wars and Children's Entertainment", *Action and Adventure Hollywood*, ed. Yvonne Tasker, London and New York: Routledge, 2004 (pp. 358-370), pp. 361, 365.

case of Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982), although the sheer volume of tie-in merchandise suggested a predominantly juvenile audience, adults were its dominant theatrical consumers.¹⁹ However, with continued attempts from political and religious groups to appropriate family films for their own ideological ends (an aspect which will be afforded greater discussion in the following chapters), the possibility remained that the 'family' brand was best left in the past. Its absence in advance publicity material and press releases served only to perpetuate its absence in the media.

The turning point occurred in the early-1990s, when a number of the Hollywood major studios created 'family film' production divisions. The return of cinematic family entertainment as a product and as a brand was contextualised by the Hollywood studios' absorption into global media conglomerates. This phenomenon is discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis; for the moment, it is sufficient to stress the importance to such organisations of vertical integration and synergy, encompassing everything from theatrical, pay per view, cable, network and home video revenues, to books, music, toys and other forms of merchandise. A widely-read report by entertainment research company Paul Kagan Associates underlined the potential of family movies, pointing out that nearly half of the films to gross \$100 million at the box office were PG-rated.²⁰ It argued that 'there is an underexploited segment that could be costing the studios million of dollars: family comedies and dramas that are rated PG'.²¹ These conclusions undeniably influenced industry strategy over the following production season, and

¹⁹ Nigel Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007, p. 85.

²⁰ Ryan Murphy, 'The Kids Are All Right: PG Flicks – "The Secret Garden" and "Free Willy" Are Among the Family-Oriented Films On Which Studios are Setting Their Sights', *Entertainment Weekly*, April 16th, 1993. <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20218929,00.html>> [accessed 29/10/2009].

²¹ *Ibid.*

coincided with an industry-wide surge in family film production. Creative Artists executive Rick Nicita suggested that the motivation was purely commercial:

The number of these family films is unusual [...] but I don't think studios have created a mandate that says "Let's make family films". With rising costs, they want to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The higher the rating, the fewer people are excluded. It's really economic rather than conceptual. Dollars and cents. A desirable G-rated film has got to make more money than a desirable NC-17.²²

'The resurgence of family pictures is no coincidence', acknowledged Warner Bros.

executive Bruce Berman, in March 1993:

We've begun to realise there's a big audience out there. Kiddie films are no longer seen as movies that adults have to deal with for 75 or 80 minutes. Quality films reaching parents and kids is the primary target.²³

MGM marketing executive Bob Dingilian pointed to the greater commercial life-span of PG movies compared with more adult categories, arguing that the 'visual' quality of the format contributed to its popularity overseas.²⁴ Nevertheless, there was still some scepticism towards the format. Director Ron Shelton bemoaned Hollywood's embrace of 'the lowest common denominator', while fellow filmmaker Paul Mazursky did not believe the 'cycle' would continue for more than a couple of years.²⁵

In a sense, Mazursky was correct. Family movies of the early-1990s were notorious in their commercial unreliability. There was a joke in the industry that hit family movies could be concocted 'simply by phoning Steven Spielberg's mother and asking what his favourite TV shows were as a kid'.²⁶ Not all family film producers had the skill and resources of Spielberg. During 1993 and 1994, there were a number of

²² Bernard Weinraub, 'Hollywood is Testing Family Values' Value', *The New York Times*, November 12th, 1992. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/12/movies/hollywood-is-testing-family-values-value.html>> [accessed 24/3/2010].

²³ Elaine Dutka, 'A Startling New Concept: Family Films with Money Tight and Criticism of Sex and Violence High, Studios are Looking at PG's Power', *The Los Angeles Times*, March 22nd, 1993, p. F1.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Weinraub, 'Hollywood is Testing Family Values' Value'.

²⁶ Richard Natale, 'Family Films Abound, But Successes Don't', *The Los Angeles Times*, August 25th, 1994, p. F1.

missteps. Films such as *Lassie* (Daniel Petrie, 1994), *Black Beauty* (Caroline Thompson, 1994), *Getting Even with Dad* (Howard Deutch, 1994) and *Richie Rich* (Donald Petrie, 1994) were only some in a long line of box office failures. ‘The upside on family films is impressive’, said one studio executive, ‘but when they don’t work, they don’t work at all’.²⁷ Many of these new family films were simply too juvenile for modern tastes. For better or worse, the family blockbusters of Lucas, Spielberg and others had changed public perceptions of family entertainment, and modern versions of *Lassie*, *Black Beauty* and *The Little Rascals* (Penelope Spheeris, 1994) suddenly seemed mundane. These were early, faltering steps in Hollywood’s renewed embrace of family movies, and the lessons were soon learned.

Hollywood’s strategies changed again during the 1995/96 production season. Observing that special effects-heavy blockbusters such as *Twister* (Jan de Bont, 1996) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) were dominating box office charts, studios chose to abandon child-orientated family films. A high-level Sony executive announced, portentously: ‘the death of the family movie – that is the footnote for summer 1996’, while Twentieth Century-Fox executive Bill Mechanic explained:

We made a strategic move to get out of the kid business, as we’ve known it, a year ago. Kid-oriented movies have been in trouble. [The] Nutty Professor and Independence Day have become the kid movies, the new family films.²⁸

In 1997, the president of marketing at Warner Bros. noted the increasing overlap between the tastes of children and adults:

Children are the only demographic that aspires older [...] They were raised on the computer and they want the same explosions, special effects, originality and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Judy Brennan, ‘Summer School Lessons; Families Didn’t Flock to Movies That Were Aimed at Children. But Special-Effect Flicks with Extraordinary Plots Got the Bucks for Their Bangs’, *The Los Angeles Times*, September 12th, 1996, p. F1.

edginess as adults. They know when a movie panders to them. Kids, even small kids, attack each choice with a level of sophistication and cynicism I've never seen before.²⁹

Disney executive Joe Roth traced the beginnings of this shift to the Lucas-Spielberg collaboration *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.³⁰ This blockbuster, Roth claimed, was 'the beginning and the end of family films in America'.³¹ Buffy Shutt, president of marketing for Universal, argued that the tonal shift in family movies paralleled a wider cultural embrace of youth culture across demographics:

We grew up in a youth culture: we're youth oriented and we still think we're hip and young [...] Parents and kids now dress similarly, listen to the same music, have the same pop culture meeting grounds. My parents wouldn't think of watching Elvis or the Grateful Dead with me. That wouldn't happen now.³²

Producer Brian Henson spoke for the majority when he argued, simply, 'there's really no such thing as a children's movie'.³³

Having settled on this basic formula of broad appeal and undifferentiated address, the new millennium has seen Hollywood concentrating on devising suitably-grandiose family franchises. The basic infrastructures are in place: the internationally-based production companies, the required capital, the technologies, the skills base and the synergies. As Universal executives Scott Stuber and Mary Parent noted in 2002, 'if you can have a product that can be realised across many different avenues of the company, it has more than one shot at success'.³⁴ *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* all combine the traditional pleasures of narrative with computer-

²⁹ Bernard Weinraub, 'Movies for Children, and Their Parents, Are Far From "Pollyanna"', *The New York Times*, Tuesday July 22nd, 1997. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/22/movies/movies-for-children-and-their-parents-are-far-from-pollyanna.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>> [accessed 14/5/2009].

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jonathan Bing and Cathy Dunkley, 'Kiddy Litter Rules H'Wood: Tyke Tomes Ascendant in Studios' Post-Potter Parade', *Variety*, Tuesday January 8th, 2002. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117858043.html?categoryid=21&cs=1>> [accessed 19/10/2009].

generated special effects and, increasingly, 3-D presentation. ‘You’re going to see more of the same’, according to one Warner Bros. executive, ‘not because studios have run out of ideas but because [this kind of product] makes money’.³⁵ In contrast, unsuccessful family films often lack the key elements of spectacle, excitement and franchise potential. John H. Williams of Vanguard Animation assessed Warner Bros. animation *The Iron Giant* (Brad Bird, 1999) – which was critically successful but commercially disappointing – as ‘a cautionary tale of a story well told that doesn’t have the critical factor of making the audience feel they just had a rollercoaster ride of adventure and fun and suspense’.³⁶ Cinema is under pressure to push family entertainment in new and increasingly appealing directions, luring audiences to the cinema in preference to competing entertainment forms. As Warner Bros. executive Kevin Tsujihara argues, ‘you have to stay in front of technology [...] If you don’t, consumers will find a way to get what they want’.³⁷ Contemporary family audiences are obsessed by technology, or more precisely, by the advanced forms of spectacle technological advances represent. As Hollywood plunges, willingly, into spectacle and aesthetic-based appeal, it moves further away from the origins and the ethos of family entertainment as it appeared during the studio era, between 1930 and 1960.

³⁵ Marc Graser, ‘Hollywood: Lost Boys Refound: After Wooing New Demos, Biz Again Gets Kid-Centric’, *Variety*, Friday 25th September, 2009.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118009204.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 30/9/2009].

³⁶ Jonathan Bing, ‘H’w’d’s Hot to Trot with Tots’, *Variety*, Sunday April 28th, 2002.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117866085.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

³⁷ Marc Graser, ‘Hollywood Tickled by Technology: Digital Lockers and Home 3D Pose Growth, Hurdles’, *Variety*, Friday January 10th, 2010.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118013861.html?categoryid=3866&cs=1>> [accessed 12/3/2010].

The family film as represented by the U.S. popular press

Historically, the coverage afforded to family films by the U.S. popular press has been broadly positive. It has tended to fall into two distinct types: the first is opinion-based, assuming an adversarial position in relation to the film industry; the second is news-based. As a quintessentially 'American' form of popular art/entertainment, family films have received considerable coverage in the U.S. media. They have often been seen as upholding American cultural tradition, therefore fulfilling a positive socio-cultural function. This has manifested itself in two recurring standpoints. Firstly – as far as the press is concerned – however many family films are made, it is rarely enough. Secondly, the U.S. media generally views family entertainment as a cultural, rather than commercial format, existing within the public domain and therefore owned by the general public. Family films are thereby viewed as a 'democratic' format, representing the values of the (North American) social majority. Because both the mainstream media and the family movie generally reflect middlebrow ideology, the two forms share a natural affinity.

During the silent era, *The New York Times* often featured specially-authored polemics from civic leaders and movie reformers. During this period, the publication operated as a forum for debate and rhetoric, as well as factual reporting. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, there were pieces authored by prominent figures in the children's matinee movement, such as Jane Stannard Johnson; senior studio executives, such as William Fox; and educationalists, such as William Lewin. Aside from these freelance contributions, the paper gave considerable attention to developments in matinee movements, educational drives in relation to movies, movie censorship, and general pieces on 'children's film'. Other prominent dailies, such as *The Los Angeles Times* and

The Washington Post, showed far less interest in family/children's films and the socio-cultural issues surrounding such productions. Their unusual prominence in *The New York Times* reflects the paper's middlebrow agenda, as well as its greater interest in cinema and the arts.

During the early-1930s, the U.S. media became fascinated with family films. Publications such as *Parents' Magazine* and trade paper *Harrison's Reports* began distinguishing material intended for adults only and material suitable for 'family viewing', i.e. general audiences. Other prominent film reviewing publications, such as *Variety* and *The New York Times*, often avoided questions of audience suitability. The mainstream media became concerned with the effects of movies upon society and culture, specifically upon such vulnerable social groups as children. The reformist agendas of conservative pressure groups, such as the Catholic Legion of Decency, were given impetus by the sheer quantity of media coverage afforded their campaigns. Such media attention contributed to the film industry's decision to submit to pressure and instigate more stringent self-regulation in 1934. After these public battles, the U.S. media paid much closer attention to family films. This backlash established a new and enduring benchmark which placed continued production of specialised 'family films' firmly on the agenda. 'Make Way for the Family Movie', demanded *The Christian Science Monitor* in September 1934, amidst a general chorus of media approval for the new format.³⁸

Initially, not all media reaction was positive. Some critics, notably *The New York Times'* Andre Sennwald, were concerned with upholding artistic standards. Noting that 'it is the ironic misfortune of the screen that its universal popularity as an entertainment

³⁸ 'Make Way for the Family Movie', *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 14th, 1934, p. 16; see also Mae Tinee, 'Anne of Green Gables' Praised as Family Film', *The Chicago Tribune*, November 29th, 1934, p. 25.

medium is its undoing', Sennwald conceded that 'even the finest of the films manufactured in the Hollywood studios are occasionally too adult for the contemplation of children'.³⁹ Yet Sennwald insisted that a better system of screen regulation was needed to prevent the cinema being 'scaled down to the lowest common denominator both of taste and intelligence'.⁴⁰ Sennwald was ahead of his time; it was soon apparent that despite a general 'levelling' in suitability, which saw suggestive sex and violence largely eliminated, films remained thematically tailored to adult audiences. Few critics cared whether films were *entertaining* children; as long as they were not corrupting, the Production Code was doing its work. In 1937, *The Christian Science Monitor* noted with approval that the quantity of Hollywood-produced 'family films' had climbed to 42 per cent, a figure which – when examined in conjunction with the films released during this period – can only reflect broad thematic suitability rather than broad appeal.⁴¹

For writers such as Gilbert Seldes, Hollywood cinema's 'democratic' ability to attract many and offend few was a quality to be cherished. Seldes believed that movies reflected the tastes of the majority and constituted the first 'great art which can be shown to every single human being simultaneously'.⁴² But there is a caveat in Seldes' philosophy. He is, after all, talking about 'Majority and Minority Audiences', which leads him to argue that in mass entertainment, 'minority audiences [do not] have any

³⁹ Andre Sennwald, 'Children and the Cinema: A Brief Glance at the Nursery and Its Perplexing Relation to the Screen', *The New York Times*, Sunday December 23rd, 1934, p. x5.

⁴⁰ Andre Sennwald, 'Children and the Cinema: Containing the Heretical Suggestion That Children Know Their Own Minds', *The New York Times*, Sunday June 9th, 1935, p. x3.

⁴¹ 'Family Films Rise to 42 P.C. With Council's Five-Year Aid', *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 28th, 1937, p. 15.

⁴² Gilbert Seldes, 'Majority and Minority Audiences', February 1938, *From Quasimodo to Scarlett O'Hara: A National Board of Review Anthology*, ed. Stanley Hochman, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982 (pp. 387-392), pp. 389-390.

rights at all'.⁴³ If these words appear to echo Will Hays's sentiments pertaining to Hollywood's function as a 'universal system of entertainment', then it is no coincidence. They reflected popular belief during the 1930s attesting to the unifying power of the cinema, at a time when its influence as a social institution was at its height. The further inference, of course, is that while such vulnerable audience sections as children had a right to *moral* protection, as a 'minority' audience they had no claim to special treatment in artistic terms, particularly in relation to style and storytelling.

For the most part, family films disappeared from the headlines during the 1940s. This was not due to lack of interest, but simply the belief that the battle for family films had already been won. During the early 1940s, in particular, Hollywood cinema was strong and stable, and seemingly upholding the sanctity of its responsibilities regarding mass audiences and the moral protection of children. After this prolonged period of approval, intimations of disquiet began to appear during the early-1950s. *The New York Times*, hitherto a strong supporter of family films, criticised small-town musicals *On Moonlight Bay* (Roy Del Ruth, 1951) and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* (David Butler, 1953) as excessively old-fashioned.⁴⁴ With the moral panic surrounding the emergence of teen culture in full force during the mid-to-late 1950s, the media's interest in family movies was comparatively low, except for reporting industry complaints that family films in the traditional sense were no longer good business.

During the late-1950s and 1960s, family film discourse was increasingly the province of more conservative publications such as *The Christian Science Monitor*. But

⁴³ Ibid, p. 387.

⁴⁴ A.H. Weiler, 'On Moonlight Bay', *The New York Times*, July 27th, 1951, 15:2; Bosley Crowther, 'By the Light of the Silvery Moon', *The New York Times*, March 27th, 1953, 28:2.

whilst the moral reformers of the 1920s and 1930s seemed to know precisely what the term ‘family film’ signified, the definition no longer seemed so clear-cut:

Everybody favours family movies, but nobody seems to know what they are. In recent years the clamour has increased for Hollywood to make more family films, and to make fewer of those with so-called adult themes. When it comes to defining a family film, however, experts disagree. Even a family may fight about it.⁴⁵

This ambiguity, of course, has always existed, but has not always been acknowledged. The author of this article was forced to concede that ‘family films’ necessarily reflect society-at-large, an admission which would have been unthinkable in context of the moral absolutism of the early-1930s, in which family films were understood largely in terms of their supposed purity. With the upsurge in youth-orientated culture during the 1950s and 1960s, audience *appeal* was becoming far more important in terms of how films were received, whereas in the 1930s, a family film needed only to satisfy *moral* considerations to merit the label. Nevertheless, the same morally-orientated understanding of family movies brought the otherwise-unremarkable films of Robert B. Radnitz considerable press attention. Radnitz became something of a folk hero, portrayed as upholding the spirit of the wholesome ‘family film’; Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* even proclaimed Radnitz the ‘apostle of family films’, despite his relative lack of box office success.⁴⁶ Although a great deal of nostalgia and fondness for family films remained, and plaintive appeals from the Catholic Legion of Decency for increased production were still being published, there was increasing acknowledgement

⁴⁵ ‘A Family Movie Mirror of World Opinion’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 19th, 1962, p. 16.

⁴⁶ Charles Champlin, ‘Another Entry from Apostle of Family Films’, *The Los Angeles Times*, May 25th, 1969, p. o1.

that the world was changing and that traditionally-made family films had become a luxury, rather than a socio-cultural necessity.⁴⁷

The media's interest in family entertainment was again aroused in the early-1970s as part of a backlash against increasing levels of violence and sex in movies. 'Wanted – More 'G' Whizzes in Family Films', requested Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times*, in November 1970.⁴⁸ 'Family Films Fail in Austin Theatre; Sex Movies Return', reported the *Chicago Tribune* in December 1971, with palpable concern.⁴⁹ 'What Happened to Films About Families?' enquired Louise Sweeney of *The Christian Science Monitor*, in March 1972.⁵⁰ Throughout the early-1970s, the films of Disney and Radnitz were embraced, as if representing the last bastions of hope in an industry rapidly losing its moral compass.⁵¹ The popular press was eager to scent the resurgence of the family movie. The Readers' Digest initiative received considerable coverage, and, in April 1975, *The Christian Science Monitor* optimistically speculated that the minor animal movie *Benji* (Joe Camp, 1974) might herald a 'new era in family films'.⁵² The media-driven moral panic of the early-1970s may almost have rivalled the debates of the early-1930s in intensity, extending as it did from wider debates concerning the growth of permissiveness and fear of social breakdown.

⁴⁷ 'National Legion of Decency Asks More Family Films of Hollywood', *The New York Times*, Friday December 4th, 1964, p. 42; Robert Windeler, 'As Nation's Standards Change, So Do Movies', *The New York Times*, Tuesday October 8th, 1968, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Charles Champlin, 'Wanted – More 'G' Whizzes in Family Films', *The Los Angeles Times*, November 29th, 1970, p. r1.

⁴⁹ Clarence Page, 'Family Films Fail in Austin Theatre; Sex Movies Return', *The Chicago Tribune*, December 19th, 1971, p. w12.

⁵⁰ Louise Sweeney, 'What Happened to Films About Families?', *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 10th, 1972, p. 7.

⁵¹ William Wolf, 'Radnitz Mission: Family Films without Fairy Tales', *The Los Angeles Times*, October 25th, 1970, p. 157; David Sterritt, 'Robert Radnitz: Maker of Family-Film Hits', *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 14th, 1976, p. 22.

⁵² Mary Sue Best, 'New Era in Family Films? Canine Star Points the Way', *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 2nd, 1975, p. 25.

Following the release of films such as *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977) and *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), media discourse again subsided. *The New York Times* reported that family movies were ‘making a comeback’, but little else was said regarding their return, perhaps because the form had changed almost beyond recognition.⁵³ Since the 1980s, the mainstream North American media have assumed a less adversarial position in relation to Hollywood’s production of family movies. During the 1980s, a period in which the industry exercised caution in its use of the ‘family’ brand, the media followed suit and generally avoided the term. In the early-1990s, when family entertainment became central to Hollywood’s branding and production strategies, the press again embraced the format. To a large extent, it now takes its cue from the film industry. The reasons for this are manifold, ranging from historical shifts in the way the press conducts itself, to increasing media conglomeration, in which many newspapers are now owned by the same parent companies of the Hollywood film studios. More importantly, newer and more dangerous threats to young minds have been identified. Adult-rated video games, for instance, make commercial cinema seem comparatively safe and well-regulated.

The family film as represented in academia

Academia has trailed behind Hollywood and the popular press – and no doubt the general public – in its recognition of the importance of the family film to mainstream cinema and U.S. popular culture. The family film has, in fact, been woefully under-addressed in academic film study; it is surely the *most* neglected of all the major Hollywood genres.

⁵³ Judy Klemesrud, ‘Family Movies Making a Comeback’, *The New York Times*, Friday February 18th, 1978, p. c10.

The first systematic studies into family entertainment did not appear until the 1990s, and the work that does exist consists only of brief sketches, rather than in-depth historical analysis. Given that the academic neglect of the family film is self-evident, it is more useful to investigate *why* this neglect has taken place. I would argue that, in several key regards, academic film history has developed in ways which actively work *against* the study of the family film.

Before the emergence of Film Studies as a coherent academic discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, most systematic studies of cinema were conducted by sociologists motivated by fears regarding the social effects of mass media consumption. Many were concerned with how children would respond to the medium. Some evidenced suspicion and hostility towards the movies; others argued that movies should fulfil a positive, practical role, particularly for pedagogical purposes. The most significant exploration of this relationship were the Payne Fund Studies, a comprehensive series of sociological and theoretical works published between 1933 and 1935, and organised by the Motion Picture Research Council. The head of the Council, the Reverend William Short, was an activist who believed that movies were socially damaging. He secured funding from the Payne Fund, a private foundation concerned about the educative implications of commercial cinema. The studies themselves were written by professional social scientists, but the enterprise was undermined by the initiative's implicit hostility towards the movies. This was exemplified by Henry Forman's *Our Movie Made Children* (1933), a publication intended to summarise the findings of the various reports, but which reduced these serious studies to the level of crude, anti-movie moralising.⁵⁴ The Payne Fund Studies

⁵⁴ Garth S. Jowett et al, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 7.

were criticised for their untheoretical focus, excessive polemical content and increasingly dated agenda; by the time the last case study was published, in 1935, Hollywood had initiated strict self-regulation, rendering the initiative virtually redundant.⁵⁵

Other notable North American works exploring the relationship between children and the cinema included Alice Miller Mitchell's *Children and Movies* (1929); Edgar Dale's *Motion Pictures in Education* (1937); Raymond Moley's *Are We Movie Made?* (1938); and Margaret Farrand Thorp's *America at the Movies* (1939). Educators and moralists in the U.K. were wrestling with similar questions and produced a wide-ranging body of literature, including the British Film Institute's selection of movies for matinee exhibition, *Films for Children* (1937); Richard Ford's *Children in the Cinema* (1939); Douglas Macintosh's *Attendance of School Children at the Cinema* (1945); Mary C. Parnaby's *Children's Cinema Clubs* (1947); Mary Field's *Children and Films: A Study of Boys and Girls in the Cinema* (1954); and Janet Hills's *Films and Children: The Positive Approach* (1960). The United Nations' Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) also commissioned two in-depth reports on children's film in Europe; Henri Storck's *The Entertainment Film for Juvenile Audiences* (1950) and Philippe Bauchard's *A Report on Press, Film and Radio for Children* (1952). As will be seen, concerns regarding the relationship between children and films persisted far longer in Europe – particularly Great Britain – than in the U.S. Whereas Hollywood's self-regulatory reforms largely placated American commentators, the efforts of the British Board of Film Censors – arguably an even more conservative censorship body than the U.S. Production Code Administration (PCA) – were neither as popular nor well-publicised, which might explain the persistent stream of reports, investigations and castigations regarding the

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 8-9.

influence of commercial cinema upon children, which abated only in the 1960s.⁵⁶ This fascination with the relationship between children and commercial cinema, of course, came at the expense of analysing how films operated through *multiple* forms of address.

Film Studies' interest in so-called 'children's films' began, in a very basic form, in the mid-1970s. Garth Jowett's *Film: The Democratic Art* (1975) and Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (1975) – both broad-ranging scholarly histories of Hollywood commercial cinema – contain some information on the early relationship between children and cinema. Three useful books emerged during the 1980s: Ruth M. Goldstein's and Edith Zornow's *The Screen Image of Youth: Movies about Children and Adolescents* (1980); David M. Considine's *The Cinema of Adolescence* (1985); and Kathy Merlock Jackson's *Images of Children in American Film: A Sociocultural Analysis* (1986). However, as the titles suggest, these works limit their scope to *representations* of children. Richard deCordova has observed that 'It seems odd that [...] film history has so completely ignored the obsession with the child audience, particularly if we admit that it was the dominant feature of critical approaches to cinema at the time'.⁵⁷ Film Studies' interest in the youth audience and 'children's film' only gained momentum in the 1990s. Thomas Doherty's study *Teenagers and Teen Pics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s* (1988) served as a catalyst for further, more broad-ranging research into the relationship between cinema and young people.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010 (1984), pp. 101-107. For more information on the children's cinema movement in Britain, see Terry Staples' *All Pals Together: The Story of Children's Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

⁵⁷ Richard deCordova, 'Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, The Hays Office and Saturday Matinees', *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory A. Waller, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002 (pp. 159-169), p. 168.

A selective list of such publications gives some sense of the movement's breadth and scale, encompassing as it does Neil Sinyard's *Children in the Movies* (1990); Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1991); Jon Lewis's *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (1992); Eric Smoodin's *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era* (1993); Smoodin's edited collection *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom* (1994); Nora Odom Pecora's *The Business of Children's Entertainment* (1998); Ian Wojcik-Andrews's *Children's Films: History, Ideology, Pedagogy, Theory* (2000); Timothy Morris's *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film* (2000); Heather Addison's 'Children's Films in the 1990s' (2000); Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary Cinema* (2002); Michael Barrier's *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (2003); Nicholas Sammond's *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960* (2005); Jyotsna Kapur's *Coining for Capital: Movies, Marketing and the Transformation of Childhood* (2005); Karen Lury's *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (2010) and Keith M. Booker's *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films* (2010).

Most of these studies can be divided into four areas of inquiry: children's films, or accounts of the representation of children in popular film; children's culture; feature animations (especially Disney, encompassing elements of the first two categories); and teenage films. It is worth considering these movements in terms of how they have served to curtail interest in the family audience and family film. Firstly, there have been several academic publications regarding 'children's films' (although, in reality, they generally

pertain to family films), the most significant of which are Wojcik-Andrews's *Children's Films: History, Ideology, Pedagogy, Theory* and Booker's *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*. Booker's monograph is very much a series of personal reflections on the films discussed. Although his textual analysis is fine, his strategic decision to concentrate solely on film *content* allows some of his more significant claims to go unchallenged. For example, after explicitly stating in his preface that he is 'relatively little troubled by the question of defining just what constitutes a "children's film"', the limitations of his subsequent analysis calls into question the validity of such an approach, particularly when he deems such films as *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Tim Burton, 2005) and *Up* (Pete Docter, Bob Peterson, 2009) to be too adult/sophisticated to really merit the label 'children's film'.⁵⁸

Wojcik-Andrews's work is more ambitious in its conceptual scope. He considers global manifestations of children's film, particularly European productions; he also attempts to chart the historical development of the format. Curiously, however, he views children's films to be defined by their casting, rather than content, marketing and reception. Narratives which heavily feature child performers but which are thematically weighted towards adults – *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962), for instance, and the gritty Brazilian drama *Pixote* (Hector Babenco, 1981) – are deemed to be 'children's films', an oddity which undermines the more valuable aspects of the enterprise.

Several studies – notably Morris's and Kapur's – attempt to bridge the gap between children's literature and film by placing them under the banner of 'children's culture'. Kapur, for example, views family films and children's films as analogous; her

⁵⁸ Keith M. Booker, *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*, California and Oxford: Praeger, 2010, pp. xv-xvi; 110; 118.

index entry for ‘family films’ simply reads ‘see children’s films’. The fundamental difficulty of such an approach is that family films are usually far more adult-orientated than is children’s literature. Even contemporary ‘crossover’ fiction – an increasingly prominent literary genre in which texts are designed cross boundaries between children and adults – is not really the same as a Hollywood family movie, which operates under very different commercial conditions. This conflation stems partly from (perhaps wilful) ignorance regarding the economic imperatives of Hollywood cinema. Many writers who have made this confusion are experts in children’s literature and culture, and would like to view family movies as simple extensions of those fields.

The first academic works specifically addressing the family film finally emerged in the mid-1990s. Although reflecting burgeoning academic awareness of youth culture in the cinema, this interest also responded to the explosion in family film production during the early part of the decade. The first such work was the article ‘Unshrinking the Kids: Children’s Cinema and the Family Film’ (1995), by Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples. In short, the authors view the family film as ‘essentially American’, as distinct from the ‘children’s film’, which is regarded as ‘essentially, but no longer exclusively, European’.⁵⁹ The main difference between the two forms, it is argued, lies not with the nature of the material and composition of the audience, but with casting. Family films, they argue, rely heavily upon child actors possessing ‘not only national and ethnic identification to the child audience but sexual appeal to the adult audience as well’.⁶⁰ This is contrasted with the apparently less stringent (and less prurient) casting demands

⁵⁹ Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples, ‘Unshrinking the Kids: Children’s Cinema and the Family Film’, *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, London: British Film Institute, 1995 (pp. 92-108), p. 95.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of European 'children's cinema'.⁶¹ Three important articles on family films emerged soon afterwards: Peter Kramer's 'Would you Take a Child to See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family Adventure Movie' (1998), Robert C. Allen's 'Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the "Family" Film' (1999), and Kramer's 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema Since the 1960s' (2002). Kramer has taken a particular interest in the contemporary Hollywood family film, and has published several articles on the subject.

Kramer's first paper argues that 'family adventure movies are the most successful production trend in American cinema since the late 1970s', and that Hollywood blockbusters betray an 'obsessive concern' with 'family issues'.⁶² In his 2002 paper, Kramer broadens his scope to include what he sees as a more general trend towards family movies in Hollywood since the 1960s.⁶³ He begins by observing that 'when it comes to American cinema, children's films are very low on the academic agenda, at least in film studies'.⁶⁴ He continues by positing a workable distinction between 'children's films' and 'family films': 'children's films are films made specifically for children', whilst 'family films can be defined as those films aimed at both children and their parents'.⁶⁵ He suggests that critics have often misconceived 'children's films' as 'cheap, badly made and *only* suitable for children', and that 'many of the most cherished and most successful (and not always cheap) American films in recent decades can be

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Peter Kramer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family Adventure Movie', *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 (pp. 294-311), pp. 294-295.

⁶³ Peter Kramer, 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema Since the 1960s', *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale, London: British Film Institute, 2002 (pp. 185-200).

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 185.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 186.

understood as children's or family films'.⁶⁶ He also emphasises that until the abolition of the Production Code in the late-1960s, 'notwithstanding age-related taste differences at a basic level, all of Hollywood's releases were intended for the whole family'.⁶⁷

Allen's paper approaches family films from a different standpoint. He argues that:

What was referred to in the trade as the "family film" emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Hollywood's attempt to exploit the profit potential of the video market, particularly sell-through, as fully as possible.⁶⁸

Allen is not interested in examining family films across a broader historical period; he focuses on what he calls 'postmodern family entertainment', which he regards as 'a cultural response to separate – though interlaced – demographic, technological and social phenomena: the "echo boom", the VCR and the postmodern family'.⁶⁹ In other words, Allen understands the family film as a historically-specific reflection of the relationship between American social change and global commerce. The family film, he argues, is 'the earliest and clearest expression' of 'the rise of post-Hollywood cinema'.⁷⁰

All of these works are valuable and laudable, and deserve a great deal of credit for bringing family films to wider scholarly attention, yet each misrepresents the nature of Hollywood family entertainment in some important regard. While it may be true, as Bazalgette and Staples argue, that European cinema is more child-orientated than Hollywood, surely the reasons for this are not confined to casting, but also relate to issues of cultural taste, audience composition and commercial strategy. Robert C. Allen's work

⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 186-187.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 191.

⁶⁸ Robert C. Allen, 'Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the "Family" Film', *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 1999 (pp. 109-131), p. 113.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 110.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 125.

is more usefully industry-orientated, thereby eschewing the superficiality of an exclusively textual approach, but his parameters are too constrained. Allen contends that the family film is a post-1980s phenomenon; this need not have been a problem, had he acknowledged that contemporary family entertainment is differentiated from previous family-orientated filmic cycles through stylistic development, but instead he portrays it as a completely new phenomenon. Overall, Kramer's articles are the most detailed and reliable examinations of Hollywood family entertainment. However, it seems to me that his work contains two important misconceptions. Firstly, having established that 'children's films' are 'made specifically for children [...] aged twelve or younger', and that 'family films' are 'aimed at both children and their parents', his later contention that *Star Wars* and *E.T.* can be regarded as 'children's films' appears confusingly contradictory, given their proven popularity with adults.⁷¹ Whilst this terminology reflects the belief that such films address 'the kid in everybody', it nonetheless risks conflating quite separate phenomena.⁷² Secondly, and more importantly, he argues that all Hollywood movies prior to the 1960s, differences in taste notwithstanding, were 'family movies'. This seems, to me, wholly misguided.

The fallacy that Hollywood cinema produced mainly family films before the late-1960s is surprisingly widespread. As I suggested earlier, it stems from Hollywood's propaganda, which stated that the Production Code rendered all films morally suitable for children, and that films that are 'suitable' for children are necessarily family films. There are a number of problems with this position. Firstly, it is quite apparent that many studio-

⁷¹ Kramer, "The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema Since the 1960s", p. 186.

⁷² Kramer, "It's Aimed at Kids – The Kid in Everybody': George Lucas, *Star Wars* and Children's Entertainment", p. 358.

era films were *not* suitable for children. Even industry advocates such as Will Hays, a tireless propagandist with a clear vested interest in promoting Hollywood cinema as a 'universal' entertainment, stopped short of claiming that *all* Hollywood films were family-suitable. It was not merely 'taste' that marked such explicitly adult films as *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) as unsuitable for children, but also content. Secondly, it seems bizarre to suggest that simply because a product is *suitable* for the consumption of children – in that it can do them no obvious harm – it can be regarded as 'family'-orientated. There must, surely, be a place for both suitability *and* appeal in our formulation of the 'family film'. After all, party political broadcasts on network television may be suitable for children, even as they target prospective adult voters; are they, therefore, 'family' advertisements? My own position, as will become clear, is that relatively *few* movies from the studio era were family films.

Some of the most useful work on the 'family audience' has emerged through historical studies of the Hollywood pre-sound and early-sound eras. Lee Grieveson's article, 'A Kind of Recreative School for the Whole Family': Making Cinema Respectable, 1907-09' (2001), examines the burgeoning U.S. film establishment's growing interest in the family audience as early as the 1900s; although Grieveson's focus is on exhibition, rather than production, his article demonstrates just how enduring and powerful the idea of the family audience is. Richard Maltby has perhaps best articulated Hollywood's fascination with the family audience during the early-1930s, particularly in his article 'Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of its Audiences' (1999), in which he argues that Hollywood's understanding of mass

audiences was fluid, shifting in accordance with the cultural and political climate. His work is particularly valuable in that, like me, he sees the ‘family audience’ as a construct rather than ethnographic entity, invented by Hollywood for commercial and ideological reasons. Ruth Vasey’s monograph, *The World According to Hollywood 1918-1939* (1997), is also invaluable, in that she examines studio-era Hollywood in terms of its desire to attract *international* as well as domestic mass audiences, and also examines the textual, rather than simply industrial, implications of this strategy. Maltby and Vasey are in accordance with my own position in that they understand Hollywood’s output during the 1920s and 1930s in terms of a conflict between industry policy, as defined by the MPPDA (which favoured ‘family’ films), and studio production output (which continued to make adult-orientated films in an attempt to satisfy the box office).

In general, though, the conspicuous absence of academic writing on the family film and family audience suggests that the Film Studies academy has – tacitly, at least – deemed them to be largely unworthy of study. Admittedly, this can partly be attributed to the considerable amount of research on overlapping areas of study. For example, many family movies are fantasies or musicals, genres which have been scrupulously explored by genre criticism. Similarly, there have been detailed auteurist studies into such notable family film figureheads as Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Meanwhile, research into teen films, feature animations, children’s culture and blockbusters has sometimes, albeit inadvertently, obfuscated the study of family films. Whereas the children’s culture movement has occasionally been guilty of conflating disparate forms of commercial culture under a central, all-encompassing banner, the study of blockbusters inadvertently establishes an opposition with the family

film, in which family movies are not sufficiently differentiated from more adult-orientated blockbuster fare (such as high-concept action films). Additionally, the ongoing scholarly fascination with feature animation, especially Disney films, invites a skewed understanding, in which the broader history of Hollywood family movies risks being misconceived as little more than a curious adjunct to the Disney canon.

I agree with Kramer's identification of 'a set of prejudices' in relation to 'children's and family films'; 'namely that by and large they are cheaply made and simply not very good and not even very important commercially'.⁷³ The sheer fallacy that 'family film' describes only to the most juvenile, corny productions bedevilled Hollywood during the 1980s and 1990s and seemingly infiltrated the Film Studies establishment. However, whilst these prejudices were sufficiently widespread between the 1950s and mid-1990s to restrict critical discourse, it seems possible that a contrary set of prejudices have surrounded the family film since the mid-to-late 1990s, which have proven just as limiting in their effects. The family film has become so recognisably broad and all-encompassing in its cultural and social reach that it has, perhaps, acquired a contrary set of distasteful associations, its attractiveness for study dampened by its nebulous filmic identity and apparent lack of tangible boundaries. Additionally, the family film seems to embody a rampant commercialism, representing all that is rapacious and cynical in Hollywood's capitalistic identity. The fact that the provenance of the family brand lies with Hollywood is itself, perhaps, a stumbling block for an academy often rooted within an independently-minded liberal humanism. Film scholars not only tend to dislike blatantly commercial products and gravitate towards the artistically

⁷³ Kramer, "The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s", p. 186.

innovative and commercially negligible, but they prefer to identify their own areas for study, and dislike having labels imposed on them by non-experts, or worse, commercial cinema itself.

The fact that the family film sits awkwardly in relation to questions of film genre is, perhaps, the most important factor in this neglect. Film criticism remains fixated by the concept of genre; of identifying hitherto-unexplored groups of films sharing formal characteristics, placing them within an easily-digestible framework, noting divergences, developments and evolutions corresponding to the established canon, and generally fitting pieces together, like parts of a puzzle. While this may be a simplified and pejorative understanding of genre, there is a convenience to critical classification which sometimes precludes deep analysis of incongruent forms. Family movies are a classic example. The family film is not a genre in the traditionally-understood sense; that is clear. There are relatively few formal connections; the category is not unified, and family films inhabit widely-understood genres of their own: musicals, comedies, fantasies, animations, science-fiction films, epics, and even westerns. However, it is equally apparent that the 'family film' is a globally-consumed brand. Surely, it is a prerequisite of the academic study of cinema to examine commercial films in relation to the societies in which they are produced and consumed. The criticism is not of 'genre' per se, but rather over-literal interpretations of its utility. Recently, in Film Studies, there has been a determined movement away from strict, over-literal interpretations of genre; an edited collection published in 2008 collectively argues that generic labels are increasingly irrelevant and even detrimental to the works to which they are applied.⁷⁴ I would agree

⁷⁴ *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labelling Films, Television Shows and Media*, eds. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich, London: McFarland, 2008.

with this assessment, and also stress the need continually to reappraise accepted beliefs, even in such a thoroughly explored area as Hollywood cinema. When mighty tomes like Barry Keith Grant's *Film Genre Readers* – which purportedly address the most important cinematic forms of the period – disregard the most profitable type of films in the world, there has been a failure in process, in conceptualisation and in understanding.

Methodology

Despite these misgivings, this thesis shares much in common with a genre study in its broad historical perspective, lengthy analysis of individual films, and attempt to critically define the subject. Where it differs from a purely generic focus is the particular interest in cultural and industrial aspects of family films, rather than confining the study to the texts themselves. As I have already suggested, textual analysis in isolation is insufficient; conversely, it seems equally apparent that there must be at least *some* analysis of these films in order to reveal not only their artistic properties, but also the cultural trends and ideological values they shape and reflect. My approach, then, attempts to convey how cultural and industrial forces shape the development of the family film, and equally, explores what these films reveal about Hollywood cinema and U.S. society as a whole.

This leads to an important point about definition. Most of the time, identifying family films presents no difficulties, for there is generally a firm picture established through a combination of production (the elements *within* the text that suggest intended 'all-age' appeal), exhibition (time of year the film is released; in public holidays, for instance, to attract 'families'), marketing (how a film is represented to the public before, during and after theatrical release), merchandising (magnitude, and whether designed to

appeal to both adults and children) and reception (critically and commercially). In this way, we can see quite clearly that *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001) is a family film: its modes of appeal are universal rather than niche, and it contains little or no violent or sexual content; it was released just before Christmas to attract the highest concentration of cross-demographic audiences; it was overtly marketed as a 'family film'; it spawned a huge range of merchandising; and it was widely-received, critically and popularly, as a family film. However, the definition is not always so clear-cut, and there are sometimes grey areas. Occasionally, audiences can *manufacture* family films for themselves, such as the slapstick comedies of Laurel and Hardy, or, more recently, *Star Wars*. In both instances, the films did not correspond with Hollywood's overall approach to family entertainment at the time of release, but nevertheless met the demands of mass audiences. Often, 'grey areas' arise because a film is broadly-*suitable* for mass audiences (especially children), but not broadly-*appealing*. On other occasions, a film may be broadly-appealing, but not regarded as morally-suitable for children (and therefore not a family film). Many Frank Capra films of the 1930s and 1940s fall into the first category: they were generally highly moral, tended to contain little violence or allusions to sexuality, and several were adapted for the highly-successful, family-orientated Lux Radio Theatre (1934-1955) slot. On the other hand, Capra's films were often rather talky and (in spite of their self-avowed 'down-to-earth' streak) sophisticated. They contained little to which juvenile audiences could explicitly identify. On the other hand, many productions – particularly action-adventure blockbusters – would be regarded as too 'adult' for juvenile consumption, yet contain the spectacle and narrative transparency that can be appreciated by audiences of all ages. The James Bond franchise

– which has sometimes flirted with family suitability, particularly during the Roger Moore era – is an excellent example, and it is not only its high action/adventure quotient but also the seemingly endless array of merchandising it has spawned which marks it out as a precursor to the modern family-adventure blockbuster. Similarly, despite its graphic violence and intensity, *The New York Times* critic Vincent Canby received *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) as a film for the ‘kidult’ – a slightly derogatory, predominantly North American term for the symbolic child, ‘who may be 8, 18, 38 or 80’.⁷⁵ No doubt it is grey areas such as these which have dissuaded film scholars from writing a history of the family film; here, I approach them with caution, and try – perhaps not always successfully – to follow the overall consensus.

The decision to focus exclusively on *Hollywood* family films – rather than those produced elsewhere in the world – stems from a number of motivations. The concept of the ‘family audience’ originated in the U.S., and Hollywood has always been best served to address mass audiences because of its near-hegemonic control of world film markets. It is the purported universality of the family film – resting upon broadly-appealing movies and global distribution avenues – that marks it as Hollywood’s domain. As Ruth Vasey has argued, as early as the 1920s – the period in which it tightened its grip on the world market – Hollywood ‘had to formulate a recipe for movies that could play in the North and the South, on the West Coast and in the East, and from Cape Town to Capri’.⁷⁶ The idea of the ‘family audience’ extends throughout Hollywood’s history, and its pursuit is one of the governing principles behind commercial cinema. Furthermore, I would also

⁷⁵ Vincent Canby, ‘Die Hard’ Calls to the Kidult’, *The New York Times*, July 31st, 1988. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/31/movies/film-view-die-hard-calls-to-the-kidult.html?scp=1>> [accessed 22/9/2010].

⁷⁶ Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, p. 4.

contend that most Hollywood-produced genre films as well as art house, leftfield and independent productions actually depend for their existence on family films *failing* to reach universal appeal, a failure which creates a commercial vacuum which can and must be filled by niche and minority-appeal titles. If this contention appears unacceptable, it may be because we are still accustomed to viewing entertainment films predominantly as art, rather than commerce. It is one of the aims of this study to challenge this lingering preconception.

All of these goals require a broad historical perspective. Historically-orientated analysis is essential, allowing us to trace the artistic, technical and corporate developments underpinning the shift from the dual-addressed, adult-inflected family films made between the 1930s and early-1970s to the more universally-addressed family entertainment of today. The films and franchises currently dominating international box office charts, for all their novelty, stylistic innovation and apparently-defining uniqueness, have their origins in commercial strategies, cultural values and production trends dating back to the early-1930s, when Hollywood first embraced the economic potential of the 'family film'. Any systematic analysis of family films ignoring the bigger historical picture, therefore, is necessarily incomplete. Indeed, the absence of historical perspective is potentially dangerous, if it submits to novelty by focusing only on recent trends. By the same token, my interest in family movies after the industry's transition to sound in 1929 and 1930 stems from two reasons. Firstly, pre-sound family movies were not part of an industry-wide strategy. Secondly, they were usually lacking in prestigious quality, and therefore did not possess the public-relations function that was deemed integral in family movies until the late-1960s.

A broad range of primary and secondary sources have been used in this thesis. Since the study investigates the relationship between Hollywood strategy and the socio-cultural context, each chapter examines a number of pertinent family films selected for their social and commercial significance, and general representativeness. Often, discussion is founded upon detailed textual analysis, an approach which seems highly appropriate to the central question of how industrial strategy and social context shape popular entertainment. At other times, discussion of the films is founded more on behind-the-scenes information. Secondary sources are divided between contemporary news reports and reviews, and academic criticism and history. Academic sources provide depth and perspective, but because of the lack of existing scholarship in this area, they are not specific enough to be used in isolation. Consequently, a great deal of foundational research was conducted with the aid of trade papers such as *Variety*, *Harrison's Reports* and the *National Board of Review Magazine*, and newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Economist*. During the early part of the thesis, greater emphasis is given to *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* because they combined international news coverage with particular attention to the cinema. Film reviews are taken from a wide variety of sources, with special attention to *Variety* and *The New York Times*, for reasons of greater coverage, depth and (rather more subjectively) quality of analysis.

Each chapter deals with a specific historical period in the development of the family movie, spanning its emergence in the 1930s to its current international box office dominance. Chapter 1 investigates how and why Hollywood began strategically pursuing

'films for the family', and examines the range of films designed to attract this conceptual audience. Chapter 2 considers Hollywood's relationship with the family audience during the 1940s and early-1950s. During this period, the Hollywood studios settled on a conservative but highly successful strategy of making big-budget films *about* families, working on the principle that the 'family audience' would automatically appreciate films representing family life in its most pleasing forms. Chapter 3 examines how the family film was affected by Hollywood's uneasy period of transition between the early-1950s and late-1960s, in which audiences declined, lifestyles changed, television threatened the film industry's dominance and the teenager emerged as a powerful consumer. Chapter 4 deals with the re-emergence and reconfiguration of the Hollywood family audience between the late-1970s and mid-1990s, when the key shift towards a regressive, immersive aesthetic occurred. Chapter 5 assesses the position of family entertainment within the context of contemporary media culture, examining the most successful forms of family entertainment in the new millennium in the context of synergies, technological advances and the broader relationship between the movie and the spectator. Collectively, these chapters highlight the need for a major reevaluation of the importance of the family film as a cultural and commercial format, particularly within the Film Studies academy.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of the Hollywood Family Film, 1930-1939

This chapter traces the beginnings of the Hollywood family film. By 1930, American cinema had become the most powerful and influential producer of popular entertainment in the world, but was still widely disparaged by social commentators as a lowbrow diversion for the working classes. The film industry was under constant pressure from censors, critics and reformers to improve its product and make it more morally and pedagogically suitable for children. Although Hollywood cinema was marketed and received as ‘family entertainment’ as early as the 1910s because of its near-universal reach, for many years producers resisted calls to make movies ‘suitable’ for everyone, fearing that such a move would alienate the existing audience base. The turning point was the introduction of sound in 1929, after which domestic audiences surged, responding not only to the novelty value but also the greater creative possibilities of ‘talkies’. Although the integration of sound highlighted the commercial potential of attracting a more wholesome, respectable mass audience than Hollywood had previously commanded, family movies did not become a coherent, industry-wide production trend until the success of *Little Women* (George Cukor), released in late 1933. There were three important factors in this emergence, none of which, in isolation, would have proven decisive, but which collectively created the necessary industrial and cultural conditions for family films. The first was the Production Code, a restrictive piece of self-censorship which saw a large increase in the amount of Hollywood films deemed morally *suitable* for everyone, especially children. The second were a series of educational reforms initiated during the late-1920s and early-1930s, which saw ‘film appreciation’ adopted by thousands of schools nationwide, creating a sudden demand for family-suitable

productions with pedagogical value. The third was a more general embrace of ‘middlebrow’ values in America during the 1920s and 1930s, which worked against the proliferation of explicitly adult-orientated movies. In this chapter, I will examine the social and economic factors that initially prevented and finally stimulated the production of Hollywood family movies, and analyse the various movie cycles resulting from this drive during the 1930s.

Hollywood and the family audience before sound

The desire to attract ‘family audiences’ – a symbol of respectability, profitability and mass cultural acceptance – had gripped North American producers and exhibitors since Hollywood’s emergence as a cultural institution in the early years of the twentieth century.¹ However, the beginnings of the Hollywood family film, as it understood today, really began in the 1910s, when Hollywood’s cultural and corporate identities were becoming firmly established. In 1915, an American Supreme Court ruling found that movies were not protected by the First Amendment – a section of the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights guaranteeing freedom of speech, particularly in relation to the commercial press. The ruling was a landmark, because it meant that Hollywood had no legal protection on the grounds of artistry, leaving its films vulnerable to state, local and national censorship legislation. At the same time, the Supreme Court ruling institutionalised the development of movie-going in the U.S. from a ‘poor man’s art’ and

¹ See Lee Grieveson, ‘A Kind of Recreative School for the Whole Family’: Making Cinema Respectable, 1907-09’, *Screen* 42, no. 1, 2001, pp. 64-76; also Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, pp. 29-32; Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 159; and Leroy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of Popular Culture Since 1830*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006, p. 188.

'salvation of democracy' into an increasingly regulated mainstream 'family entertainment'.² As such, it shaped the movies' relationship with child and adult audiences for the remainder of the studio era. With full creative autonomy removed, Hollywood cinema became a site of negotiation between moral and political organisations and censorship boards all too aware of the increasing socio-cultural significance of the medium, and determined to curb its potential for misuse. The 1915 ruling derived from a commonly articulated fear that

this powerful new medium, if misused by unscrupulous, commercially minded men, possessed a "capacity for evil" against which every community should be given a right to legitimately shield itself.³

Some observers were equally alarmed by the film industry's rate of expansion. The industry grew rapidly from modest beginnings. By June 1915, the *New York Times* reported that:

In practically fifteen years the motion picture industry has grown to occupy the position of fifth in size in the world of commerce today. Some \$37,000,000 was spent in less than the entire year of 1914 for the manufacture of films alone, and it has been estimated that an average of 10,000,000 people attend the motion picture theatre daily.⁴

Hollywood, as Gary R. Edgerton notes, 'forged the beginnings of an identity between 1896 and 1912'.⁵ U.S. domestic exhibition, in its crudest form, began in April 1896, when Thomas Edison sponsored the first public unveiling of the movies at a prominent New York vaudeville theatre.⁶ However, it was the emergence of the Nickelodeon

² Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1976, p. 121.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 'Children's Films for Children', *The New York Times*, Sunday June 20th, 1915, p. x5.

⁵ Gary R. Edgerton, *American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry's Market Structure 1963-1980*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983, p. 128.

⁶ Ibid.

theatre between 1905 and 1912 that proved pivotal to Hollywood's mass cultural acceptance.⁷ Edgerton suggests that

by 1905, the age of the Nickelodeon had arrived as a number of storefront theatres nationwide exceeded one-thousand for the first time. This figure would multiply more than ten times by 1913, as movies were now big business complete with antitrust litigations, numerous state and municipal censorship laws, and the beginnings of multi-reel story-telling.⁸

While Edgerton suggests that 'the American movie business could outline its success as [having] cornered an urban, working-class clientele', it was the seduction of the U.S. middle-classes, as Merritt argues, that elevated Hollywood cinema beyond this socially disreputable milieu.⁹

Equally significant was Hollywood's successful expansion into the world market. The beginnings of Hollywood's near-hegemony can be traced to 1907, with the formation of the Movie Picture Patents Company (MPPC). The MPPC restricted the free entry of foreign production companies into the U.S. domestic market, and served to consolidate the power bases of the more powerful domestic firms.¹⁰ Hollywood began to accelerate into foreign markets, but did not achieve international domination until after the onset of the Great War in 1914. Hitherto, the main film producing country had been France, which had also seized a larger stake in the global marketplace.¹¹ At this point, London was the centre for world trade and finance, largely because of Britain's impressive naval capacity, which easily allowed international trade of all sorts of commodities, including

⁷ Russell Merritt, 'The Nickelodeon Theatre, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies', *Exhibition, The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark, London and New York: Routledge, 2002 (pp.21-29) p. 22.

⁸ Edgerton, *American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry's Market Structure 1963-1980*, p. 129.

⁹ Edgerton, *American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry's Market Structure 1963-1980*, p. 129; Merritt, 'The Nickelodeon Theatre, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies'.

¹⁰ Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, London: British Film Institute, 1985, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

films. However, the war dramatically changed the balance of power. While America remained neutral and continued expanding its production and distribution outlets, the previously-dominant European film industries were economically shattered as a result of the war effort.¹² As European cinemas suffered irreversible declines, Hollywood continued to make gains in Latin America, Asia and Africa, plugging the European production shortfall.¹³ The U.S. economy profited considerably from the war, as the government allowed private banks to loan money to Allied countries to finance the war effort; this accelerated America's transition to a creditor nation, and shortly after the war ended, New York replaced London as the centre for world finance.¹⁴ This greatly facilitated foreign trading and the push of American film producers into new markets. Hollywood was also assisted by the active support of the U.S. government during the latter part of the war in taking educational and commercial films into new world markets.¹⁵ By the 1920s, despite several Western European countries initiating trade restrictions on U.S. films in the hope of sustaining the local industry, only the Soviet Union, Germany and Japan resisted Hollywood's hegemony with any degree of success, with its share of all feature films in world distribution reaching 80 per cent by 1930.¹⁶

Until about 1950, though, many Hollywood films were profitable solely from domestic revenues, a fact that attests to the immense size and power of the U.S. film-going public. As a result, foreign audience tastes rarely determined Hollywood production policy (although, as Ruth Vasey has shown, a great many concessions were

¹² Douglas Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 45-46.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, pp. 61-63.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 93-94.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 132.

made to keep lucrative foreign markets on side), and during the 1920s, it was American middle-class reformers who exercised the greatest influence over the content of commercial cinema.¹⁷ During the mid-1910s, civil pressure upon the film industry to reform was generally low-level and localised, and while most agreed that cinema was ‘family entertainment’, producers came under little real pressure to make this credo a reality by eliminating ‘adult’ content from their films.¹⁸ Because of this relative lack of influence, socially-minded civic leaders were forced to focus their efforts on making the movie *experience* more suitable for young audiences by organising children’s matinees. Initially, there was little official support for the matinee program. Theatre managers were concerned with the possibility of losing money, and without the sponsorship of bodies such as PTAs, local Boards of Education and women’s clubs, matinees would probably never have taken place.¹⁹ Organisers were highly selective about the kinds of films children should be allowed to see. In 1915, Helen Duey, then editor of *The Woman’s Home Companion*, conducted a ‘thorough investigation’ of movies under wide release and found only ‘between 150 and 200 photoplays which are suitable and adaptable to the child’s mind from entertainment, educational, and moral standpoints’.²⁰ Nevertheless, the persistency of these organisers ensured that, by 1913, ‘children’s matinees were a visible component of urban culture’ and ‘by 1915, there were regular matinees in Boston, Louisville, New Orleans, Grand Rapids, New Rochelle, and probably many other major

¹⁷ Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

¹⁸ Jane Stannard Johnson, ‘Moving Pictures for the Children’, *The New York Times*, Sunday November 18th, 1917, p. x6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ ‘Children’s Films for Children’, *The New York Times*, Sunday June 20th, 1915, p. x5.

cities in the country'.²¹ Content differed from region to region, but so-called 'educational films' were a vital component. Most educational films were adapted from commercially-released movies, while some were made-to-order.²² In 1915, *The New York Times* reported that educators in Boston had 'conceived the idea of establishing a children's theatre for educational films only', and that the New York-based United Film Service would cater to the increased demand in this area.²³ Generally, however, such enterprises were unprofitable, and educational film production descended into 'a sloppy, semi-amateur industry', unpopular with children.²⁴

During the mid-to-late 1910s, Hollywood expanded beyond 'freewheeling competition' into an organised industry with a united front.²⁵ From 1909, an independent, New York-based organisation called the National Board of Review 'reviewed' films on behalf of the industry, suggesting possible changes to those which contained questionable material.²⁶ The Board had no legal powers to impose changes, but its role was welcomed by critics as a check upon dubious movie content.²⁷ However, the Board was staffed largely by volunteers and required a 'fee' for overheads, and this financial link, however innocent, was enough to weaken its public credibility.²⁸ The Board's position as an effective deterrent against civil and state opposition was also compromised by its opposition to censorship, and its liberal belief that raising the overall

²¹ Richard deCordova, 'Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, The Hays Code and Saturday Matinees', *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory A. Waller, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002 (pp. 159-169), pp. 163-164.

²² Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 148.

²³ 'Children's Films for Children', *The New York Times*, Sunday June 20th, 1915, p. x5.

²⁴ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 148; Alice Miller Mitchell, *Children and Movies*, Chicago and Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1929, pp. 104-115.

²⁵ Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, London: British Film Institute, 2005, p. 1.

²⁶ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, pp. 126-127.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

standard of films, rather than imposing critical limitations, was a more worthwhile occupation.²⁹ In 1914, the Board established the National Committee for Better Films, which promoted a ‘high[er] type’ of film, both literary and suitable for families.³⁰ Although it foreshadowed the eventual industry-wide embrace of family films in the early-1930s, and whilst its activities were ‘ambitious... [and] well-organised’, the ‘Better Films’ movement was well ahead of its time.³¹ The 1915 Supreme Court ruling appeared to signal the failure of the Board of Review as an effective safeguard against external intervention. Consequently, the film industry worked to establish its own trade organisation to represent its interests effectively. The first attempt was the short-lived Motion Picture Board of Trade.³² This was succeeded in 1916 by the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), whose primary function was to relieve external pressure by gaining a constitutional amendment to allow for freedom from censorship.³³ A Federal Motion Picture Commission was first discussed in Congress in 1914, and was again proposed in 1916, 1926 and 1934, although on each occasion the proposal was ultimately set aside.³⁴ According to Jowett, the NAMPI was not particularly successful as an anti-censorship lobby.³⁵ In response, in 1921, NAMPI President William A. Brady attempted to appease critics by overseeing the establishment of an early code of production, ‘The Thirteen Points or Standards’, but this was inhibited by the lack of enforcement machinery.³⁶

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915-1928*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1990, p. 208.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 156.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, p. 23.

³⁵ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 156.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 157.

Faced with the certainty of increasingly repressive censorship legislation, the industry turned to Postmaster General Will H. Hays as the man to 'clean up Hollywood'. Hays became the first president of a new trade organisation formed in March 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Jowett argues that the formation of this organisation constituted 'a last-gasp effort by the motion picture industry to save itself from government regulation', and as such, Hays's appointment received much criticism in the press.³⁷ The first major test of his political skills was a public referendum on the proposal of state censorship for motion pictures in Massachusetts. This constituted something of a turning point. The public voted overwhelmingly against the proposal, and 'no major state censorship laws were enacted after that date'.³⁸ Hays said many times publicly that the primary role of the MPPDA was to effect higher standards in two ways: 'improving the quality of supply' by encouraging member companies to produce movies of a higher artistic standard, and 'improving the quality of demand' by 'educating' the public and working with interested civil organisations. However, these twin objectives were not self-supporting; although Hays continued to promote 'better films' from moral and artistic standards, and introduced two self-regulatory codes of production aimed at restricting salacious content, neither were mandatory, and so-called 'sex films' proliferated during the late-1920s.³⁹ This, in turn, led to resentment from reformers and campaigners, who failed to see a discernable moral and artistic uplift. Hays repeatedly resisted trying to impose the cooperation of producers in this endeavour; his method, rather, 'was a flower of slow

³⁷ Ibid, p. 166.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 167.

³⁹ Douglas W. Churchill, 'Hollywood Heeds the Thunder: Bewildered by the Widespread Crusade for Cleaner Pictures, the Film Centre Now Listens to Main Street and, Contrite as Never Before, Accepts the Verdict of its New Censor', *The New York Times*, Sunday July 22nd, 1934, p. SM1.

growth [...] I did my best to encourage the flower, but any forcing would have killed it. You can't tell creators how to create'.⁴⁰

Most of the 1920s were marked by an ongoing game of cat and mouse between the industry and the reformers who were leading the campaign for moral, educational and artistic uplift. The MPPDA was not only a regulatory body, but also a public-relations department for the industry, designed to placate the fiercest critics, but doing little to disrupt the status quo. In 1922, Hays formed a Public Relations Committee comprising many of the most prestigious American social organisations, such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae and the YMCA.⁴¹ Together, these organisations formed a cultural elite that exercised an influence far outweighing their true levels of representation. However, very few of the Committee's activities had much bearing on film content. Disillusioned with their 'inconsequential work' and the apparent lack of progress, various organisations broke rank and the Committee was finally dissolved.⁴² Undeterred, Hays formed a Department of Public Relations within the MPPDA in March 1925.⁴³ Headed by Hays's old friend Jason Joy, the Public Relations Department was far more visible than the behind-closed-doors activities of the Committee, and did a good job of managing dissenting voices. It invited participation from 'every organisation of every description in either this country or any other country

⁴⁰ Will H. Hays, *The Memoirs of Will H. Hays*, New York: Doubleday, p. 377.

⁴¹ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, pp. 173-174.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

which is interested in public betterment' – although, inevitably, the more commercially valuable voices were the most influential.⁴⁴

The industry's reluctance to reform stemmed not only from the belief that mature viewers would abandon the cinema if 'adult' movies were withdrawn, but a suspicion that child-suitable films would lower artistic standards. As deCordova notes:

Many writers and reformers called for the censorship of all films that included scenes deemed harmful to children. The National Board of Censorship, and later the Hays Office, countered this argument by claiming that such a measure would reduce all adult entertainment to the level of "childish intelligence". The prospect of child-like adults was perhaps as threatening as that of adult-like children.⁴⁵

Films made prior to the early-1930s were produced and received under a curious and largely unacknowledged paradox: most films were made for adults, yet were somehow considered 'family entertainment'. This state of affairs was widely accepted, although The National Board of Review, and its subsidiary organisation The National Juvenile Motion Picture League, persistently pointed to the adult-orientated nature of Hollywood's films. The Board argued that 'there must [...] be recognition of the fact that *most film dramas are made for the consumption of adults*' (my emphasis).⁴⁶ In 1920, *The New York Times* quoted from an open letter to the Hollywood studios from the President of the League, Adele F. Woodard, appealing for more family films:

Some pictures are made, [Woodard's letter] says, "but their producers are not alert to the necessity of wholesomeness in every detail. They inject all sorts of civil suggestion, attempting to smother out the evil effect of these details with a moral tacked on at the end or a severe spanking for the offender". It adds that "another serious mistake is the inane picture, which children call 'goody-good' and it insists that "clever, wholesome pictures artistically produced are in demand and will succeed".⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, p. 38.

⁴⁵ deCordova, 'Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, The Hays Code and Saturday Matinees', p. 163.

⁴⁶ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ 'Films for Children', *The New York Times*, Sunday February 1st, 1920, p. xxx3.

Woodard went on to suggest texts ideally suited for adaptation, such as ‘Peter Pan’, ‘The Ginger Bread Boy’ and ‘Red Riding Hood’.⁴⁸ For 1920s film producers achieving hits with sex films, the prospect of turning towards such saccharine fare must have appeared unappetising. A recurring mantra in 1920s movie discourse was that movies ought to be ‘passionate but pure’; this was, according to *The New York Times*, how the American public wanted its entertainment.⁴⁹ There was an apparent cultural appetite for salaciousness which, although firmly regulated and restricted, was clearly contrary to the long-standing association of Hollywood filmmaking as ‘family entertainment’. Indeed, in 1927, the MPPDA estimated that 80 per cent of its total business was subject to censorship, both domestic and international.⁵⁰ The industry would continue to supply such films as long as they were supported by the movie-going public, and troublesome reformers could be placated.

Children themselves remained unconcerned by these debates. They cared little whether the movies they flocked to see were ‘suitable’ for their enjoyment. In fact, many children doubtlessly preferred watching films which did not condescend to their supposed intellectual and emotional levels. One of the most valuable documents exploring children’s relationship with cinema during this period is Alice Miller Mitchell’s *Children and Movies*, published in 1929. Based upon the responses of over 10,000 Chicago children to a series of questionnaires exploring their movie habits, the study reveals much about the disparity between what children wanted in their movies, and what reformers

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ ‘Humanizing the Movies’, *The New York Times*, Wednesday January 18th, 1922, p. 13; Lary May, *Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 205.

⁵⁰ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, p. 64.

wanted *for* them. Although the author was very much a moderate voice in the debate and readily celebrated movies for their ‘universal popularity’, she still lamented the fact that

so far motion pictures for juveniles are not being produced. Of course there are some films that are quite appropriate for children, but in the sense that books are being written and published primarily for the juvenile public movies are not.⁵¹

Despite such concerns, children often attending the movies independently of adult supervision, and enjoyed the experience irrespective of genre. Admittedly, certain films were more popular with children, notably ‘western, adventure, comedy, and mystery [...] with the boys, and romance, comedy, and western [...] with the girls’.⁵² Action-adventure material was well attuned to the tastes of children, even if it fell foul of the strict moral prescriptions of the reformers. Nevertheless, it is noted that ‘almost all children like movies of all types [...] and they will go to see any kind of a movie rather than to see none at all’.⁵³ Although it must be remembered that movie appeal was far less differentiated during the silent era, the apparent indiscriminateness of younger audiences is a major reason why family-orientated material was so scarce in the 1920s. Producers wanted mass audiences, but with films made for adults.

Having failed in their repeated attempts to stimulate production of family films, the Board of Review tried to establish nationwide exhibition programs such as ‘family nights’ and children’s matinees.⁵⁴ The Board did not envisage that such programs would be financially self-sufficient; they suggested – rather optimistically – that local communities could subsidise exhibitors to cover expenses.⁵⁵ As such, these matinees were viewed as a public service, rather than a business. The Board maintained that a

⁵¹ Miller Mitchell, *Children and Movies*, pp. 16, 36-37.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁴ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

‘well-considered system of education of parents to develop a public sentiment both for finer family pictures and for selected pictures for young people must be carried on’.⁵⁶

Although supposedly supported by the industry, the initiative did not catch on with the general public.⁵⁷ Between 1925 and 1926, however, the MPPDA put its considerable weight behind a nationwide program of children’s matinees. Launched by the MPPDA’s Committee for Public Relations, the venture was motivated not only by PR, but also by profit. deCordova outlines its construction:

During 1924 and 1925, the committee completed a survey of the films in the vaults of the MPPDA’s member companies. They identified those films that were suitable for children to view and constructed a series of 36 programs for special matinees. By the fall of 1925, 52 programs were available to any organisation or theatre – a full year’s supply of movies for weekly matinees. Each program consisted of a feature film, a two-reel comedy, and what was referred to as a semi-educational short, usually a scenic or industrial film.⁵⁸

Like the earlier, locally-run matinee programs of the 1910s, these films were substantially cut and sometimes re-titled ‘to make them appropriate for a child’s psychological needs’.⁵⁹ In part, these cuts were designed to truncate the films in accordance with the shorter attention span of children. By late-1925, over 30 ‘of the largest cities in the country began to exhibit the MPPDA-sponsored weekly matinees’, with plans for expansion in small localities.⁶⁰ The major obstacle, however, was the lack of sufficient children’s films to support the program, and organisers were forced to rely on films ‘that had long since had their first run...[and] were usually in poor condition’.⁶¹ This lack of suitable program material perhaps explains why the project was abandoned only one year

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ deCordova, ‘Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, The Hays Code and Saturday Matinees’, pp. 165-166.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

into a projected three-year run.⁶² Nevertheless, these industry-approved matinees temporarily appeased critics. The plan also served to reassert ‘traditional distinctions between the child and adult’ in a period where a ‘levelling’ of movie content suitability was being widely and vociferously mooted.⁶³

Throughout the studio era, the onus was very much on exhibitors to attract audiences. The exhibition sector was the crux of the movie business, and as Balio suggests, ‘Motion Picture Production was but one of the many activities of the majors, and not necessarily the most important’.⁶⁴ One of the big exhibition chains, Paramount Publix, employed a telling slogan: ‘You don’t need to know what’s playing at a Publix house. It’s bound to be the best show in town’.⁶⁵ When audiences declined during the Great Depression, theatre owners employed a range of incentives for audiences, such as concession stands, double-feature programs and ‘bank night’.⁶⁶ In other words, motion pictures were just one element in a wider program of attractions comprising a ‘night at the movies’.⁶⁷ The reason for this unequal emphasis on exhibitors rather than producers to attract audiences was that almost all films were purportedly suitable and appealing for everyone. Hays once remarked:

Not only the cornerstone but the foundation of the success of the American motion picture enterprise may be summed up in the phrase, "one program for one audience." Here pictures are not rated for showing to children or adults, theatres are not graded and films are not made for different classifications of audiences.⁶⁸

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, pp. 166-167.

⁶⁴ Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939*, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, p. 58.

⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 77-79.

⁶⁷ Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Hays, Will H., *The Motion Picture in a World at War: Twentieth Anniversary Report to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Inc.*, New York: MPPDA, March 1942, p. 40.

By fostering this misleading argument, the MPPDA was attempting to shift the pressure to reform cinema from producers to the community organisations who were attempting to ‘improve the quality of demand’ by organising children’s matinees and family nights.

Although the creative limitations of silent cinema undeniably imposed a high degree of product standardisation, the theatrical experience itself was far more differentiated. There were highly stratified audience divisions based on ethnicity, social class and theatre location, which was reflected in the cost of tickets, the prestige of the films and the overall quality of the exhibition experience.⁶⁹ The adult middle-classes were lured to theatres through strategies designed to make the exhibition experience as prestigious and seductive as possible, and from 1913 onwards, the big metropolitan studio-owned theatre chains, which dominated the theatrical market, began opening luxurious ‘picture palaces’.⁷⁰ These theatres constituted a gilded invitation to the bourgeoisie to embrace motion pictures on a large scale. As Edgerton argues:

These movie palaces were structures that were substantially more than just theatres. In a very real sense, these dream palaces were both part of the show and indices of a more general aspiration for achieving the “good life” that millions of Americans paid money week after week to share collectively.⁷¹

A major component of the ‘picture palaces’ was their architectural splendour and size, ‘almost as if the dream spilled off the screen and embellished the walls, the statues, the domed ceilings and the army of attendants’.⁷²

Conditions for workers and blacks were less salubrious. The exclusion of blacks (and other ethnic minorities) from many theatres led to the proliferation of ‘Negro houses’, which offered lower ticket prices to reflect the second-class status of the

⁶⁹ Edgar Dale, *Children’s Attendance at Motion Pictures*, New York: Macmillan, 1935.

⁷⁰ Edgerton, *American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry’s Market Structure 1963-1980*, p. 130.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, p. 131.

clientele.⁷³ Less wealthy patrons usually attended ‘nabes’ – common parlance for cheap neighbourhood theatres. Neither the Negro houses nor nabes could command the prestige quality of films offered in the more expensive houses. Studio distribution strategy ensured that the biggest movies were showcased in the best theatres. Will Hays publicly professed his pride at the social and ethnic inclusiveness of the motion picture, but exhibition in the pre-sound era was designed around fragmentary spectatorship.⁷⁴ The nabes relied heavily on B movies and repeat-releases. It was in such houses that the highest concentrations of child viewers – as much as 41.7 per cent of the audience – were to be found.⁷⁵ Stratification in domestic exhibition was based on several social and economic variables, including location, age, race and social class. Middle-class white adults were comfortably seated at the head of the pecking order.

Such audience fragmentation partially explains the general absence of family films in the 1920s. Despite industry propaganda to the contrary, Hollywood did not command a unified audience, without which a universalised type of film is worthless. In any event, with a largely standardised product, predominantly tailored towards adults but widely consumed by children, identifying where family films begin and end is problematic. Many Mary Pickford (1892-1979) vehicles are among the more identifiable, notably *Cinderella* (James Kirkwood, 1914), *The Little Princess* (Marshall Neilan, 1917), *Pollyanna* (Paul Powell, 1920) and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (Alfred E. Green and Jack Pickford, 1921). We know little about the shared viewing habits of

⁷³ Dale, *Children's Attendance at Motion Pictures*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ Quoted in P. S. Harrison, ‘The Producers’ New Code of Ethics’, *Harrison's Reports*, Saturday April 5, 1930, Vol. XII, No. 14.

⁷⁵ Dale, *Children's Attendance at Motion Pictures*, p. 61.

families from this period, but contemporary reviews, such as that of *Pollyanna*, suggest that these films possessed a dual appeal:

This sort of thing, of course, is certain to delight children, but will adults, therefore, be bored or, at most, mildly amused by it? Some, perhaps; but they didn't seem to be present yesterday afternoon. Whether they were ashamed of it or not, they gave every sign of enjoying the picture as much as any little tot in the house. They laughed, and in the sentimental places – they blew their noses. Today they may say that “Pollyanna” is too silly and saccharin, but they couldn't tell it so to its face yesterday afternoon.⁷⁶

The slapstick comedies of, say, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy and, particularly, Charlie Chaplin, were also seen as possessing ‘universal’ qualities. Hays, however, tried to downplay the economic importance of children, claiming – inaccurately – in 1927 that ‘only 8 per cent’ of U.S. audiences were ‘children’ (his definition of ‘children’ is unknown).⁷⁷ Based on an audience study conducted in 1929, sociologist Edgar Dale estimated that children and teenagers under the age of 21 actually comprised over one-third of U.S. movie audiences.⁷⁸

Demand for thrills ‘n spills-type products created a virtual sub-industry of series and serials tailored to the child audience, generally short films manufactured by independent producers. In 1922, the Chicago Board of Education determined to find a new breed of educative movie to replace ‘the wild West and blood and thunder movies in the affections of the young folks’ and were disappointed when their educational test films were poorly received.⁷⁹ One of the most producers of children’s entertainment was Hal Roach, whose *Our Gang* series produced 221 shorts between 1922 and 1944.⁸⁰ The series used mainly child actors, featuring then-groundbreaking interaction between black

⁷⁶ ‘The Screen’, *The New York Times*, January 19th, 1920, p. 16.

⁷⁷ Dale, *Children’s Attendance at Motion Pictures*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁷⁹ ‘Test Movies on Children’, *The New York Times*, Sunday March 19th, 1922, p. 14.

⁸⁰ Leonard Maltin and Richard W. Bann, *Our Gang: The Life and Times of The Little Rascals*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc, 1979, p. 13.

and white children on level terms. Like the casting, the plots were also often subversive in that the amorality of the children generally prevailed over the authoritarianism of the adult characters. Leonard Maltin and Richard Bann felt that the series

stand[s] for all the best of the collective American boyhood. From a kid's point of view. As timeless as childhood itself, *Our Gang* represents the kind of adventures kids yearn for, and the ones grownups wish they *could* have had.⁸¹

Although the most famous, *Our Gang* was not the first children's series. Sidney Franklin's *Sunshine Kiddies* started out in 1915, whilst Larry Darmour's famous Mickey Rooney-starred *Mickey McGuire* comedies ran parallel with *Our Gang*.⁸²

Serials were similarly popular. The format was custom-made for the pre-sound era because of its heavy emphasis on action over dialogue. Initially, as Raymond William Stedman suggests, serials were consumed by children and adults alike, at a time when the composition of the movie audience was more weighted towards ethnic minorities and the working class.⁸³ As movies became lengthier and more sophisticated and audiences changed, children became the main consumers.⁸⁴ Serials were often comic-book adaptations, colourful in tone (if not, because of their cheapness, in appearance), with cliff-hangers designed to draw back young viewers week after week. *New York Times* writer Andre Sennwald looked back fondly on the format as 'the most sheerly [sic] exciting movies [...] which I recall for their phenomenal ability to conclude each week's instalment on a note of overpowering suspense'.⁸⁵ Because of the predominance of nabes and second-run theatres, and the constant demand from young

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 15-16.

⁸³ Raymond William Stedman, *The Serials: Suspense and Drama by Instalment*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971, p. 51.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Andre Sennwald, 'Children and the Cinema: A Brief Glance at the Nursery and its Perplexing Relation to the Screen', *The New York Times*, Sunday December 23rd, 1934, p. x5.

audiences throughout the 1920s and 1930s, this was perhaps the only period in which Hollywood produced ‘children’s films’ on a broad scale.

The emergence of the family film

Writing many years later in his memoirs, Hays looked back on the year 1926 with fondness, as a time when

the American motion picture industry [was] happily absorbed in its world mission of entertainment and mass education. Its films, though silent, were full of action, humour, appeal. Then came the world-shaking discovery: motion pictures could also speak’.⁸⁶

The transition to sound, which occurred on a wide scale in the U.S. in 1929, was a watermark not only in the broader history of Hollywood cinema, but also in the development of specialised family films. Had movies remained silent, Hollywood would not have come under such intense pressure to reform. As it was, the MPPDA was cognizant that the transition to sound would upset Hollywood’s uneasy alliance with movie reformers, and this led Hays to organise and address a National Conference on Motion Pictures, which was held in New York in September 1929. The forum was attended by dozens of religious, educational and community organisations from around the country. A similar conference had taken place shortly after the MPPDA’s formation in 1922. In both instances, the industry’s ‘party line’ was that Hollywood was essentially a benevolent and respectable cultural institution, and although the odd undesirable movie slipped through the net, progress was continually being made towards universal audience suitability. Hays argued that the industry had largely succeeded in ‘improving the quality of supply’, and that it was up to community workers to ‘improve the quality of demand’.

⁸⁶ Hays, *The Memoirs of Will H. Hays*, p. 389.

To this end, one of the most significant outcomes of the conference was the MPPDA's sponsoring and distribution of *The Neighbourhood and Its Motion Pictures: A Manual for the Community Worker Interested in the Best Motion Pictures for the Family*, a handbook with contributions from, amongst others, the World Federation of Education Associates, The General Federation of Women's Clubs, The International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, and several Better Films committees under the auspices of the National Board of Review. Arguing that 'the training of our people for wholesome recreation and intellectually profitable entertainment is a matter of tremendous importance', the publication outlined how community organisations and individuals can successfully solicit the cooperation of local exhibitors for the establishment of children's matinees and 'family nights'.⁸⁷ Readers were advised to give feedback to exhibitors with such comments as 'I liked the picture today. It is the sort my family approves', and to pass lists of approved films to theatre managers.⁸⁸ Hays told the MPPDA in 1932 that 'inviting the public into consultative partnership' in this way solved 'the ever present dilemma of how to maintain adequate adult entertainment and at the same time give due weight and response to the entertainment needs of the child'.⁸⁹

However, the days in which the MPPDA could appease critics through good public relations in the face of blatantly salacious movies were over. Talkies were seen as far more potentially damaging than silent films, and their introduction caused considerable unrest. Pre-emptively, the MPPDA introduced a more rigorous Production

⁸⁷ *The Neighbourhood and Its Motion Pictures: A Manual for the Community Worker Interested in the Best Motion Pictures for the Family*, New York: MPPDA, 1930, p. 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 33.

⁸⁹ Will H. Hays, *The President's Report to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc.*, New York: MPPDA, 1932, p. 13.

Code in April 1930, written by two prominent Catholics, designed to regulate talkies and placate potential enemies. In a speech announcing the Code, Hays affirmed that:

The Motion Picture, as developed for the primary purposes of the theatre, is a universal system of entertainment. Its appeal has broken through all barriers of class distinction. It is patronised by the poor man, the rich man, the old and the young. It is a messenger of democracy, and the motion picture industry is sensible of the great public responsibility.⁹⁰

Whilst the Code was considerably more restrictive than previous attempts at self-regulation, contemporary reaction was sceptical. As trade writer P. S. Harrison noted, ‘some of the papers have attacked the producers and Mr Hays; some have ridiculed them. But not one of the worthwhile papers has taken them seriously’.⁹¹ Many guessed the truth: that the Code was brought in not to *reform* the industry, but rather to *protect* it from pressures exerted by ‘women’s clubs’ and ‘ministers’, who possessed

the power in many communities to hurt the motion picture business. It is this fact, rather than any love of virtue for its own sake, which has inspired [Hays] to assemble in one code all the known counsels of perfection.⁹²

Without any real mechanism of enforcement, this voluntary Code paled into insignificance against the promise of the box office. Regulation was ‘unsystematic, and [...] negotiation still occurred case by case [...] Evading the Code and detecting the run-around became a game for studios and viewers “in the know”’.⁹³

Talkies were, nonetheless, a remarkable novelty, and opened up a whole new spectrum of audiences. There were concerns that spoken dialogue may limit Hollywood movies – which had previously spoken a ‘universal language’ – to English-speaking territories, but after experiments with making costly foreign-language versions of the

⁹⁰ P. S. Harrison. ‘The Producers’ New Code of Ethics’.

⁹¹ P. S. Harrison, ‘The Effects of the Code on the Minds of the American Public’, *Harrison’s Reports*, Saturday April 12th, 1930, Vol. XII, No. 15.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926-1931*, New York: Scribners, 1997, p. 476.

biggest productions (usually in French, German, Spanish and Italian), by 1931 the language problem had largely been solved through a mixture of subtitling and dubbing.⁹⁴ However, a serious economic crisis was looming on the horizon. Until 1931, Hollywood had remained largely insulated from the effects of the Great Depression, because of its centrality to the North American way of life. The first signs of economic downturn were attributed by some to the artistic restrictions of the Production Code, but by the following year, theatre attendances were down massively, and the scale of the losses had bankrupted several of the major studios, which were saved only through Wall Street investment.⁹⁵ Desperate for films that would make a healthy profit, producers turned to populist and often salacious genres, such as trial films, musicals, society dramas, social realism, and gangster films.⁹⁶ In September 1932, Joy and Hays found that 24 out of 111 films in production dealt with ‘illicit sexual relations’.⁹⁷ Producers believed that they ‘had to compete to supply the demand’, whilst the reformers, who were outraged by such blatant Code transgressions, were adamant that strict moral standards were enforced.⁹⁸ The two parties were on a collision course.

Very few family films were released during this period; they were not seen as good business. In July 1931, it was reported that Hollywood would be releasing more ‘family’ movies during the following season as part of the supposed process of ‘housecleaning’, but little came of this.⁹⁹ Universal hoped that *Destry Rides Again* (Benjamin Stoloff, 1932) – the first talking picture to feature silent-era cowboy star Tom

⁹⁴ Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, pp. 158, 163; Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, p. 96.

⁹⁵ Hays, *The Memoirs of Will H. Hays*, p. 445; Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise*, pp. 13-16.

⁹⁶ Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931*, p. 539.

⁹⁷ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, pp. 124-125.

⁹⁸ Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931*, p. 478.

⁹⁹ Mollie Merrick, ‘Family’ Films to be Supplied’, *The Los Angeles Times*, July 26th, 1931, p. B22.

Mix – might succeed in attracting children and their parents to the theatres, while Mary Pickford claimed that the public was tired of sex and gangster films, and spoke of her desire to star in a Walt Disney-produced animated version of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan*.¹⁰⁰ However, Paramount was the only studio in the immediate aftermath of the transition to sound which made a determined movement towards family-orientated feature films. B. P. Schulberg – Paramount’s head of production, and Hays’s old friend and ally – was apparently one of the few senior Hollywood executives who believed that ‘the public wanted family entertainment with real characters and down-to-earth themes’, and between 1930 and 1933, under his direction, Paramount released *Tom Sawyer* (John Cromwell, 1930), *Skippy* (Norman Taurog, 1931) – which won an Academy Award for Best Director, and was also nominated for Best Picture – *Huckleberry Finn* (Taurog, 1931), *Sooky* (Taurog, 1931), and a big-budget adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1933).¹⁰¹ The critical and commercial failure of *Alice* resulted in family movies falling out of favour at Paramount for the remainder of the decade.

Movie reformers were given ammunition by the Payne Fund Studies, or, more precisely, by the publication of Henry Forman’s book *Our Movie Made Children* (1933), a popularisation of the studies, which became an influential best-seller.¹⁰² While the publication may not have accurately reflected public feeling towards adult-orientated movies, its populist message acted as a call-to-arms for the U.S. media, intensifying the hostile press attention Hollywood was already receiving. The Catholic Legion of

¹⁰⁰ Chapin Hall, ‘Hope Placed in Cowboy Films to Attract Children to Theatres’, *The New York Times*, February 21st, 1932, p. X4; ‘Mary Pickford Back From Europe; Proposes to Appear in “Alice in Wonderland”’, Animated by Walt Disney’, *The New York Times*, March 31st, 1933.

¹⁰¹ Hays, *The Memoirs of Will Hays*, p. 444.

¹⁰² A fuller examination of these points can be found in Garth S. Jowett et al, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Decency, the most powerful and vociferous voice in the battle for movie reform, was formed the same year. Brought into existence for the express purpose of reforming commercial cinema, the industry initially assumed that the Legion ‘was just another attempt by a religious group to bring about “moral reform” of the movies, and would eventually fail as the others had done’.¹⁰³ Matters reached a head in early 1934, when a number of civil and religious organisations intensified their attack on the film industry. The Catholic Church threatened a nationwide boycott of the cinema from its 20 million members unless effective self-regulation was established, with Jewish and Protestant leaders voicing their support for the campaign.¹⁰⁴ Although some executives questioned public support for the so-called ‘Pollyanna Pictures’ regulation apparently portended, the industry was forced to bow to overwhelming pressure, and the Studio Relations Committee under Joy was reconstituted in July 1934 as the Production Code Administration (PCA) under Catholic Joseph I. Breen.¹⁰⁵ Breen argued upon his appointment that:

If the screen doesn’t clean itself up [...] three things will happen: theatres will be boycotted, Federal censorship will be instituted, and every State and city with depleted revenues will establish censor boards for the taxes that will result. If we clean up there is little to worry about, but if we don’t we might just as well forget Hollywood.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 253.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory D. Black, ‘Changing Perceptions of the Movies: American Catholics Debate Film Censorship’, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 2001 (pp. 79-90), p. 79; Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, p. 130.

¹⁰⁵ Chapin Hall, ‘Attack on Movies Stuns Hollywood’, *The New York Times*, Sunday July 8th, 1934, p. E1.

¹⁰⁶ Churchill, ‘Hollywood Heeds the Thunder: Bewildered by the Widespread Crusade for Cleaner Pictures, the Film Centre Now Listens to Main Street and, Contrite as Never Before, Accepts the Verdict of its New Censor’.

Breen had the power to force changes to any film falling foul of the Production Code, with a \$25,000 penalty for non-compliance.¹⁰⁷ Thereafter, the Hollywood studios usually ensured that their films met the strict standards demanded by the PCA.

Hollywood's obvious ambivalence towards family films in the 1920s and 1930s reflected the complementary, yet hitherto-irreconcilable, perennial twin aims of the industry, in the words of Ruth Vasey: 'to please all of the people, everywhere, all – or at least most – of the time, and to displease as few people – or as few people who mattered – as possible'.¹⁰⁸ Previously, pleasing as many people as possible (i.e. a mass audience, through populist and often licentious material) had entered into a conflict with the desire not to displease the influential minority (i.e. moral and educational reformers). Now, with the introduction of the Production Code, Hollywood no longer had an obvious mass audience for the cleaned-up fare now being demanded. Its response, as Richard Maltby has argued, was to 'discover a "new" audience who had previously not attended', thereby moving away from the community and religious leaders, children, teachers and clubwomen which had consumed the MPPDA during the 1920s, and effectively 'invent' a respectable, consensus-orientated mass audience – the 'family' audience.¹⁰⁹ The idea of the family audience, and the formulation of an all-inclusive type of popular film, represented a concerted effort on the part of the MPPDA – on behalf of the entire industry – to reconfigure Hollywood's status within the U.S. cultural consciousness.

Although the Production Code (and the pressures which led to its tightening) was a major factor in Hollywood's embrace of family-orientated fare, it was only one of a

¹⁰⁷ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, p. 254.

¹⁰⁸ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood 1918-1939*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Maltby, 'Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of its Audiences', *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 1999, (pp. 23-47), p. 38.

number of catalysts. Also important was the U.S.' embrace of 'middlebrow' culture in the late-1920s and early 1930s, as Joan Shelley Rubin argues:

In the three decades following the First World War, America created an unprecedented range of activities aimed at making literature and other forms of "high" culture available to a wide reading public. Beginning with the Book-of-the-Month club, founded in 1926, book clubs provided subscribers with recently published works chosen by expert judges [...] Colleges and universities, accommodating an expanding student body, augmented their curricula with extension programs in the humanities and other disciplines, some offered on the new medium of radio.¹¹⁰

There were also internal pressures upon producers, mainly from the MPPDA, but also from such influential figures as market researcher George Gallup (whose Audience Research Institute was employed by RKO and Disney during the 1930s and 1940s), who pointed-out that literary adaptations had a built-in audience because of the popularity of the adapted material.¹¹¹ Hays had campaigned for greater production of a more middle-class, universally-suitable product since the mid-1920s. Jowett notes that:

As early as 1924, Hays went out of his way to call attention to the merits of the film *Abraham Lincoln*, which was then playing to small audiences in a first-run theatre on Broadway. The film was ultimately a financial success.¹¹²

Indeed, such was Hays's insistence that Hollywood pursue a more family-orientated agenda that at an MPPDA crisis meeting in March 1933, he informed the studio heads that he would no longer tolerate Code violations, and threatened to *personally* instigate litigation against member companies unless the situation improved.¹¹³

The third major factor for the Hollywood studios' strategic embrace of the family movie was more directly commercial. During the late-1920s and early 1930s, a series of educational reforms were implemented by the National Education Association and the

¹¹⁰ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. xi.

¹¹¹ Susan Ohmer, 'The Science of Pleasure: George Gallup and Audience Research in Hollywood', *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences* eds. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, London: British Film Institute, 1999 (pp. 61-80), p. 71.

¹¹² Jowett 181.

¹¹³ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, pp. 128-129.

National Council of Teachers of English, which introduced new elements to school syllabuses based upon ‘critical appreciation’ of motion pictures.¹¹⁴ Soon after the initiative began in 1928/29 in Newark, New Jersey, educators approached Hollywood executives to solicit the specialised production of child-friendly, educational films, but producers were unresponsive, insisting ‘that the label “educational” would spell “failure” at the box office’.¹¹⁵ The tide changed dramatically in 1933, when, after a successful trial period, representative teachers from 17 states voted in favour of new curriculum units featuring film study, after which educational study of the movies was rolled out nationally.¹¹⁶ By October 1935, this curriculum was allegedly in use in approximately 2,500 schools.¹¹⁷ Although obviously a large-scale initiative, this program formed only part of a wider discourse centring on the use of motion pictures as an educational aid in elementary, senior and higher educational establishments.¹¹⁸ Many of these ‘film appreciation’ initiatives were short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful, but their high visibility kept the wider debate in the public eye.¹¹⁹ Educationalists and producers now found that cooperation was a matter of mutual self-interest. Teachers wanted ‘better films’ for pedagogical, moral and artistic reasons. Producers suddenly had easy access to a vast, unexploited audience group. The result was a dramatic upsurge in productions of

¹¹⁴ William Lewin, ‘Higher Screen Standards for Youth: Filming of Classics Urged by English Teachers’, *The New York Times*, Sunday July 15th, 1934, p. xx4.

¹¹⁵ William Lewin, ‘Movies Bow to Schools: The Film World Launches a New Cycle of Classics Long Favoured by Educators’, *The New York Times*, Sunday September 1st, 1935, p. xx7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Anne Moray, *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry, 1913-1934*, Missouri: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 159.

¹¹⁸ See Edgar Dale et al, *Motion Pictures in Education: A Summary of the Literature*, New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1937.

¹¹⁹ Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007, p. 6.

literary classics easily adaptable for the classroom, which in turn prompted the wider integration of family movies into Hollywood production schedules.

Little Women, released in November of that year, was the breakthrough film. Many of its attributes – the historical setting, the focus on the family, the coming-of-age narrative, the atmosphere of gentility and the particular appeal for women – set a successful template for subsequent family-friendly literary adaptations, and, indeed, for family films throughout the studio era. One of the most important assumptions underpinning the selection of styles and stories for family films was that wives and mothers represented their families. Although various trade papers estimated that females comprised between 60 and 80 per cent of the domestic cinema audience, the telling statistic, as Melvyn Stokes suggests, was that housewives ‘made 80 to 90 per cent of all purchases for family use’.¹²⁰ Rightly or wrongly, then, women were seen as driving the family’s leisure activities. *Little Women*’s emphasis upon family values and unity in a time of social fragmentation – in this case, the American Civil War – neatly parallels social anxieties surrounding the country’s future during the Depression. It was the fourth most successful movie of the decade at the U.S. box office.¹²¹ In March 1934, Hays spoke of his belief that moral and artistic standards were continually improving, and ‘praised the efforts of better-film movements to raise the standards of the industry’. He quantified this belief by noting that, in 1933,

¹²⁰ Melvyn Stokes, ‘Female Audiences of the 1920s and early 1930s’, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 1999 (pp. 42-60), pp. 43-44.

¹²¹ Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003, pp. 356-363. *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937) and *San Francisco* (Woody Van Dyke, 1936) were the top three films at the box office during that decade.

seventy-two pictures were endorsed by previewing groups as suitable for children between the ages of 8 and 12 years, as against the endorsement of fifty-one such pictures for the year 1932.¹²²

These ‘improving’ standards, Hays ventured, could lead to ‘an era of literary films’ – although he was quick to add that ‘intelligent movies [...] need intelligent audiences’ – a coded warning that such films would endure for only so long as they remained profitable.¹²³ Hays did, however, understand their uses as propaganda. The genre was designed to attract mass audiences and rehabilitate the cultural reputation of the movies in one fell swoop. The modern Hollywood family film was born.

Literary adaptations and the family film strategy

Although prestige literary adaptations were becoming prevalent by the time *Little Women* was released in November 1933, the film’s popularity convinced producers of their commercial potential. *Little Women* was, as Tino Balio notes, ‘considered the first picture of the decade based on a literary classic to be turned into an artistic and commercial success’, and he places the literary adaption within the broader cycle of the ‘prestige picture’, which was ‘far and away the most popular production trend of the decade’.¹²⁴ Hays hoped that it ‘may open a new type of source material’ capable of galvanising ‘a new movie-going public recruited from the higher income earning classes [...] which better pictures would transform from casual to regular patrons’.¹²⁵ Maltby argues that ‘the film’s success was in part brought about by a marketing strategy aiming at school audiences via large-scale direct-mail marketing techniques’.¹²⁶

¹²² ‘Hays Sees an Era of Literary Films’, *The New York Times*, Tuesday March 27th, 1934, p. 24.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939*, pp. 187, 179.

¹²⁵ Maltby, ‘The Production Code and the Hays Office’, pp. 62-63.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Because of their prominence in classrooms, public libraries and private bookshelves, literary classics seemed to producers and reformers to be the epitome of 'family' material. Although novels and plays by the likes of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Louisa May Alcott and Robert Louis Stevenson may not have been widely consumed, at least by the common man, they were almost universally known. Between 1933 and 1940, many literary classics were brought to the screen, including *Little Women*, *Treasure Island* (Victor Fleming, 1934), *Great Expectations* (Stuart Walker, 1934), *David Copperfield* (George Cukor, 1935), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Max Reinhardt, 1935), *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (James Cromwell, 1936), *Romeo and Juliet* (George Cukor, 1936), *Poor Little Rich Girl* (Irving Cummings, 1936), *Captains Courageous* (Victor Fleming, 1937), *The Prisoner of Zenda* (John Cromwell, 1937), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Norman Taurog, 1938), *The Little Princess* (Walter Lang, 1939), *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *The Blue Bird* (Walter Lang, 1940). All of the major studios except Paramount produced these family-friendly literary adaptations, most of which were very enthusiastically received by audiences and critics. The stories were respectable and inoffensive; the kinds of texts appointed to school syllabuses and regarded as the kind of material children *ought* to be consuming, but which are mainly enjoyed by the adult middle-classes.

1935 saw the release of two of the most significant family-orientated literary adaptations of the decade: Warner Bros.' production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Max Reinhardt, and independent producer David Selznick's star-studded adaptation of *David Copperfield*. Not only were they lavish, star-studded productions, but they were among the most faithful adaptations of literary classics ever brought to the

screen. The key to successful literary adaptations, according to Selznick (who later adapted *Gone with the Wind* in 1939), was ensuring that deviations from the source material were nothing more than omissions; *changes* to plot and character, he suggested, ran the risk of alienating audiences familiar with the original texts.¹²⁷ Producers, though, ensured that all bases were covered by making them attractive to general audiences. Aside from polished production, the main weapons in this endeavour were big stars. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* featured popular Warner Bros. contractors such as James Cagney, Dick Powell and Joe E. Brown, all of whom made their name in overtly populist genres such as gangster movies, light comedies and musicals. Selznick pulled off a significant coup by casting comedian W.C. Fields as Micawber in *David Copperfield*; it mattered little that Fields had to clumsily read his dialogue from cue cards placed just off camera – his presence alone guaranteed box office value. Both films introduced up-and-coming child actors – namely Mickey Rooney as Puck, and Freddie Bartholomew as young David Copperfield – thereby offering some level of identification for younger viewers. Such was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s public-relations value that *Variety* suggested that Warner's would not have been perturbed with a \$500,000 loss on the venture.¹²⁸ As it was, both films were enormous box office hits.¹²⁹

Contemporary reviews of such films tended to agree with Hays's claim that they appealed to 'the highest common denominator of public taste'.¹³⁰ The National Board of Review's James Shelley Hamilton affirmed *Little Women* as 'a film that on the surface is

¹²⁷ Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1945 (1939), p. 142.

¹²⁸ Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939*, p. 192.

¹²⁹ Finler, 'Box Office Hits 1914-2002', pp. 356-363.

¹³⁰ Hays, *The President's Report to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc.*, p. 8.

above everything else entertaining, and appealing' – but to whom?¹³¹ P. S. Harrison's review of *David Copperfield* was similarly unhelpful, lauding it as 'a picture which will undoubtedly entertain everybody'.¹³² The mainstream press was especially susceptible to the fallacy of 'universal' entertainment, none more so than that bastion of middlebrow values, *The New York Times*, which applauded *Little Lord Fauntleroy* for its ability to 'charm and kindle a reminiscent glow in the hearts of contemporary audiences'.¹³³ Such responses imply that through sheer, unequivocal excellence, these productions effaced divisions in age, class, race, gender and even taste. *Variety*'s film reviews were exceptions, increasingly assessing movies in terms of projected audience response. *Variety*'s review of *Alice in Wonderland* pointed out that 'like most of the other supposed children's classics, "Alice" is really a distinctly grown-up book. Juvenile patronage probably won't be the choice of the kids themselves, but possibly under grown-up duress'.¹³⁴ Similarly, although *Little Women* may have been a 'pretty costume play for the great generality', its appeal 'for the younger generation' was 'a little dated'.¹³⁵

Many specialist journals and popular magazines looked beyond the propaganda of 'universal entertainment' and sought to inform readers about suitability *and* appeal. *Harrison's Reports* contained reviews written primarily for theatre owners, and which concluded with a short summary of perceived audience suitability. In the absence of any formal system for assessing suitability and appeal, though, such judgements were often arbitrary; Harrison, for instance, ludicrously viewed *Little Big Shot* (Michael Curtiz,

¹³¹ James Shelley Hamilton, 'Little Women', reprinted in *From Quasimodo to Scarlett O'Hara: A National Board of Review Anthology*, ed. Stanley Hochman, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982, pp. 177-179.

¹³² P. S. Harrison, 'David Copperfield', *Harrison's Reports*, Saturday January 26th, 1935, vol. xvii, no. 4.

¹³³ Frank S. Nugent, 'Little Lord Fauntleroy', *The New York Times*, April 3rd, 1936, p. 27:1.

¹³⁴ 'Alice in Wonderland', *Variety*, December 26th, 1933.

¹³⁵ 'Little Women', *Variety*, November 21st, 1933.

1935) – a Warner Bros. child-star vehicle starring Sybil Jason – as ‘unsuitable for children [or] adolescents’.¹³⁶ *Parents’ Magazine*, *The Rotarian* and *Christian Century* were slightly more methodical, assessing contemporary films according to demographic suitability, with audiences divided between ‘adults’, ‘youths’, and ‘children’; *Parents’ Magazine* contained a special section called ‘Family Movie Guide’.¹³⁷ *Parents’ Magazine* argued forcefully that ‘children under 8 years of age should not be permitted to attend regular motion picture performances’.¹³⁸ While they all clearly harboured political agendas, these publications recognised that ‘universal suitability’ was deliberately fostered by the film industry as a public-relations exercise.



Figure 1: The middlebrow family film began with the release of *Little Women* (1933).

¹³⁶ P. S. Harrison, ‘Little Big Shot’, *Harrison’s Reports*, Saturday October 5th, 1935, vol. xvii, no. 40.

¹³⁷ Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child 1930-1960*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 112-113.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

For the teachers, higher movie standards were part of a broader educational drive. For educationalists convinced of motion pictures' value in the education of the young, Hollywood was as a necessary evil. William Lewin – a representative of the motion picture committee of the National Education Association and author of the new curriculum – suggested that:

Through the classrooms of the high schools, where during the school year 6,000,000 adolescents are daily in session, the present drive is securing changes looking toward a finer type of audience in the coming generation. Before we can have an era of great photoplays we must have great audiences, and to develop them is the task of the schools.¹³⁹

By late-1935, according to Lewin, producers were spending 'six times as much as they did two years ago on films likely to be of interest to teachers and students. Included are some of the most costly pictures of the coming season'.¹⁴⁰ Lewin also pointed to a recent survey indicating that 'all the studios, major and minor, recognise that there is an effective demand for films worthy of classroom discussion'.¹⁴¹ It was still an uneasy compromise: studios were unable to sacrifice profitability for the sake of fidelity, but educationalists demanded that adaptations preserve at least the 'essence' of the original texts. To facilitate the easy integration of these films into the classroom, students' 'critical appreciation' was fostered by a series of study guides for distribution in schools nationwide, based on films such as *Little Women*, *David Copperfield*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.¹⁴² As Richard Ford explains,

¹³⁹ Lewin, 'Higher Screen Standards for Youth: Filming of Classics Urged by English Teachers'.

¹⁴⁰ Lewin, 'Movies Bow to Schools: The Film World Launches a New Cycle of Classics Long Favoured by Educators'.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Steve J. Wurtzler, 'David Copperfield (1935) and the U.S. Curriculum', *Dickens on Screen*, ed. John Glavin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 (pp. 155-170), p. 159.

The average guide (they are called “Photoplay Studies” or “Group Discussion Guides”) is an illustrated booklet of 16 pages. It deals with the story, historical or literary background, and film treatment of the theme; it includes a number of questions for discussion, and suggestions of books for reading. Bought in quantities the Guides cost three cents each.¹⁴³

Initially, they were sponsored by the studios.¹⁴⁴ Later, the industry maintained its support by providing schools with film posters, stills, press-books and free movie tickets for ‘underprivileged children’.¹⁴⁵ Hays later claimed that ‘no single project in our program did more to raise a generation of discriminating fans’ than study guides.¹⁴⁶ Some were enormously profitable: *David Copperfield*’s guide sold around 200,000 copies, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s apparently as many as 500,000.¹⁴⁷ During the mid-1930s, then, motion pictures possessed a pedagogical dimension to an extent never seen before or since, although economic interests were also well served by the venture.

Once again, the film industry was shrewdly allying itself with powerful external organisations in the hope of further dispelling criticism of commercial cinema as a mass medium, whilst courting a vital audience section. By maintaining close ties with educative and religious groups like the National Education Association and the Legion of Decency, the film industry worked to extend the concept of the ‘family audience’ within the popular consciousness. This was a basic function of the Public Relations department of the MPPDA, and references to Hollywood cinema as a ‘family’ medium predominate in many of public statements from the period. On a more practical level, between 1934 and 1938, the MPPDA published a monthly ‘newspaper’ called *The Motion Picture and the Family* for free distribution in theatre lobbies. Marketed as ‘a bulletin for all who are

¹⁴³ Richard Ford, *Children and the Cinema*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1939, pp. 211-212.

¹⁴⁴ Wurtzler, ‘David Copperfield (1935) and the U.S. Curriculum’, pp. 155-156.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Hays, *The Memoirs of Will H. Hays*, p. 487.

¹⁴⁷ Ford, *Children and the Cinema*, pp. 211-212.

interested in better motion pictures’, the paper featured contributions from teachers, educators and ‘community leaders’.¹⁴⁸ Aside from constituting another useful PR exercise on the part of the film industry, this publication was yet another attempt to keep potential enemies of the industry close at hand. In his end-of-year report for the 1934 season, Hays congratulated the industry for a job well done, and promised more of the same. Pointing to the success of the newly-established Production Code, Hays noted:

We are more than satisfied with results attained during our period of self-regulation. Theatre attendance has increased approximately 20 per cent throughout the country. Our analysis shows that this increase is due to three elements – old patrons going to the theatre more often, the winning of a new audience that had stayed away from pictures in the past, and improved general conditions.¹⁴⁹

The family-friendly literary adaptation’s true value was in redefining the relationship between Hollywood and its audiences. It was less effective in changing the viewing habits of adults and children: adults could still attend romantic and crime films (albeit in a ‘cleaned-up’ form), and children still favoured action/adventure serials and matinee fare. What the movement *did* accomplish, more importantly, was embedding the idea of the ‘family film’ tightly within the national consciousness, protecting Hollywood from the threat of censorship, and establishing a public tide of goodwill towards the industry.

The child-star film

The child-star film ran concurrently with the family-friendly literary adaptation, becoming big business in 1934 and remaining so until around 1938. Unlike the literary adaption movement, it emerged not from careful planning and cooperation, but as a rapid response to social affairs – in this case, the Great Depression. Prefaced by the Wall

¹⁴⁸ With special thanks to Nic Sammond of the University of Toronto for kindly supplying a copy of this publication from his own records.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Hays Finds Public Backs Clean Films’, *The New York Times*, Thursday October 11th, 1934, p. 29.

Street Crash of 1929, although the Depression damaged the film industry considerably in the short term, it also galvanised the American public and further cemented family movies within the popular consciousness. While the child-star vehicle had been popular during the silent era, the success of Shirley Temple transformed the format for the 1930s. After Temple rose to prominence in *Bright Eyes* (David Butler, 1934) and caught the public imagination, several major studios attempted to cash-in on her popularity, by signing promising child performers and by placing them within specialised vehicles designed to showcase their particular talents (whether singing, dancing, precocious cuteness or capacity for mischief). During the mid-to-late 1930s, MGM contracted Jackie Cooper, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney and Freddie Bartholomew; Twentieth Century-Fox had Shirley Temple and Jane Withers; Warner Bros. had Billy and Bobby Mauch, Sybil Jason and Bonita Granville; Columbia had Edith Fellows; and Universal had Deanna Durbin. Although various child actors were contracted to Paramount and RKO during the 1930s (such as Jackie Searle and Virginia Weidler), neither studio embraced the child-star vehicle. Nevertheless, the 1930s was the golden age of the child-star movie. Temple's persona, in particular, was tailor-made for Depression-era audiences; it is a measure of her immense popularity that she was the top U.S. box office attraction between 1935 and 1938.¹⁵⁰

Initially, the Depression did not hit Hollywood hard, and it seemed that the film industry would be able to escape its worst effects, but by 1932, 'all of show business was in shambles'.¹⁵¹ Following the bankruptcy of several of the major studios, only

¹⁵⁰ David Thomson, 'Shirley Temple', *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1994, pp. 743-744.

¹⁵¹ Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939*, p. 14.

investment from Wall Street maintained the studios through this period.¹⁵² Fortunately for Hollywood, the social and recreational importance of the cinema was then at its height, and attendances, although reduced, remained high. Average weekly attendances in 1933 stood at 60 million; at this point, the film industry had an 84.1 per cent share of spectator amusement expenditure, and 21.9 per cent of all recreation expenditure.¹⁵³ Movie-going remained one of the dominant social activities for young people, and their sizable injection of capital partially offset the potentially-catastrophic effects of the Depression.¹⁵⁴ It helped that the major studio vehicles of Shirley Temple, Jane Withers and Deanna Durbin, whilst tailored towards adults thematically, had a sizable juvenile fan-base because of the cross-generational appeal of the performers themselves.¹⁵⁵

Overall, though, child-star films generally responded to adult concerns. In this regard, there are two elements of this ‘adult appeal’ to consider: the child, and the films. Graham Greene controversially argued that Temple’s ‘admirers’ were ‘middle-aged men and clergymen’ who appreciated the ‘adult emotions of love and grief’ she displayed – an assessment which, when combined with scandalous references to her ‘well-shaped and desirable little body, packed with enormous vitality’ – provoked legal retribution from her studio.¹⁵⁶ Biographer Norman J. Zierold more diplomatically described her as ‘[meeting] all the requirements: height, curly hair, bright teeth, an infectious smile, and a

¹⁵² Ibid, pp. 24-26.

¹⁵³ Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989, p. 36.

¹⁵⁴ See Edgar Dale, *Children’s Attendance at Motion Pictures*, New York: Macmillan, 1935, p. 73. Dale estimated that minors accounted for approximately one-third of all tickets bought during the early-1930s.

¹⁵⁵ Terry Staples notes that Shirley Temple was ‘the overall top favourite film star’ of British children, a fact demonstrated ‘in various polls, when children were asked to name the star they liked the best of all, not restricting their choice to favourites of the Saturday morning [matinee] screen’. *All Pals Together: The Story of Children’s Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 72.

¹⁵⁶ Graham Greene, ‘Wee Willie Winkie; The Life of Emile Zoza’, originally published 28th October 1937 in *Night and Day*, and reprinted in *The Graham Greene Film Reader: Mornings in the Dark*, ed. David Parkinson, Manchester: Carcanet, 1993, p. 234.

definite, distinctive personality'.¹⁵⁷ However, the true value of these attributes can only be appreciated in context, and whatever dubious sexual appeal Temple may have possessed, her films functioned as a powerful countervailing force against Depression anxiety. She starred in a series of films (e.g. *Bright Eyes*, *Our Little Girl* [John S. Robertson, 1935] and *Poor Little Rich Girl* [Irving Cummings, 1936]) speaking directly to adult anxieties concerning economic hardship and the hope of recovery. Appearing as a staunch figure of optimism, she enables the extraordinary as she moves through the narratives of her films, transforming the lives of those she meets through sheer force of goodness. Her Depression-era films operated as a form of licensed public propaganda.

Poor Little Rich Girl is, perhaps, the clearest distillation of these attributes.

Temple plays Barbara Barry, the daughter of a successful soap manufacturer (Michael Whalen). Simultaneously the devoted, over-protective father and successful businessman, Mr Barry keeps Barbara home-schooled and away from possible harm. Barbara takes the first opportunity to break out of her ivory tower, travelling around the city and helping a variety of down-on-their-luck individuals. The paradox which sees Barbara/Temple idealised as a priceless object, but also exploited for the use value implicit in her social ability to galvanise, is articulated on-screen in an early exchange between Mr Barry and Barbara's nurse:

Nurse: Did you ever consider that the constant piling-up of precautions and attentions was bad for the child? Why, she's pampered and watched-over and babied to death.

The contrary positions of the nurse, pleading for a loosening of a constrictive domestic structure, and Mr Barry, obstinate in his defence of his precautionary attitude, reflect a

¹⁵⁷ Norman J. Zierold, *The Child Stars*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1965, p. 61.

wider dichotomy between the need to preserve the child from interference and danger, and the need to universalise her ineffable talents.

Mr Barry's professional importance highlights the duality of the early Temple figure; the happy marriage between working class and business class, and its implicit reaffirmation of Depression recovery ideology. Her affinity with the working class and her desire to project outwards into the wider social sphere are heavily mediated by her middle-class social status, and her ultimate return into the arms of her penitent father as the film draws to a close. By this point, Mr Barry realises the harmful consequences of his behaviour, offering emotional security in addition to his already-established financial power. It is significant, though, that Mr Barry's business is the profitable but wholesome profession of soap production – by its very nature clean and unsullied. These films were produced at a time when big business was widely distrusted – particularly in rural areas – because of the believed metropolitan origins of the global Depression.¹⁵⁸ This distrust promoted ideologies of anti-industrialisation counter-productive to Roosevelt-era recovery policies, which stressed the importance of national unity. The President

strove to project an image that was above party and above class. His rhetoric in the early New Deal stressed national unity, interdependence, and class harmony rather than class conflict. He welcomed support from progressive Republicans and independents. He played down the use of the word Democrat in the 1934 and 1936 elections.¹⁵⁹

Because (as contemporary economist Lionel Robbins noted) 'the first essential of any recovery from the position in which the world now finds itself is a return of business confidence', it was crucial that broad-demographic films portrayed big business as

¹⁵⁸ See particularly Theodore Caplow et al, *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 4-5, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940*, London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 247.

innocuous and approachable.¹⁶⁰ If the connection appears fanciful, it should be noted that the spirit of the New Deal transcended normative frontiers between political legislation and popular ideology, infiltrating Hollywood in sometimes explicit ways. Some of Warner Bros.' early 1930s musicals, as Mark Roth has shown, offered flag-waving support to Roosevelt and his recovery programs.¹⁶¹

Reflecting a similar set of ideologies, Deanna Durbin's late-1930s vehicles were also highly successful. *Variety's* review of *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (Henry Koster, 1937) is particularly noteworthy, affirming the movie as a 'smash hit for all the family [...] something new in entertainment'.¹⁶² Durbin stars as Patricia, the daughter of an unemployed musician, John Cardwell (Adolphe Menjou). Realising that the Depression has disenfranchised many other talented members of society, Patricia decides to form an orchestra of one hundred unemployed musicians. In order to stage the massive, publicity-generating show she envisages, she must court the services of world-renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski, who is sympathetic to the cause, but has already pledged his services to a high-profile tour of Europe. During the course of this narrative – overtly constructed to emphasise as strongly as possible the unifying charm and singing prowess of Durbin – Patricia manages to infiltrate Stokowski's house:

Stokowski: How do you get into places where you should not be?

Patricia: I don't know. My daddy says it's a gift.

Astonished by her impudence, but clearly impressed by her talents, Stokowski agrees to conduct the orchestra of the unemployed. After having obtained the co-operation of a wealthy backer who realises the public-relations potential of the enterprise, the show goes

¹⁶⁰ Lionel Robbins, *The Great Depression*, London: Macmillan, 1934, p. 16.

¹⁶¹ Mark Roth, 'Some Warners Musical and the Spirit of the New Deal', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 17, winter 1977, pp. 1-7.

¹⁶² 'One Hundred Men and a Girl', *Variety*, Friday January 1st, 1937.

ahead to wild success. The film ends with the promise of financial security for Patricia and her father. As with Temple's early films, Durbin here functions as a galvaniser of the dispossessed. A sharp contrast is established between rich and poor; only through the magical abilities of Patricia/Durbin is the situation improved. If the 'One Hundred Men' of the title represent the wider mass of unemployed and disenfranchised, then the 'one girl' suggests an organisational figure; a leader.¹⁶³ The affirmative qualities of the film are glaringly apparent: for the disenfranchised, Durbin and Temple offer hope of a brighter future, which for the business class, they render safe potentially subversive factions. Were it not for their mediatory presence, the down-on-their-luck figures they encounter might easily be intimidating or even communistic in their proletariat overtones.

By the late-1930s, the ideologies of social and economic recovery in American society had changed attitudes towards the Depression. With the New Deal operating in heavily reduced form by 1938, Depression narratives became anachronistic.¹⁶⁴ Temple's studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, responded by gradually manoeuvring her into more fantastic, displaced territory. *Wee Willie Winkie* (John Ford, 1937) is set in India, and *Heidi* (Allan Dwan, 1937) in Switzerland. *Susannah of The Mounties* (William A. Seiter, 1939) is located in the nineteenth-century American frontier, whilst *The Little Princess* is set in a picture-postcard nineteenth-century England. Finally, *The Blue Bird* takes place in a mythical land evocative of fairy tale mythology. Even in a film as displaced as *Susannah of the Mounties*, though, Temple's political function remains apparent. At one point, Susannah (Temple) chastises the 'Indian' chief:

¹⁶³ Thereby providing an irresistible parallel with the solitary, powerful leader figure embodied by Roosevelt.

¹⁶⁴ Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940*, p. 8.

I don't see why you want to fight the white people anyway. They haven't done anything to hurt you.

America's gradual recovery from the Depression, ironically, disempowered Temple's symbolic properties. The key to her popularity, after all, was not her ability to articulate a conservative ideological position, but rather, as Charles Eckert argues, the positive relationship between her filmic persona and recovery from the Depression.¹⁶⁵ Temple's movement away from dramas located in contemporary America towards the more blatantly artificial, displaced terrain of literary classic adaptation coincided with a gradual but noticeable cooling in critical and commercial response. The increase in prestige and budget in her films – eventually enabling her movement into colour in *The Little Princess* – served almost as distractions from her comparative social impotence. The balance between ideological and aesthetic appeal unsuccessfully shifted towards the latter.



Figure 2: Shirley Temple, Jane Withers and Deanna Durbin: three of the most successful child-stars of the 1930s.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Eckert, 'Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller', *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 60-73.

The New York Times' Frank S. Nugent, a noted admirer of Temple in her earlier films, suggests that, by the time of *Little Miss Broadway* (Irving Cummings, 1938),

the devastating Mistress Temple is slightly less devastating than usual [...] It can't be old age, but it does look like weariness [...] Although she performs with her customary gayety and dimpled charm, there is no mistaking the effort every dimple cost her. And perhaps even Shirley couldn't feel enthusiastic about the [...] script.¹⁶⁶

Although *The Little Princess* was well-received, *The Blue Bird*, Fox's Temple-starred riposte to MGM's *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), performed poorly at the box office. Its problem was its over-emphasis on childish appeal at the expense of adult viewers, who had previously sustained child vehicles. Critical approval for child-star films was rarely founded upon appreciation of plot, narrative, characterisation or other representational elements. In fact, many such reviews emphasise the role of the child performer in propping-up flimsy or clichéd storylines. Narrative plausibility and textual depth, then, were less important than the signifying presence of the child-star.

The emergence of the small-town family film

Small-town U.S. audiences were integral to Hollywood's revenues. As high a proportion as '65 percent of the population, or 80 million people, lived in small-towns at the start of the decade'.¹⁶⁷ Until the mass-migration to the suburbs in the late-1940s, the North American small-town wielded considerable influence over production strategy, and many films and genres were tailor-made for this market sector. Even so, Hollywood was repeatedly criticised for disregarding the requirements of small-town audiences, and favouring more urban-centred entertainments adapted from the Broadway stage. New

¹⁶⁶ Frank S. Nugent, 'Little Miss Broadway', *The New York Times*, July 23rd, 1938, p. 10:4. Ironically, in Nugent's later career as a Hollywood screenwriter, he provided the script for one of Temple's few successful – albeit relatively minor – adult roles, in John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1949).

¹⁶⁷ Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939*, p. 27.

York exhibitor Arthur L. Mayer argued that most films were ‘consciously directed to metropolitan audiences eager for the unconventional, the subtle and the artistic’.¹⁶⁸

Small-town patrons, conversely, were ‘more appreciative of human, conventional stories and of conservative technique in their presentation’.¹⁶⁹ Margaret Farrand Thorp went even further, suggesting that ‘the subtle, the exotic, the unexpected [small-town audiences] do not like at all, and they are frankly annoyed by costume pictures’.¹⁷⁰ In 1934, just prior to the establishment of the Production Code, *The New York Times* lamented Hollywood’s propensity to

read what the trade papers said and what the New York critics thought, ignoring the opinion and even the box-office receipts of the small-towns. Hollywood was concerned only with the receipts on Broadway, forgetting that production cost comes from the cities and profits from the towns.¹⁷¹

It seems safe to assume that family-friendly literary adaptations, designed to exploit a predominantly metropolitan interest in middlebrow culture and social respectability, had less impact in small-towns. Beginning in 1935, producers began addressing this problem by methodically targeting small-town audiences with family-orientated material.

MGM’s adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s only comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!* (Clarence Brown, 1935) was the first major production in this area. Billed quite overtly as an exercise in sweet nostalgia, carrying the subtitle ‘A Comedy of Recollection’, it centres on a quiet family in a pre-industrialised small-town at the turn of the century, and possesses many of the tropes that would come to dominate Hollywood family films throughout the remainder of the studio era: a large, extended family; the depiction of a

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Maltby, ‘Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood’s Generic Conception of its Audiences’, p. 27.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Thorp, *America at the Movies*, p. 19.

¹⁷¹ Churchill, ‘Hollywood Heeds the Thunder: Bewildered by the Widespread Crusade for Cleaner Pictures, the Film Centre Now Listens to Main Street and, Contrite as Never Before, Accepts the Verdict of its New Censor’.

simple, ritualistic but spiritually rewarding pastoral lifestyle; the misadventures of an adolescent protagonist on the cusp of adulthood; the pronounced importance of the parents, specifically the father; the fallibility, sexual temptation and first love of the adolescent protagonist; and the ultimate transmission of wisdom and experience from the father to the son. The film became a template for several long-running, cheaply-made family series spanning the late-1930s and early-1940s. Fox was the first studio to exploit the potential of this format, with a series of low-key, earthy comedies centring on the Jones family (1936-1940). MGM responded with the most famous and long running series in the genre, the Hardy family comedies (1937-1946), starring Mickey Rooney. Warners produced a series of three comedy films starring the Lemp family (1938-1941), and Paramount adapted their Henry Aldrich comedies from the radio into a family-orientated film series (1939-1944).



Figure 3: The Hardy family. Left to right: Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy, Lewis Stone as Judge Hardy, Fay Holden as Mrs Hardy and Cecilia Parker as Marian Hardy.

The Hardy family series was the most famous, critically favoured and longest-running example of the genre. Over the course of sixteen cheaply-made instalments, it brought in around \$25 million for MGM – a significant amount, at the time.¹⁷² In the process, these films became, according to *Variety*, ‘the biggest money makers in relation to investment in plant’s [sic] entire history’.¹⁷³ Beyond simple economics, the series was close to the heart of studio head Louis B. Mayer. A man notorious for his love of sentiment, Mayer is said to have considered the Hardy family series as his masterpiece.¹⁷⁴ Set in the fictional town of Carvel, the family consisted of Rooney’s Andy; Judge Hardy (Lewis Stone), the benevolent, upstanding patriarch; Mrs Hardy (Fay Holden), the doting mother; occasionally Andy’s sister Marian (Cecilia Parker); and the spinsterish Aunt Milly (Sara Haden). The family was strongly patriarchal, centring mainly on the communication of wisdom and experience from Judge Hardy to his son. Because of the centrality of this didactic theme, there was little variation in narrative across instalments.

Like the small-town communities they approximated, these narratives were relatively uneventful affairs. They emphasised a cyclical way of life; ritualistic daily routines and conventions which offered a bulwark against the forces of social change. The lack of overall development in the series, and the importance of repetition, therefore served ideological functions. Indeed, on two occasions where the series steps away from the conventionality of the small-town milieu towards a more metropolitan lifestyle, the results are disastrous. In *The Hardys Ride High* (George B Seitz, 1939), the family comes into a \$2 million inheritance and moves to Detroit. Long before the end, it has become clear that the corrupting power of excess wealth, and the lack of community

¹⁷² David M. Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence*, Jefferson and London: McFarland, 1985, p. 13.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p. 11.

spirit, necessitates a return to Carvel. When the inheritance falls through, this apparent misfortune is presented as a blessing in disguise. Excessive wealth is presented as concomitant with a decline in the cohesive properties of community spirit within the social sphere; values at a premium in 1930s America. Emanuel Levy argues that

the ideal small-town represents a primary relationship: intimate, face-to-face, personal interaction. By contrast, the Big City is based on networks of secondary relationships, signifying the ills of bureaucratic organisations: magnitude (messiness), specificity, formality, impersonality, and anonymity.¹⁷⁵

In *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (George B Seitz, 1941), undoubtedly the most unusual entry in the series, Andy moves to New York to ‘find his fortune’. He finds life tough. Unable to find a job and reduced to sharing a tiny bedsit with a young dancer, the narrative takes a surprisingly dark turn with the apparent suicide of his roommate. Distraught, but somehow wiser, Andy moves back to Carvel with the promise of maturity. Normality, however, was resumed in time for the next instalment in the series.

Increasingly, the main critical complaint was the series’ apparent inability – or unwillingness – to develop beyond its original remit. Bosley Crowther argued that ‘the quality of the Hardy pictures seems to be on an obvious decline’, and complained that ‘the ageless juvenility of Mr Rooney as Andy is beginning to wear’.¹⁷⁶ Reviewing *The Courtship of Andy Hardy* (Seitz, 1942), Crowther observed, with obvious frustration, that ‘the Hardys emerge from the picture no different from what they were when it began’.¹⁷⁷ The success of the Jones family comedies was almost completely restricted to rural and small-town areas. Their first feature, entitled *Every Saturday Night* (James Tinling), emerged in March 1936. It was received enthusiastically by *The New York Times* as

¹⁷⁵ Emanuel Levy, *Small Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of Community*, New York: Continuum, 1991, p. 25.

¹⁷⁶ Bosley Crowther, ‘Andy Hardy’s Double Life’, *The New York Times*, January 12th, 1943, 23:3.

¹⁷⁷ Bosley Crowther, ‘The Courtship of Andy Hardy’, *The New York Times*, April 10th, 1942, 21:2.

‘disarming’ and ‘wholesome’, successfully transcending its status as ‘small-town’ entertainment.¹⁷⁸ P. S. Harrison, however, noted that the film ‘is the type of story that will appeal more to mature people than to the young because it deals mostly with the problems of everyday life in the home of an average American family’.¹⁷⁹ Harrison averred that ‘the trouble with such a picture...is the fact that the theme is too close to one’s everyday existence’.¹⁸⁰ Despite this, the series ran for 4 years and 17 films, being particularly ‘well received [...] in small-towns’.¹⁸¹ The lack of appeal to wider audiences, as well as child appeal, ensured that commercial returns were not high.

Some critics stressed the importance of retaining the uniqueness of the cinema, and its sanctity as the preeminent national entertainment medium. For such observers, the family series constituted a threat. In February 1940, *New York Times* columnist Frank S. Nugent argued that family series had become ‘too familiar’:

There is great danger now of the family and series film getting completely out of hand and reducing the screen to the level of newspaper comic strip or radio “soap operas”. Both of these have their addicts, of course; but if the screen is placed too predominantly at their service, millions of others, of less elementary taste, may forget they ever had formed the movie-going habit.¹⁸²

The increasing prominence of soap opera material appeared to be taking Hollywood cinema in a very different path to that established by the ‘better films’ movement. By the late-1930s, Hays had relaxed his rhetoric attesting to the cultural respectability of the movies, and the clamour of the movie reformers had largely subsided. In his annual report to the MPPDA in 1938, Hays casually accepted the charge that Hollywood product was ‘unreal and escapist’, adding that such a ‘soft impeachment’ was tolerable given that

¹⁷⁸ Thomas F. Brady, ‘Every Saturday Night’, *The New York Times*, March 14th, 1936, 10:2.

¹⁷⁹ P. S. Harrison, ‘Every Saturday Night’, *Harrison’s Reports*, Saturday, February 15, 1936, vol. xviii, no. 7.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Don Miller, *B Movies*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1970, p. 47.

¹⁸² Frank S. Nugent, ‘The Too Familiar Family’, *The New York Times*, Sunday February 19th, 1940, p. x5.

the industry was flourishing both economically and culturally.¹⁸³ Indeed, aside from the brief period in the 1930s when Hollywood was actively attempting to prove its social value and cultural respectability, this desire to be regarded as purely harmless and escapist has been Hollywood's default mode of self-representation. The 'better films' movement, we can conclude, was expedient, its value commercial rather than artistic. At the annual conference of elementary school workers at Columbia University in May 1938, teachers were even told to watch movies *before* they criticised cinema's suitability for children.¹⁸⁴ All of this points to a growing consensus in cinematic discourse by the late-1930s, largely as a result of the Production Code. Whilst this consensus had positive effects, it also resulted in a spate of films pitched at the 'lowest common denominator', as Andre Sennwald had correctly predicted would take place.¹⁸⁵ Some critics blanched at the growing predominance of such anodyne material, and repudiated the small-town family series. By the early-1940s, however, the format was already in decline, and Hollywood was turning its focus towards more prestigious, less mimetic small-town productions such as *Meet me in St Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944).

Children's films in 1930s Hollywood

While the major studios concentrated on producing broadly adult-orientated family series, smaller studios had a much clearer juvenile emphasis. The main factor behind their greater embrace of child viewers was commercial practicality. Mainstream major-studio offerings responded to the concept of a vast, demographically-unrestrained

¹⁸³ 'Movies are Guilty of "Escapism", Can be Proud of It, Hays Finds', *The New York Times*, Tuesday March 29th, 1938, p. 23.

¹⁸⁴ 'Teachers' Taste on Films Doubted', *The New York Times*, Sunday May 15th, 1938, p. 1.

¹⁸⁵ Andre Sennwald, 'Children and the Cinema: Containing the Heretical Suggestion that Youngsters Know Their Own Minds', *The New York Times*, Sunday June 9th, 1935, p. x3.

audience that was tangible and accessible. Smaller studios adapted to the market by accommodating areas ignored by the majors, resulting in large numbers of child-orientated series and serials produced by ‘poverty row’ studios such as Republic and Monogram, and smaller majors like Universal and Columbia.¹⁸⁶ Such films tended to be cheap B releases of varying length, lacking significant star power, and generally positioned on the bottom half of a double-bill. Series and serials rarely transcended cult audiences, yet were creatively diverse, encompassing science-fiction epics and domestic rural dramas, child-star series and ensemble adventure stories.¹⁸⁷ While the majors privileged formula and repetition in their child-star vehicles and family series, small producers pursued juvenile audiences out of necessity, recognising that the biggest films were those not only with the biggest stars and budgets, but those buoyed by high-power marketing strategies. B product’s reputation for inferiority, meanwhile, ensured that the wider spectrum of adult audiences was inaccessible.

The Johnny Weissmuller-starred *Tarzan* series – which began at MGM in 1932 as a high-profile, adult-orientated initiative under the auspices of Irving Thalberg, and ended up as low-budget, largely child-orientated matinee fare produced by RKO – is an fine example of how the 1934 mandatory enforcement of the Production Code imposed changes in Hollywood’s audience address. MGM’s first *Tarzan* film, *Tarzan the Ape Man* (W.S. Van Dyke), was not only conspicuously expensive, but downright racy, with a high quotient of violence and near-nudity from former Olympic swimmer Weissmuller

¹⁸⁶ Although a member of the so-called ‘big eight’ Hollywood studios, Columbia’s reputation for low-grade material was long-standing. As Don Miller observes, ‘Columbia pictures was known in the silent days as CBC productions, which the wags promptly broadened to Corned-Beef-&-Cabbage. They couldn’t shake the stigma of the second-rate, although this wasn’t fair to the company or its products’. *B Movies*, p. 10.

¹⁸⁷ There are exceptions, as the nationwide success of the Andy Hardy films demonstrate. However, the comparative neglect of serials and series in popular writing and academic scholarship is perhaps reflected by the general lack of commercial recognition for this format. To date, there have been no published large-scale studies of any of the family series discussed here.

and his co-star, Maureen O'Sullivan. Nevertheless, it was a significant box-office success, and a sequel, *Tarzan and his Mate* (Cedric Gibbons) emerged in April 1934.¹⁸⁸ Like its predecessor, it was explicitly adult-orientated, and one infamous sequence sees Tarzan and Jane (O'Sullivan) swimming underwater, Tarzan's modesty protected only by a loin cloth, and Jane totally naked.¹⁸⁹ After the tightening of the Code, the series became far more family-suitable, retaining its emphasis upon action and adventure but introducing a lighter, more inoffensive tone to proceedings. The playful, overtly-sexual relationship between Tarzan and Jane was reconfigured to one of domesticity, particularly after they adopt a 'son', Boy (Johnny Sheffield) in *Tarzan Finds a Son!* (1939). Boy's introduction constituted a clear attempt to engage more with younger viewers. When the franchise was taken over by RKO in 1943, the series changed again: the production values became less polished, and the narratives more fantasy-orientated. By the time of *Tarzan's Desert Mystery* (Wilhelm Thiele, 1943), the hero is no longer battling hostile tribesmen or crocodiles, but man-eating plants, dinosaurs and giant spiders. The two elements that probably attracted Depression-era adult audiences to the first two *Tarzan* films – the hard-edged style and sexual allure of the two leads – had long since been phased out, and the comic-book style that replaced it was far more attuned to juvenile than adult audiences, which, like Hollywood executives, were often prejudiced towards material that was deemed overly 'childish'.

Most series and serials were low-risk, low-return ventures. Pretensions towards art were reserved for those studios able to afford impressive production values; by contrast, the serials represented themselves overtly – perhaps centrally – as disposable.

¹⁸⁸ Finler, 'Box Office Hits 1914-2002', pp. 356-363.

¹⁸⁹ The scene was cut after protests from the Legion of Decency, but the footage still exists, and often features in modern showings and home video releases of the film.

There are more important contrasts to be drawn between serials and series. Kalton C.

Lahue argues that:

A serial contained the same leading figures in the cast, and it had a plot which interconnected each episode, whether these divisions were complete in themselves or were 'cliff-hangers'. A series, although it might contain the same cast, had no broad connecting plot between chapters.¹⁹⁰

However, this distinction is not merely limited to form. The thematic and tonal content of serials were more often child-orientated, incorporating fantastic situations, heavy use of melodrama and exaggerated characterisations. A typical serial comprised around 13 episodes (although some were longer), with an average length of about 20 minutes.¹⁹¹

Although they were at their height in the pre-sound era, serials were still produced into the 1950s, remaining well attuned to the requirements of children. Many serials were exploitation releases tapping the commercial zeitgeist. Neither low-budget family series nor science fiction serials operated in the 'adult' world of depression anxiety and rural/urban tension, so they were less overtly political. This, too, made them ideal escapist entertainment for children. Serialised adaptations of *Tarzan*, *Buck Rogers*, *Zorro* and *Flash Gordon* were amongst the sci-fi productions released by serial specialists Universal, Republic and Columbia in the late-1930s.

One of the more popular child-orientated series of the period was *Nancy Drew*, based on the adventure books of 'Carolyn Keene' and produced by First National. Four instalments were produced between 1938 and 1939, each centring upon the exploits of an adventurous teenage girl, played here by fifteen year-old Bonita Granville. Although Granville was almost the same age as Deanna Durbin and was Oscar-nominated for her

¹⁹⁰ Kalton C. Lahue, *Continued Next Week: A History of the Moving Picture Serial*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964, pp. xvi-xvii.

¹⁹¹ Ford, *Children and the Cinema*, p. 129.

role in *These Three* (William Wyler, 1936), she was soon appearing in second-feature material. What is most interesting about this series is its naturalistic representation of the central child figures. Nancy is independent, resourceful and brave, and clearly more competent and formidable than her male sidekick, Ted Nickerson (Frankie Thomas). *Nancy Drew* was produced in a period where the teenage protagonists in mainstream films were often subject to the will of their domineering parents, within tightly-prescribed family units. Here, Nancy is the obvious star of the show. The focus, then, is less upon generational continuity than teenage adventure, inevitably filtered through adult eyes, but directed squarely towards teen and pre-teen viewers.

Nancy's father, Carson Drew (John Litel), makes frequent appearances in the films, and in common with most contemporary family productions, the family is wealthy and socially respectable (Carson is an eminent attorney). Crucially, though, Carson's occasional, tongue-in-cheek attempts to impose didactic authority upon Nancy are instantly reprov'd. One sequence in *Nancy Drew, Reporter* (William Clemens, 1939) sees Carson, bored of fielding Nancy's enquiries regarding legal procedure, picking her up into his arms, intent on taking her to bed. Indignantly, Nancy struggles to get free:

Nancy: Daddy, put me down! I'm not a baby!

Carson: You'll always be your daddy's baby.

Nancy: I won't be anybody's baby!

This exchange underlines the fact that whereas Andy Hardy required the persistent direction and intervention of his father, Carson is compelled to leave Nancy to her own devices. Her competency is never in question, as the titles of the first three films – 'Detective', 'Reporter', and 'Trouble Shooter' – indicate. Another divergence from the Hardy family movies is the absence of the awkward 'adolescent condition'; the exaggerated point of teenage crisis underpinning the transition from childhood to

adulthood. The representation of this transition as a bittersweet, melancholy passage is a common feature of adult fiction.¹⁹² Its absence here is unsurprising, given the intended youthful audience of these films; second-feature movies were a rare escape from the adult fixation on childhood evanescence implicitly present in the child-star films and mainstream family series. Instead, these productions depict relative juvenile self-sufficiency, rather than dependency on adult carers.

Monogram was one of the most prolific producers of low-grade children's and teenage fare. Perhaps Monogram's most enduring film series during the late-1930s and early-1940s was the Frankie Darro-starred ensemble comedy-dramas, which, in hindsight, can be seen as precursors to the teen films of the 1950s. Darro was an archetypal B movie actor, appearing in dozens of productions of variable size, budget, form and quality. Comprising stand-alone light-comedy instalments featuring many of the same actors, but with variations on plot, situation and character, the Frankie Darro films served as a kind of clearing-house for fading and emergent talent. Aging child-stars Jackie Moran and Marcia Mae Jones – then in their late teens – made several appearances, as did Keye Luke, also known for playing the title character's eldest son in Twentieth Century-Fox's 1930s *Charlie Chan* series. Gale Storm, who became Monogram's biggest star before a successful singing career in the 1950s, joined the series at the launch of her film career in 1941. *Let's Go Collegiate* (Jean Yarbrough, 1941), a typical instalment, sees the protagonists embroiled in a plot to replace a star athlete, who has just been enlisted by the army, on the college rowing team. They enlist the paid help

¹⁹² Thomas Hine, *The Rise and fall of the American Teenager*, New York: Avon Books, 1997. Hine argues that 'the concept on the teenager rests...on the idea of the adolescent as a not quite competent person' (p. 4), but notes that 'the teenage years have been defined as, at once, the best and freest of life and a time of near madness and despair' (p. 11).

of a burly, none-too-bright trucker to impersonate the athlete until they can find a replacement, but learn to their amazement that he is a naturally-brilliant rower who manages to win the day for the team in the closing stages. P. S. Harrison was scornful:

This program college comedy with incidental popular music is strictly for the younger picture-goers. It holds little appeal for adults, since the plot is somewhat silly, and the actions of the leading characters [are] extremely juvenile.¹⁹³

Harrison's disdain perhaps reflected the fact that most of the cast were either teenage or in their twenties – this was a rarity in films of the period, but was far more permissible in low-budget offerings tailored towards the youth audience.

Other youth-orientated Monogram films included *Barefoot Boy* (Karl Brown, 1938), a second-feature film barely an hour in length. In this film – ‘suggested’ by John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem of the same name – the credits are explicitly divided between child actors and ‘the grown ups’. The parents of Billy (Jackie Moran), the male protagonist, make only fleeting appearances, but wisdom and astuteness nonetheless resides with the sympathetic father. Like Judge Hardy, Billy’s father is grey-haired and pipe-smoking, slow-moving in body but mentally agile. The film, set on a country ranch, concerns the exploits of a small group of children who uncover, and eventually foil, a prison-break. The pastoral setting elicits a greater play towards romantic ‘realism’ in the representation of the child figures. Marcia Mae Jones, who appeared as the bratty antagonist of Deanna Durbin in *Mad about Music* (Norman Taurog, 1938), plays Pige, a feisty girl with aspirations to be an ‘adventuress’. Such a character would indicate malfunction within the context of later mainstream family films such as *Meet me in St Louis*, but here, she operates as the central focus of a narrative in which rebellious spirit is celebrated, rather than marginalised or resolved. Action, adventure and youthful spirit

¹⁹³ P. S. Harrison, ‘Let’s Go Collegiate’, *Harrison’s Reports*, Saturday, October 4, 1941, Vol. xxiii, no. 40.

suitable for both young metropolitan and rural viewers sustained such films, in which the material was wholesome and guileless. The crucial point of difference between these lower-level offerings and mainstream child vehicles is that these central child actors are subordinate to narrative. Moran and Jones never attained the level of fame to rise *beyond* the pleasures of narrative, in the fashion of Coogan, Temple and Durbin.

Perhaps the most notable form of children's entertainment in the 1930s was the animated short. Although animation became inextricably linked in the popular consciousness with Walt Disney Studios after it turned to feature-length animations in 1937, during the mid-1930s every major studio had its own animation division.¹⁹⁴ It was the films of Disney and Warner Bros., however, which captured the public imagination most. After Disney pioneered the animated talkie with *Steamboat Willie* (Ub Iwerks) in 1928, two fortuitously-named Disney animators, Hugh Harman and Rudolph Ising, quickly set up their own rival independent company, Harman-Ising Productions, which became affiliated with Warner Bros.¹⁹⁵ Rivalry between Disney and Warner's animation divisions continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Disney launched a series of shorts under the umbrella name 'Silly Symphonies'; Warner's responded with their 'Looney Tunes' and 'Merrie Melodies' series.¹⁹⁶ By 1934, cartoons had become established on the movie bill, alongside newsreels and main features, as part of a typical evening's entertainment.¹⁹⁷ However, between 1928 and 1937, animated shorts, although doubtlessly enjoyed by adults, were still generally regarded as children's entertainment.

¹⁹⁴ Barry Putterman, 'A Short Critical History of Warner Bros. Cartoons', *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998 (pp. 29-38), pp. 29-30.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

In terms of production, as Eric Smoodin argues, Disney ‘achieved success by marketing his product as ideal children’s fare’.¹⁹⁸ Leon Schlesinger, the head of Warner Bros. animation, maintained that ‘we cannot forget that whilst the cartoon today is excellent entertainment for young and old, it is primarily the favourite motion picture fare of children’.¹⁹⁹ The standard product was between 6 and 8 minutes in length. Disney released 198 such shorts between 1928 and 1939.²⁰⁰ As Smoodin observes, ‘exhibition practises relegated cartoons to less important positions on the film bill than those held by the feature film or the newsreel’.²⁰¹ This situation changed only with the colossal success of Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), the first animated feature.²⁰² The relatively small section devoted to Disney in this chapter may appear obtuse to those accustomed to the belief that American family entertainment begins and ends with that studio, but despite its undoubted popularity, Disney had a relatively minor role in the emergence of American family entertainment until 1937. Only after the release of *Snow White* did Disney become a major player in the family market.

Seeking the family audience in late-1930s Hollywood

‘The pearl of great price’ to the Hollywood film industry, as Margaret Farrand Thorp observed in 1939, ‘is the picture that pleases everybody’.²⁰³ However, very few movies produced by Hollywood were capable of pleasing ‘everybody’. Appeal remained extremely fragmentary. Whilst the term ‘family film’ might be pressed into service to

¹⁹⁸ Eric Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993, p. 15.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁰⁰ Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the American Child 1930-1960*, p. 115.

²⁰¹ Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, p. 1.

²⁰² With box office rentals of around \$8 million, the film was comfortably the second most commercially successful of the decade, after *Gone with the Wind*. See Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, pp. 356-363.

²⁰³ Thorp, *America at the Movies*, p. 16.

describe inoffensive, saccharine fare such as the child-star films of Shirley Temple or nostalgic literary adaptations such as *Little Women* and *The Little Princess*, as a label it is somewhat inadequate. These films were products of middlebrow culture, reflecting adult social concerns, such as the effects of the Depression and the supposedly pernicious impact of industrialisation and global capitalism upon contemporary society. They were designed to appeal to middle-class adults who responded to cute, precocious little girls, pleasing sentiment and nostalgic evocations of a mythologised past. Children had screen entertainment of their own: action-heavy series and serials, comedies, animated shorts, westerns – matinee fare in general. In this sense, we can see that the barriers erected between children and adults at the movies in the 1910s and 1920s remained largely intact. Despite the notion of the ‘great audience’ – which circulated widely in industry propaganda and subsequently in popular critical discourse – the concept was illusory. What we *can* see in 1930s cinema is a general levelling process in audience suitability, which saw commercial cinema finally taken seriously by the intelligentsia as a mass medium perhaps capable of universal reach. Many more films (though certainly not all) were morally and thematically *suitable* for children and adults to view together. Few films, though, possessed mass *appeal*.

In late-1930s Hollywood, there were perhaps three types of film possessing broad suitability *and* appeal, capable of galvanising a cross-demographic audience. None of these were developed into wider industry production strategy. The first type was the Charlie Chaplin slapstick comedy; the second was the Disney animated feature; the third the prestige fantasy. These various forms require some analysis, as they each possessed qualities thought to be unique, and impossible to replicate on a production-line basis.

Chaplin was one of the ‘pearls of great price’ to which Thorp alluded.²⁰⁴ He was surely the *most* unique figure operating within Hollywood during the studio era: almost everything about his movies and his methods delineated him as irreplaceable; a one-off. The slowness of Chaplin’s work-rate was legendary: he made only ten movies in a career spanning fifty years, partly because of a need to fulfil ‘every creative function on a film, whether it is scripting, composing, or directing actors’.²⁰⁵ His level of creative autonomy was unrivalled, mainly because nobody else had the power to operate so independently.²⁰⁶ Although his release rate was intermittent at best, and his later films heavily criticised for pretension, Chaplin’s early-to-mid period work was beloved of critics and mass audiences alike. He successfully tapped into a multi-layered mode of appeal which operated, at its base level, on slapstick, yet was framed by a keen eye for social critique and tragicomedy. With the release of *Modern Times* in 1936, James Shelley Hamilton wrote:

For something like a quarter of a century Charlie Chaplin has been the delight of ordinary movie-goers, the masses who in the beginning were articulate only with their nickels and dimes, with which they set huge fortunes a-building. In later years the literati, the dilettanti, the cognoscenti and the rest of the esthetes [sic] hailed him as artist and genius [...] he creates something of a feeling that perhaps our mortal eyes are looking upon a bit of immortality.²⁰⁷

Chaplin was a social phenomenon whose filmic persona, ‘the tramp’, was perhaps even, as David Thomson suggests, ‘the most famous image of the twentieth century’.²⁰⁸

Disney films also quickly acquired cultural significance transcending the ephemerality of typical Hollywood entertainment. The studio’s development into feature

²⁰⁴ Thorp, *America at the Movies*, p. 16.

²⁰⁵ David Thomson, ‘Sir Charles Chaplin’, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, pp. 122-125.

²⁰⁶ Chaplin was, after all, one of the founding members of Hollywood major United Artists.

²⁰⁷ James Shelley Hamilton, ‘Modern Times’, March 1936, reprinted in *From Quasimodo to Scarlett O’Hara: A National Board of Review Anthology*, pp. 217-220.

²⁰⁸ Thomson, ‘Sir Charles Chaplin’, p. 124.

filmmaking with *Snow White* was integral to this process of capturing a broad cross-demographic audience, and its implicit development from child- to family-orientated programming. With its position within the studio system far from secure, this expansion carried great risk, as the consumption of time and money involved in the production process was considerable. Whereas ‘a ten-minute film required roughly 14,400 drawings, *Snow White* consisted of over 2 million’.²⁰⁹ Upon its release, however, critics marvelled at its timeless charm and universal appeal. P. S. Harrison affirmed that it ‘should be enjoyed by everyone’, noting the film’s obvious attraction to children but maintaining that ‘there is no reason why adults should not react in the same way to it’.²¹⁰ Exhibitors were also delighted with the picture. One 1930s Nebraskan theatre manager enthused:

Hats off to Walt Disney. Here is possibly the grandest thing offered to the public for entertainment. It appeals to every living person from the ages of 2 to 102. After personally viewing this picture sixteen times, I regretted to see it leave the town.²¹¹

The commercial success of the film – especially striking given its particular appeal for children – was unprecedented. Disney was swiftly heralded as an outstanding, one-of-a-kind creative ‘genius’, and his productions nothing short of ‘art’ – in contrast to the animated shorts of MGM, Paramount and Warner Bros., widely considered to be ‘mere cartoons’.²¹² Like Chaplin, Disney’s ‘uniqueness’ seemed to preclude the possibility of broader integration of animated features into studio production schedules.

It would seem impossible to write a chapter about 1930s family films and completely overlook *The Wizard of Oz*. The adoration this film has received over the years, however, risks ahistoricising the conditions of production and response, for it was

²⁰⁹ Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the American Child 1930-1960*, p. 115.

²¹⁰ P. S. Harrison, ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, *Harrisons Reports*, Saturday January 15th, 1938, vol. xx, no. 9.

²¹¹ Thorp, *America at the Movies*, p. 16.

²¹² Timothy R. White, ‘From Disney to Warner Bros.: The Critical Shift’, *Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation* (pp. 38-48), p. 38.

neither a critical nor commercial success. When it became apparent that *Snow White* would be a major hit, there was ‘a wild search for producers for comparable fantasies’.²¹³ Clearly, when MGM purchased the rights to L. Frank Baum’s 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* for \$75,000, it was hoping for similar success.²¹⁴ The movie was regarded as a prestige production, costing just under \$2,800,000, but it only returned about \$2,000,000 and failed to return a profit until its 1948-49 re-release.²¹⁵ *The New Republic*’s Otis Ferguson noted its similarity to *Snow White* but criticised its lack of humour and subtlety.²¹⁶ *The New Yorker*’s Russell Maloney lamented a lack ‘of imagination, good taste, or ingenuity’.²¹⁷ This indifference served to confirm the Hollywood maxim that fantasies were bad business at the box office. The subsequent failure of Fox’s stylistically similar production, *The Blue Bird*, underlined this point, and the fantasy genre was once again relegated to second-feature fare. Harnetz argues that the movie’s exalted reputation can be traced to the mid-1950s, when television network CBS purchased the rights and began broadcasting it annually at Christmas, a tradition which endured.²¹⁸ As she observes, ‘distance would do many things to *The Wizard of Oz*. The over-produced quality that was so offensive to critics in 1939 has...later lent a hand to the picture’s being seen as significant’.²¹⁹ Whilst modern observers of family entertainment may regard *The Wizard of Oz* with misty-eyed approval, its reception in 1939 was far more ambivalent.

²¹³ Harnetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz*, pp. 3-4.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Nevertheless, each of these three forms has a stronger claim to the descriptor 'family film' than the literary adaptations and child-star films. Not only did they possess both suitability *and* appeal for cross-demographic audiences, but also, to employ a much over-used epithet, a 'timeless' quality that enables what is now called 'repeatability'. To be more precise, their appeal is not limited to the cultural and social conditions of production. As I have already suggested, the absence of such specificity allows easier access for children. However, Hollywood's inability to replicate these forms prevented their widespread integration into the broader 'family' strategy. Chaplin was unique, and pointed towards the past, while Disney pointed towards the future, but was widely-regarded, like Chaplin, to be a one-off. Meanwhile, *The Wizard of Oz* – as with other contemporary fantasies – was impeded not only by technical limitations but by contemporary distaste for excessive juvenility. *The Thief of Bagdad* – a British fantasy film released the following year loosely based on the Arabian Nights – was not a massive hit in the U.S. in spite of its incredible spectacle and evident technical virtuosity, which arguably eclipsed *The Wizard of Oz*; what it lacked, ironically, was a strongly moralistic and sentimental slant. *Snow White* may have been charming and iconoclastic, but it was also a peculiarly middlebrow morality play, which helped its cause with domestic adult audiences. During the following decade, Hollywood producers remained resistant to spectacle and aesthetic appeal, and, as the next chapter will illustrate, continued to orientate its family products towards the adult, embracing less risky, more formulaic types of family movie.

Chapter 2: The Middlebrow Family Film, 1940-1953

In the 1940s, the Hollywood family film entered an extended period of stability and relative uniformity. Child-star movies were largely phased-out, and the two dominant family genres were the small-town domestic comedy-drama, and the feature animation. Animated features were the near-exclusive province of Walt Disney studios, and still represent something of an anomaly in mainstream narrative filmmaking. In the 1940s, Hollywood continued to make films intended largely for children, in the form of B-grade series, serials, cartoons and second-feature material exhibited in matinee slots, but this practice was slowly phased out during the early-1950s, when the major studios abandoned B movie production. In addition to such well-remembered (though generically anomalous) 1940s family movies as *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) and *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton, 1947), there was the emerging genre of the animal film, which comprised such notable productions as *My Friend Flicka* (Harold D. Schuster, 1943), *Lassie Come Home* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1943), *Black Beauty* (Max Nosseck, 1946) and *The Yearling* (Clarence Brown, 1946). However, the dominant family genre from the early-1940s to the early-1950s was the small-town, family comedy-drama. Because of its popularity and time-span, and because its central image of a happy, functional nuclear family exercised such enduring power over Hollywood family entertainment in the decades to come, it is this genre with which I am chiefly concerned in this chapter. The early-1940s were a period of continued consolidation and expansion by Hollywood in general. Movie admissions increased yearly between 1940

and 1945, reaching their peak in 1946.¹ Genre films prospered during the 1940s, particularly war movies, musicals, crime dramas, melodramas and westerns. The industry hit a particular boom during World War II, when, according to Thomas Schatz, it ‘may have [achieved] its finest hour as a social institution and a cultural force’.² As Schatz is quick to point out, though, Hollywood was not a unified industry during wartime, even at the point of its greatest commercial stability.³ For all MPPDA president Will Hays’s propaganda attesting to Hollywood’s universal reach, certain genres were clearly marked by particularly adult themes, especially noirs and A-westerns. In fact, movie reformers continued to petition throughout this period for more regulated programs of children’s matinees and production of ‘children’s films’ – fruitlessly, in the latter venture.⁴ Movies spanning various genres – amongst them *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947), *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) and *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) – give lie to the persistent fallacy that most studio-era productions were family films. Whilst critics have tended to regard this tension between industry propaganda and reality as emblematic of the classical era’s admirable diversity, it foreshadowed the disintegration of the studio system in the late-1940s. The United States Justice Department renewed its anti-trust case against the major studios’ hegemony over the film industry, bringing vertical integration to an end by forcing the studios to divorce themselves of their theatres in

¹ Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, Belmont and California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1989, p. 36.

² Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997, p. 1.

³ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁴ ‘Children’s Films Gain in Momentum’, *The New York Times*, Friday September 19th, 1947, p. 26; ‘Films for Children Urged on Hollywood’, *The New York Times*, Sunday April 23rd, 1950, p. 64.

1948. Simultaneously, social developments such as the mass migration to the suburbs and the rapid development of television were changing American recreational habits. Movie attendance fell dramatically in the post-war period – and continued to decline until the 1970s.⁵ What is striking, in retrospect, is how closely the plight of the family film mirrored broader crises in Hollywood. As the 1940s began, the domestic family film and animated feature were emerging, critically- and commercially-vital media; by the end of the decade, both were in seemingly inexorable decline.

The animated feature

The animated feature began with the release of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Its colossal, boundary-breaking success seemed to augur a new, more profitable direction for the family film, but Paramount – which had a long-standing distribution deal with Fleischer Studios – was the only other producer to release feature-length animations during the entire studio era.⁶ The relative failure of its two productions – *Gulliver's Travels* (Dave Fleischer, 1939) and *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* (Dave Fleischer, 1942) – signalled a premature end to the Fleischer/Paramount venture.⁷ This left Disney the sole producer of animated features, and because the studio's position in the market was unique, there seemed little obstacle to continued expansion. In reality, there were several key obstacles. Animated features were complicated to manufacture: by the

⁵ Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, p. 36.

⁶ Fleischer Studios, which specialised in animated shorts, started life in 1921 as Inkwell Studios, formed by brothers Max and Dave Fleischer. Although the company never quite rivalled Disney and Warner Bros., their Betty Boop, Koko the Clown and Popeye-starred animations, as distributed by Paramount, were highly popular.

⁷ Michael Barrier notes that although *Gulliver's Travels* was 'modestly profitable', Paramount had to stop distributing *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* in 1946, having only recouped around one-third of the production costs. See *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 296, 305.

1950s, the necessary financial outlay, the amount of time needed to bring them to the screen, and the attendant risk all led Disney to conclude that such films were almost more trouble than they were worth.⁸ Furthermore, Michael Barrier argues that finding stories suitable for adaptation was a problem for the Fleischers and Disney alike.⁹ More fundamentally, there was widespread distrust of Walt Disney and his medium. Animation was relatively new, and carried pejorative connotations with children's matinees. The appeal of animation, it must be remembered, was primarily aesthetic and sensual, rather than intellectual. Relying largely on spectacle to attract consumers, such material was viewed by the Hollywood establishment as unsophisticated, despite – or perhaps partially because of – its enormous mass appeal. As Schickel argues, Disney spent most of his career 'tolerated by *haute* Hollywood as an enigmatic eccentric whose presence was "good for the industry"'.¹⁰ His films nevertheless stood as a powerful illustration that the industry had paid heed to pressure in the early-1930s to regulate its output, ensuring general suitability for mass audiences.

The early-1940s brought success and failure to Disney in equal measure. As the decade began, the man and the studio could scarcely have been held in higher regard. The period 'signalled Disney's apotheosis as a media hero', and his reputation as a creative genius grew further with the release of *Pinocchio* (Hamilton Luske, Ben Sharpsteen) in February 1940.¹¹ *The Board of Review's* James Shelley Hamilton felt that

⁸ Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version*, Chicago: Elephant Paperback, 1997, p. 298.

⁹ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, p. 302.

¹⁰ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, p. 29.

¹¹ Eric Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993, p. 97.

the movie went ‘far beyond anything Disney and his studio have ever done before’.¹² Hamilton concluded his review by musing: ‘in technique it is hard to imagine how Disney can go further, although it is one of the qualities of genius that it can go beyond the common imagination’.¹³ By 1945, however, the studio was in financial difficulty and Disney’s reputation was in decline.¹⁴ *The Saturday Review* claimed that the ‘genius’ in the earlier work was an ability to appeal ‘to what is childish in adults and adult in children’.¹⁵ With the turning of the critical tide, Disney was now under attack for failing to reconcile ‘the disparate groups in the movie audience’ – a perceived absence of the very quality for which he was lauded only a few years earlier.¹⁶

As I suggested in the previous chapter, Hollywood harboured a slightly incompatible dual agenda. It wanted to expand the reach of the motion picture to a position of commercial dominance, but it also courted cultural acceptance and the approval of the middle-classes. Disney’s features seemed to offer both, by virtue of their massive critical and commercial success, and yet its products oscillated wildly between ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’. Walt Disney was ‘intensely aware that, even with cinema, cartoons were seen as being less important than feature films’.¹⁷ Animated features were a curious halfway-house between the lowbrow connotations of the children’s matinee and the highbrow connotations of the prestige production. Disney’s dissatisfaction with his personal and professional status within Hollywood was certainly a factor in his desire to

¹² James Shelley Hamilton, ‘Pinocchio’, March 1940, reprinted in *From Quasimodo to Scarlett O’Hara: A National Board of Review Anthology*, ed. Stanley Hochman, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982, pp. 342-343.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, p. 101.

¹⁵ Cited in Smoodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era*, pp. 101-102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Amy M. Davis, ‘The Fall and Rise of Fantasia’, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 2001 (pp. 63-78), p. 65.

produce *Fantasia* (1940), which fuses an episodic series of animated narrative segments to classical music conducted by Leopold Stokowski. Although the movie acquired a cult audience and achieved notable success when released on VHS in the 1990s, it failed at the box office.¹⁸ The primary factor in this failure, Davis argues, was the conflict between the movie's inherent broad-range appeal, and the fact that the film was marketed primarily towards adults.¹⁹

Fantasia's poor reception had two notable consequences. Firstly, the studio was plunged into financial difficulty resulting from the failure to recoup production costs. Secondly, the studio reactively abandoned the technical and aesthetic innovation distinguishing its early feature films. 'After 1941 [...] Disney's work shifted noticeably', Steven Watts argues, evidencing

a new instinct to identify and uphold American values rather than playfully to probe or lampoon them. Individual achievement, consumer prosperity, family togetherness, celebratory nationalism, and technological promise became the beacons of the new Disney corpus.²⁰

From this point onwards, Disney broadcasted his disdain for 'art' at every opportunity.²¹ Shortly before he died, he revealed: 'I've always had a nightmare. I dream that one of my pictures has ended up in an art theatre. And I wake up shaking'.²² During the studio's financial crisis, 'only government contracts for training and propaganda films kept the studio functioning, its crisis hidden and the Disney name before the public'.²³ Disney was commissioned by the U.S. government to produce two animated features as part of its 'good neighbours' policy with Latin America, intended to bring South America

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 67.

²⁰ Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, pp. 448-449.

²¹ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, p. 38.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, p. 28.

‘firmly and fully within the United States’ sphere of influence’.²⁴ *Saludos Amigos* (1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (Norman Ferguson, 1945) were the result, the latter notable for fusing animation with live-action. Although these contracts provided financial ballast to the ailing studio, overall the 1940s were not a successful period for Disney. By the end of the decade, the Warner Bros. animations department had overtaken Disney as the leader in cartoon shorts, and in the late-1950s Disney abandoned the format altogether.²⁵ Walt Disney later admitted that the unsuccessful post-war years had been marked by crippling indecision.²⁶ In the early-1950s, the studio embraced live-action as its run-of-the-mill product, with production of the riskier, more time-consuming animated features cut back and formally-conventionalised.

The small-town family comedy and the rural/urban dichotomy

In contrast to Disney’s animated features, the small-town family comedy just about weathered the storm of the post-war industry decline. Many such films were pitched at prestige level, often adaptations of successful stage productions. Although an exhaustive list of this genre would be lengthy and contentious, the most notable examples from this period are *Ah, Wilderness!* (Clarence Brown, 1935), *The Human Comedy* (Clarence Brown, 1943), *Meet me in St Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), *National Velvet* (Clarence Brown, 1945), *Centennial Summer* (Otto Preminger, 1946), *Life With Father* (Michael Curtiz, 1947), *Summer Holiday* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1948), *I Remember Mama* (George Stevens, 1948), *Cheaper By The Dozen* (Walter Lang, 1950), *On Moonlight Bay* (Roy

²⁴ Eric Smoodin, ‘Introduction: How to Read Walt Disney’, *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, (pp. 1-20), p. 11.

²⁵ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, pp. 203, 204.

²⁶ Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, p. 264.

Del Ruth, 1951) and *By The Light of The Silvery Moon* (David Butler, 1953). Of the five biggest Hollywood studios – Paramount, MGM, Fox, Warner Bros. and RKO – only Paramount (which had harboured an apparent disdain for family movies since the mid-1930s, perhaps partly due to its self-serving representation of itself as a purveyor of sophistication) showed no interest in the small-town family movie. The genre is defined not only by its broad-based audience suitability, but typically by strong production values and impressive returns at the box office. The narratives themselves are typically episodic, cyclical, and nostalgic, and the central families typically consist of a strong, financially solvent and community-respected father figure, a pragmatic, influential, housewife, and a large, selection of children of varying ages.

Unlike most of the family films from the 1930s, the modes of address in the 1940s small-town family comedy were differentiated, to satisfy young and old alike. *Meet me in St Louis*, for example, features a full extended family – two parents, a large group of children of varying ages, and even a grand-parent – co-habiting. These films, then, operated within a broad cultural understanding of motion pictures as ‘family entertainment’. Positioned as fun for all the family, they united real-world families in a physical sense even as they offered pleasing evocations of the institution on the big screen. This reliance upon differentiated direct address is particular to the small-town family comedy of the 1940s and early-1950s, after which the increasing power of youth audiences forced Hollywood to abandon this model in favour of multi-demographic programming. By then, the small-town family comedy had attained a dusty, old-fashioned air of obsolescence.

As with most cycles, the small-town family films of the 1940s and 1950s reflected both commercial requirements and contemporary social trends. In terms of production, they were lavish. Usually filmed in Technicolor and featuring minutely-observed period detail, they often utilised a musical framework to deepen the pleasurable association for the audience. Beyond these basic aspects, however, they traded upon social nostalgia for a bygone age (the period around the turn of the twentieth century recurs time and again). Magnifying and commodifying nostalgia for a period of relative social stability, before widespread industrialisation, global warfare and economic depression, the genre posited an overriding tension between past and present, informed by an inherent resistance to patterns of real or imagined social change. This tension was often manifested in an underlying conflict between pastoral and urban associations, where industrialisation and urbanisation were figured as harmful forces of disruption. The exaggerated opposition between 'small-town' and 'big city' was, therefore, integral to these films.

The cultural origins of the form are complex. The writings of de Tocqueville, Mark Twain and Booth Tarkington, the Eugene O'Neill play *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933) and the Thornton Wilder play *Our Town* (1937), are obvious reference points, each reflecting a wider American cultural valorisation of pastoralism, related to complex ideologies of liberty and individuality. However, although such values reverberate throughout the fabric of American literature, they surely reached their cultural zenith during the 1930s and 1940s. Emanuel Levy identifies a supposed 'return to the soil' as constitutive in the rise of small-town narratives in the wake of the Great Depression; a perspective afforded greater credence by the temporal dislocation these narratives effect.²⁷ Equally, however,

²⁷ Levy, *Small Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of Community*, New York: Continuum, 1991, p. 66.

there is little historical substance beyond the tokenistic; the cheerful invocation of the Stanley Steamer in *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Summer Holiday*, or the Negro statue in the front garden in *Meet me in St Louis*. Put simply, there is a pronounced tendency in such films, as Bruce Babington and Peter Evans suggest, to reflect ‘reality through its most pleasing representations’.²⁸ However, transitional film adaptations like *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Our Town* (Sam Wood, 1940) at least display a greater interest in maintaining plausibility; the impression that what we see *might* truthfully represent a lapsed or former way of life. These texts are precursors to the more opulent small-town family comedies of the 1940s.

Such modesty often obscures a coded pretention towards profundity, in which ‘traditional’, small-town communities are held to possess a more elemental relationship with nature; the ability to tap into some form of ‘truer’ reality. The basis of this implication is noumenal, rather than substantive; with no intellectual framework upon which to valorise pre-industrial small-town life, producers justify this position by invoking emotional intuition. Both *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Our Town*, two of the most erudite contributions to the nostalgic small-town genre, are resolutely anti-intellectual, but simultaneously position themselves as ‘democratic art’, possessing an articulated understanding of the world as it really is, and the values which make it special. As such, they implicitly reject the elitist conviction ‘that true art is never popular and necessarily has a coterie audience’, and conform to the belief articulated by Gilbert Seldes and others that popular entertainment ought to address itself to the majority with intelligence and maturity, but remain accessible by avoiding pretention.²⁹

²⁸ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 161.

²⁹ Leo Braudy, *The World In A Frame: What We See In Films*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 6; Gilbert Seldes, *The Great Audience*, New York: Viking, 1950.



Figure 4: ‘It’s a nice kind of town, know what I mean?’ The stage director addresses the camera in *Our Town* (1940).

However, the idealised small-town setting came to prominence largely as a response to social anxiety. The first half of the twentieth century saw developments in lifestyle and technology gather momentum at a bewildering pace. Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd’s sociological account of a small 1920s American community, which they termed ‘Middletown’, reveals this anxiety in almost every facet of everyday life.³⁰

Whilst qualitative analysis of the community in question revealed a general frustration

³⁰ See Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, London: Constable, 1929. The term ‘Middletown’ is used by the authors to preserve some level of scientific distancing. ‘Middletown’, in reality, is a town in Indiana called Muncie. Numerous follow-up accounts of life in Middletown by separate authors have appeared since the original, in recognition of its ‘middle-of-the-road quality’ (p.7). Despite this, the Lynds were keen to point out that they did not make any implication that Middletown was, in any way, ‘typical’. However, the term seems to have been conceived to preserve the universal association of the town, as it is presented.

surrounding the drudgery working (and frequently social and marital) lives entailed, this was considered normative. The Lynds argue that ‘Middletown’s life exhibits at almost every point either some change or some stress arising from failure to change’, regardless of individual disposition.³¹ They identify a community rife with prejudice, alienation and corruption. A resident of Middletown tentatively observed an insidious but unspecified form of anxiety in the population: ‘these people are all afraid of something [...] What is it?’³² The Lynds viewed the process as symptomatic of a wider cultural trend, rather than as an isolated or provincial phenomenon:

If, as has appeared over and over again, Middletown tends to bear down harder on the relatively solid ground, it is simply exhibiting the reluctance to changing habitual ways common to men everywhere.³³

When the Lynds returned to Middletown in the mid-1930s during the Depression, these ideologies were even more entrenched, reflecting a nationwide trend in which the U.S. small-town became the cultural metaphor of choice for the containment of progressive forces, affording the small-town a mythical, idealised quality in the cultural imagination.

Social change, it is said, tends to originate in the cities before projecting outwards. As Daniel J. Monti suggests, ‘all the problems that we see in America are problems we see first and worst in American cities’.³⁴ Comparisons of small-town and city life tend to be based around differences, rather than similarities, establishing an intellectual polarity in which one lifestyle choice represents group solidarity and tradition, and the other corruption, social fragmentation and rapid change. As an essentially conservative medium, Hollywood cinema has perpetuated this false opposition. The town and city are,

³¹ Ibid, p. 498.

³² Ibid, p. 493.

³³ Ibid, p. 498.

³⁴ Daniel J Monti, *The American City: A Social and Cultural History*, Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1999, p. 29.

in many respects, different manifestations of the same basic model. Monti illustrates not only the physical convergence, but charts the rise of the intellectual tradition rejecting the so-called ‘modern city’, where the widespread movement from rural to urban seems to represent the lamented societal embrace of industrialisation and mechanisation.³⁵ It is then a small step to attributing other supposed cultural ills to the urban environment. Rarely, in popular culture, are such complex social realities mediated with full consideration of the shades and subtleties of reality.

The congested urban space has long been regarded as a locus of pressures and anxieties. Rural or small-town life, when disengaged from its parallel blue collar, economically-depressed connotations, has been frequently figured as serene, more simplistic, less ‘modern’ (when used pejoratively in conjunction with industrialisation).

As Babington and Evans note, although

a contrary tendency in the pastoral tradition recognises the possibility of rural (or suburban) imbecility, the mode has mainly a positive spirit, upholding [...] ‘the thousand decencies that daily flow’ that Milton’s Adam celebrated to his Eve.³⁶

The Lynds’ Middletown study revealed a persistent preoccupation with the possibility of economic depression and disenfranchisement. Indeed, whilst turn-of-the-century rural life provided a symbolic haven from the ravages of the Depression, its effects were actually badly felt in such areas.

Contrary to the implications of the pastoral family film, hard work was rarely viewed in rural communities as a token of heroic, productive spirit; nor was it seen to

³⁵ Most large cities began life as small-towns, but, as Monti explains, small-towns have an economic interest in development into cities, and that numerous small-towns have remained that way because of failure to seize development opportunities rather than a cultural rejection of the urban. Indeed, the complexities involved are underpinned by Monti’s assertion that ‘the failure to pursue such opportunities when they arise or to create new economic ventures on one’s own...all but ensures that one’s town will remain small and its residents less than prosperous’. *The American City: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 80.

³⁶ Babington and Evans, *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical*, p. 141.

embody a stoic fight against adversity affiliated with the taming of nature, or other romantic conceits. Rather,

for both working and business class no other accompaniment of getting a living approaches in importance the money received for their work. It is more this future, instrumental aspect of work, rather than the intrinsic satisfactions involved, that keeps Middletown working so hard as more and more of the activities of living are coming to be strained through the bars of the dollar sign.³⁷

Furthermore:

As Middletown has become reluctantly conscious from time to time of discrepancies in its institutional system, it has frequently tended to avoid “doing something about” these “social problems” of “bad times”, “the younger generation”, “corrupt politicians”, “housing”, “street traffic” and so on, and blaming the difficulties on “the nature of things”.³⁸

In various ways, the family comedies of this period reflect this fatalistic philosophy, seemingly acknowledging the existence of a pervasive social problem – excessive urbanisation, industrialisation, advanced capitalism where the entrepreneurs and small businesses associated with the small-town give way to national and international conglomerates – but offering no solution beyond escape into the past. Of course, this also reflects the Hollywood desire to profit through popular anxieties, a commodification which would probably be defended on the grounds of topicality. Andrew Britton, discussing *Meet me in St Louis*, avers that ‘1903/04 becomes the point at which ‘city’ can still mean community [...] the freezing of the development of capitalism at a certain point’.³⁹

In such texts as *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Meet me in St Louis* and *Life with Father*, anxieties and uncertainties are manifested in a contrary pull towards the familiar and conventional, towards a historical period recent enough to elicit familiarity in

³⁷ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, pp. 80-81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 501.

³⁹ Andrew Britton, ‘Meet me In St Louis’: Smith, or the Ambiguities’, *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 3, 1977, p. 9.

contemporary adult audiences, yet different enough – an era before the widespread affordability of the motor car, before the widespread development of popular cinema, before the War – to breed nostalgia. When Thornton Wilder's stage director (Frank Craven) in *Our Town* sagely intones, 'we all know, deep in our bones, that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings', he is appealing to viewers' emotions, rather than their intellects; to the hope that there is more to life than the hardships of day-to-day life. In the pastoral tradition, the privileging of such metaphysical aspects as spirituality and transcendence often parallels a rejection of rationalism. Consider Eugene O'Neill's play *Ah, Wilderness!* (and later its filmic adaptation), introduced as 'A Comedy of Recollection', in which distorted memory and historical reconfiguration serve the purposes of broad audience appeal.

Nostalgia and memory are tightly bound, and in this genre, both concepts are repeatedly invoked. *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *I Remember Mama* are both framed by voice-overs from the eldest girls of the family, looking back on their childhoods from the perspective of adulthood. The episodic qualities of the narratives, which move disjointedly from one childhood reminiscence to another, evoke the similarly fragmentary qualities of 'real life'. Both *I Remember Mama* and *On Moonlight Bay* reveal their agendas with the opening images. The opening credits of *I Remember Mama* are shown over a montage of overtly nostalgic, old-fashioned pencil sketches showing images from an imagined historical moment, quite overt in their invocation of a way of life long abandoned. *On Moonlight Bay* opens with the credits displayed over old colour photographs of small-town life. One of them depicts a congregation gathered in front of a large stage, above which is placed a banner, reading 'class of 1917'. We later discover

this to be the graduation class of Bill Sherman (Gordon MacRae), the young hero of the film. The graduation ceremony forms a significant part of the final act of the movie; the prefiguring of these events, achieved through the paradoxically faded photograph, represents a disruption in the ordered linearity of time. The manoeuvring of such events into faded stills underpins the nostalgically reminiscent mood, while establishing the events to be shown as a matter of relatable history. The element of recollection inherent in *Ah, Wilderness!* is taken to its logical intended conclusion – the framing device of an old photograph album. It suggests an excursion into the past, to which the audience are privileged spectators, filtered through the vicissitudes of recollection, and equally bound up with emotion.

Later entries in the genre cultivate an air of unreality; a dream-like state where social norms can be subverted and normative rational laws do not necessarily apply. This tone of unreality further distances these films from contemporary anxieties, such as the effects of the Depression and the Second World War. Equally important in films such as *Ah, Wilderness! Meet me in St Louis* and *On Moonlight Bay* is the youthful romance, which rarely suggests burgeoning sexuality but rather imminent marriage, domesticity and children. Marriage becomes an integral narrative component because it implies generational continuity. Crucially, the prediction of marriage and children, and the consequent positing of a future narrative beyond the structure of the film is not a portent of the unknowable, anxiety-producing dialectic between unwillingness to change and individual inability to prevent it, but represents the symbolic transmission not only of wisdom and experience, but of the ‘traditional’ values embodied by the genre.

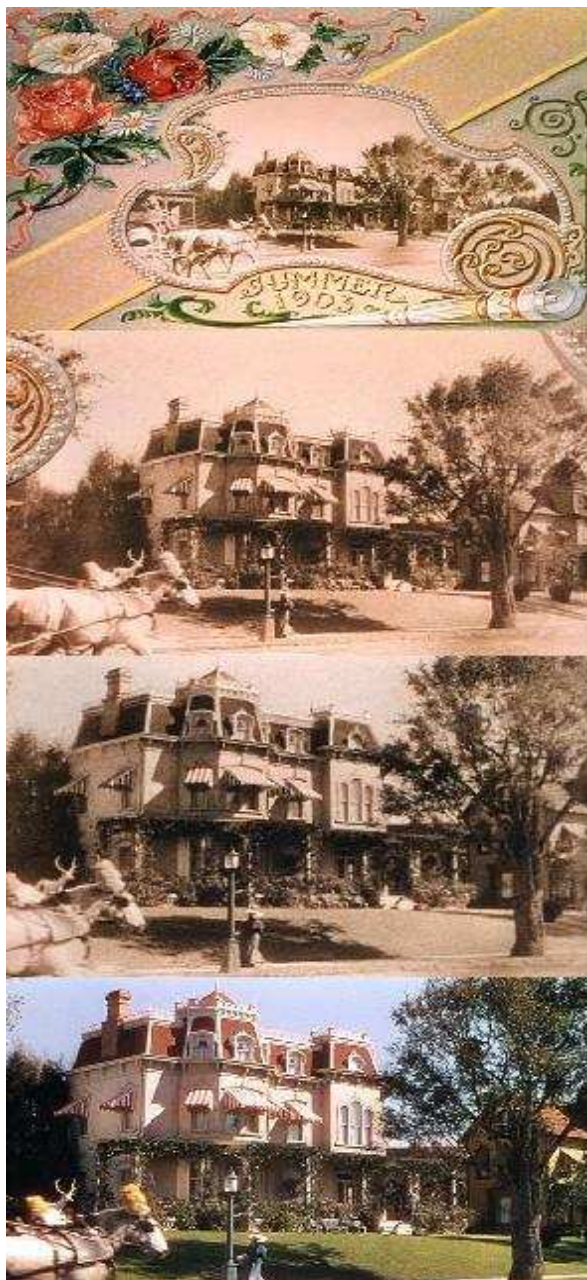


Figure 5: The faded photograph comes to life, in *Meet me in St Louis* (1944)

Life in the pastoral family film is relatively slow and untroubled, and even in *Meet me in St Louis*, ostensibly located within a large, independent city, the impression of small-town life is maintained. The ultimate arrival of the World Fair, heralded throughout the narrative, should have offered a disturbing portent of the wider infiltration



Figure 6: A similar technique is used in *Life with Father* (1947) which opens with a still photograph being viewed through a hand-held slide viewer.

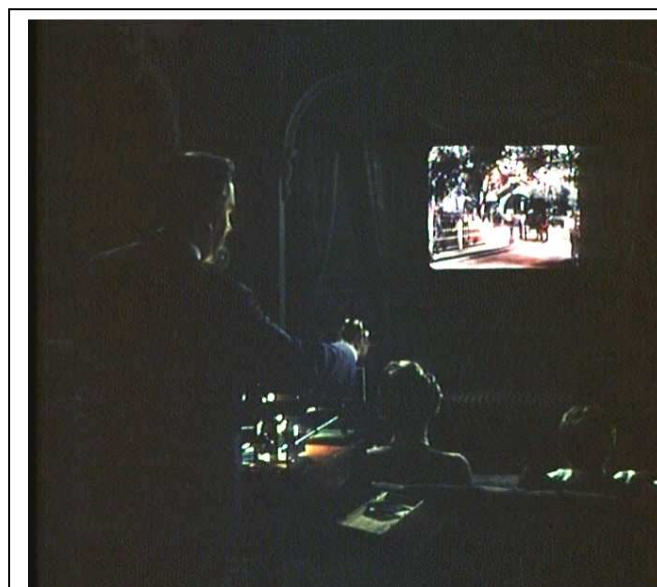


Figure 7: And again in the opening scene of *On Moonlight Bay* (1951).

of advanced capitalism into the semi-pastoral town. Instead, it simply becomes an exaggerated extension of the arcadia, with its bright, Technicolored lights, hazy colours and distant ambience remaining, as Babington and Evans argue,

the most extreme example of a metaphor that holds together both the past and progress in an impossible image, in spite of reason's claim that the world of the city, by entering the small-town, must destroy it.⁴⁰

By this point, the pastoral family film had abandoned the realism of *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Our Town*, and embraced a mode of appeal which, while stopping short of the fantastic, wholeheartedly embraced the impossible. Thus, even the approach of industrialisation cannot pose a threat to this fantasy world; nothing can.

The ongoing tension in U.S. cultural history between the public and private spheres lies equally at the heart of the 1940s Hollywood family movie. The 1930s 'return to the soil' paralleled a reversion to a unified, middlebrow conception of 'the family'.⁴¹ Historians such as Stephanie Coontz have noted a general shift towards the protective qualities of the private realm during periods of social anxiety. When Thomas Jefferson talked about 'the pursuit of happiness', Coontz argues, he referred not to 'a subjective or private state of mind, far less to a retreat into the family. He meant a public happiness which is measurable'.⁴² Therefore, the privileged position of the family as a private realm is not, Coontz suggests, a 'traditional' ideology. Rather, it was inaugurated 'little more than one hundred years ago' by 'a middle class that had retreated from larger

⁴⁰ Babington and Evans, *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical*, p. 144.

⁴¹ The persistence of the belief that the family is the centre of the socialisation process can be seen in the rhetorical attraction of functionalist sociological theory, which maintained its pre-eminent position in models of social systems until the 1960s. See, for example, Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales, *Family: Socialisation and Interaction Process*, London: Routledge, 1956. It is maintained that 'the family has become a more specialised agency than before', and that since 'the family is clearly in all societies', it is therefore 'an institutionalised system' (pp 9-16).

⁴² Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Nostalgia Trap*, New York, Basic Books, 1992, p. 99.

ethical concerns’, and this shift towards the private sphere ‘may be a symptom of socioeconomic and moral fragmentation, not a remedy for it’.⁴³

This strong emphasis on the public/private dichotomy is an overwhelmingly bourgeois concern. The Lynds found that the concept of community spirit in Middletown was only superficially affirmed, and disintegrated upon further analysis:

“Middletown is an easy place to get acquainted in; I really know everyone in town now”, remarked the wife of a socially-prominent minister [...] the “every one” of the minister’s wife included at most the three in ten of the population belonging to the business class.⁴⁴

The Middletown study also revealed that the impression of a democratic, community-driven society tended to be expressed almost universally by ‘our society people’, and that working-class respondents dissented sharply.⁴⁵ In the small-town family comedy, the almost universal focus upon economically secure, socially-prominent Anglo-Saxon-descended families purposely obfuscates this fact. The working-class do not enter the equation on any level, beyond the frequent invocation of a vulgar female maid or cook, whose narrative voice is always subordinate to that of the middle-class family. With the elevation of the private, supposedly self-contained family unit to an exalted position in contemporary American society, it was, as Coontz avers, ‘only a small step [...] to the conclusion that building a comfortable home life was the most morally worthwhile act one could undertake’.⁴⁶ Whereas earlier entries in the pastoral family film – such as *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Our Town* – responded to social ideologies of anti-industrialisation, by the time *Meet me in St Louis* was released in 1944, the preoccupation with the private

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 97, 101.

⁴⁴ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, p. 478.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 480.

⁴⁶ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Nostalgia Trap*, p. 109.

realm of the family had become largely a nostalgic indulgence, reflecting the steely grip middlebrow culture then held over American popular entertainment.

The family and the small-town community

Two significant aspects of in the 1940s domestic family comedies correspond with this institutionalised model of the family. The first is the positioning of the family within the wider community; almost exclusively, ‘community life’ is portrayed favourably. Secondly, it is equally crucial that this way of life is rendered innocuous and unthreatening to the inner realm of the family unit. Far from the invasive connotations of urban living, such affirmative representations of community reflect a lamented wider belief that its positive aspects – familiarity, congeniality, social cohesion – were disappearing. Indeed, it is noted by *Our Town*’s stage manager that ‘in our town, we like to know the facts about everybody’, but such familiarity is regarded as palatable precisely because, for all the faults of the townsfolk, no-one has anything to hide. The male protagonists in 1940s family films are usually well-known publicly; they are hard-working members of the business-class, widely respected and admired. This relates to the second dominant trope – the representation of the father as symbolic leader. Nat Miller (Lionel Barrymore), the father in *Ah, Wilderness!* is the local newspaper editor; Frank Gilbreth (Clifton Webb), from *Cheaper by the Dozen* is an internationally-renowned inventor; Clarence Day (William Powell) from *Life with Father* is a well-known stockbroker and man-about-town; George Winwood (Leon Ames) from *On Moonlight Bay* is a senior bank executive. The persistence of this family demographic suggests didacticism, demonstrating the kinds of families which were considered socially

desirable, as well as representing an idealised vision of the U.S. which might be profitably sold to audiences at home and abroad.

These patriarchs share a number of recurrent attributes. Aside from the physical similarities – they are imposing and well-dressed; each has an authority-denoting moustache – they are the socially-upstanding, mannered and slightly blustering heads of large families, over which they appear to wield complete control. Despite their exaggerated rigidity, they ultimately defer to the authority of their nagging wives. The matriarchs have an integral role, providing a pragmatic counterpoint to the often intemperate belligerence of their husbands. In *Meet me in St Louis*, Mrs Smith (Mary Astor) persuades her husband (Leon Ames) against an ill-advised move from St Louis to New York, using little more than her implied ‘feminine wiles’, whilst appearing to leave the decision solely in his hands. The comedic battle of the sexes is a major theme in *Life with Father*, where much of the humour derives from Clarence’s failure to realise that he is constantly being manipulated by his long-suffering wife, Vinnie (Irene Dunne). In one sequence, the fastidious Clarence attempts to balance the family housekeeping accounts. After enquiring how Vinnie has spent a small sum of money, he is eventually befuddled by her evasive and long-winded replies to the extent that, unwittingly, he ends up giving her *more* money. Clarence may like to think that he is in full and proper control, but it is Vinnie who holds the real power. It is a persistent and long-standing trope in Hollywood movies, particularly from the classical era, that apparently meek, subservient wives slyly control their domineering husbands through subtle, gentle emotional manipulation. Sometimes this takes the form of simple level-headedness in the face of the impetuosity or buffoonery of the patriarch. In *Life with Father*, this reaches its apotheosis when

Vinnie, after hearing the shocking news that her husband was never baptised, immediately swoons with an apparently serious (but possibly bogus) malady. Hearing Clarence's desperate agreement to get baptised – made in an unguarded moment in the hope that it will cure his supposedly dying wife – Vinnie immediately makes a miraculous and comically unlikely recovery. Such humour has its origins in the recognition that, for a mother/wife to exercise control over her family in a more straightforward, authoritarian manner would be unfeasible and absurd.

While such presentations are undoubtedly comedic, intended to offer amusement through mockery of the intransigent authority figure, they are always presented with obvious fondness and approval. In *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, Mr Winfield (credited simply as 'Father Winfield', emphasising his supposed universality) displays an interest in marrying-off his daughter, Margie (Doris Day), which verges upon the obsessive. He is told by Margie that he is 'so old-fashioned'; the point is underlined in the sequel, where Mr Winfield tells his wife:

Don't make it sound as if I'm trying to get rid of Margie. Being a responsible father, I happen to be old-fashioned enough to want to see our grown daughter take her rightful position in the institution of marriage.

In context, Father's 'old-fashioned' outlook is scarcely a negative trait, particularly when the movie is virtually a paean to the joys of the mythologised past. Instead, it is acknowledged with indulgent patience, even affection. *The New York Times'* review of *Life with Father* emphasises the reviewer's receptiveness towards the figure of Clare: 'While father goes into a towering rage at the slightest provocation...he is at heart a very

kind, tolerant and sympathetic old man (and we use that term most affectionately)'.⁴⁷ It becomes clear that the term 'old-fashioned' functions as an acceptable byword for 'conservative'.

Later period small-town family comedies descended into self-parody, with their nostalgia sometimes appearing forced, rather than natural, and producers increasingly utilised a musical framework. Although the popularity of *Meet me in St Louis* was undoubtedly a major factor in this embrace, the increasing prominence of song-and-dance numbers also suggests an attempt to sustain the small-town family film beyond its 'natural' time-span via structural and aesthetic innovation. These musical aspects deepen the pleasurable association, broadening appeal without dispensing with the conventional attractions of narrative. *Summer Holiday*, for instance – a late-1940s remake of *Ah, Wilderness!* – introduces a number of new elements to the basic story. The vibrancy of the colour stock, which utilises bright but earthy tones; the addition of sprightly musical numbers; even the inclusion of Mickey Rooney in the pivotal role, suggest an attempt to compensate for the excessive familiarity of the material, whilst confirming the abandonment of naturalism. In this sense, the genre's increasing proclivity towards diegetic song-and-dance numbers was not a point of disruption, but a logical, commercially-driven development. The increasing infiltration of 'unreality' constitutes the cinematic manifestation of the changing of the social factors that had helped popularise the form. In *Meet me in St Louis*, *Centennial Summer*, *Summer Holiday*, *On Moonlight Bay* and *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, there is a gradual trend of leaving

⁴⁷ Thomas M. Pryor, 'Life with Father', *The New York Times*, August 16th, 1947, 6:6. The predominantly middle-class readership of the *New York Times*, of course, is precisely reflected by the implied audience for films of this variety.

behind some of the motifs and received values of the past, as they begin to enter into rather too fundamental a conflict with the present.

The reaffirmation at every opportunity of the pleasures and enduring values of small-town community spirit became ever more defiant. The recurring trope of the narrative set during a public holiday over-emphasised what was, in reality, a restricted, ritualistic aspect of rural life.⁴⁸ *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Summer Holiday* take place against the backdrop of the July 4th celebrations; *Meet me in St Louis* is partly set at Halloween, partly at Christmas, whilst *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* features both Thanksgiving and Christmas family scenes. In the first three films, at least, there is a palpable suggestion of the Bacchanalian, which sees usually upstanding figures temporarily behaving outside the usual bounds of decorum, serving to redirect strong associations of the hard work and productivity ethic in rural life, while reinforcing parallel associations of its positive forms of recreation. Urban-centred narratives are not able to offer such a polarised opposition between ‘hard work’ and ‘hard play’. The carefully-signalled, rhythmical shifts in time projected in *Meet me in St Louis* and *Our Town* also emphasise a cyclical way of life. The commercial value of these narrative settings is considerable. Public holidays themselves formed a role in families being able to watch movies together, and movies focusing upon the less romantic and less sanitised realities of small-town life undoubtedly offered reduced vicarious appeal for audiences seeking escapism. Additionally, the structural strategy of locating stories around public holidays – occasions of supposed unity off-screen as well as on-screen – provided ballast to narratives which, by their very nature, were based on nothing very consequential.

⁴⁸ See Theodore Caplow et al. *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 225-229.

Youth appeal and the socialisation process

Whilst these films are clearly largely interested in adult middlebrow audiences, they make more concessions to younger viewers than family films made during the 1930s. Exhibiting these films during public holidays was a family-friendly strategy, and the generic child viewer was sometimes addressed directly. *Meet me in St Louis*, *Summer Holiday* and *On Moonlight Bay* prominently feature child figures, whose vaguely amoral adventures take the form of brief, self-contained serial-like episodes. In *Meet me in St Louis*, the mischievous child figure, Tootie (Margaret O'Brien), is the youngest of the family's children. Tootie's supposed amorality is manifested in various ways during the course of the narrative. One particularly well-known sequence shows the neighbourhood children erecting a large bonfire, and enacting a Halloween ritual, in which the children are dispatched to various households to throw flour in the faces of the adult who opens the door – symbolically 'killing' them. When Tootie 'kills' the particularly feared Mr Braukoff, she is heralded, to her delight, as 'the most horrible of us all'. Another sequence sees Tootie sabotage a rail line, an act which initially provokes condemnation, and then amusement, from her older sisters, Esther (Judy Garland) and Rose (Lucille Bremer). *On Moonlight Bay*, which owes a sizable stylistic debt to *Meet me in St Louis* and *Life with Father*, offers child appeal in the character of Wesley (Billy Gray), the younger brother of the film's protagonist, Marjorie. Wesley carries similarities with the superficially anarchic spirit of Tootie, in his youthful disruption of established behavioural norms. As if to pre-empt intimations that the film does not have a sense of fun, a po-faced graduation address delivered by young hero Bill Sherman, ruminating on the passage of boyhood to manhood, is interrupted by repeated assaults from Wesley with

a pea-shooter. Earlier in the film, Wesley falsely tells his teacher that Father is a drunk; Bill later becomes convinced that George beats his family, resulting in a comedic altercation. In *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, Wesley is responsible for the unfounded rumour that George is having an affair with a French movie star. Comically, in both cases it is the child that is responsible for undermining the almost exaggerated strength of the patriarchal head of the family. Importantly, though, these children are designed to be regarded with humour and understanding: their behaviour, after all, is never seen as a prelude to delinquency, but merely an extreme, comical representation of childish play.

Critic Andrew Britton sees Tootie as a radical figure of disruption within an ideologically-conventional narrative.⁴⁹ Within the small-town inflection, however, these apparently disruptive aspects carry deeper suggestions of down-home authenticity and naturalness. In narratives in which non-conformities and dissention are entirely effaced, Tootie's behaviour is actually received with benign tolerance, as the actions of an artless child yet to learn codes of adult morality and decorum – but she will do so by-and-by. Similarly, Wesley's mischievous antics seem permissible within the tonal and generic framework established by the film. The figure of Wesley, and indeed the persona of Billy Gray, consciously recalls the famous 1930s child-star, Jackie Cooper. Described by *The New York Times* as 'the Walter Huston of juveniles', Cooper typically portrayed young street toughs outside the bounds of the family structure, often carrying out some dubious scheme with the aid of a gang of like-minded adolescents.⁵⁰ However, whereas Cooper's characters verged on parody, invoking an escapist rather than realistic milieu, Wesley's actions are designed to evoke childhood reality. This distinction describes a

⁴⁹ See Britton, 'Meet me in St Louis': Smith, or the Ambiguities', pp. 7-25.

⁵⁰ B.R. Crisler, 'Boy of the Streets', *The New York Times*, January 24th, 1938, 17:1. Walter Huston (1884-1950) was a famous character actor of the 1930s and 1940s, famous for his tough screen persona.

notable, broader pastoral family film trope – the conscious rejection of the extraordinary. *Meet me in St Louis* and *On Moonlight Bay* both draw heavily upon Booth Tarkington's *Penrod* tales of childhood experience and misadventure.⁵¹ Despite this influence, the blend of anarchism here is too calculated, too sanctioned to bear comparison with reality, and represents an attempt to appeal to younger viewers while operating within the overall adult inflection of the narrative. This adult emphasis is maintained by the representation of the various child and teenage characters, which invariably progress logically and obediently from childhood rebellion to adult responsibility. In this way, they symbolise the success of the socialisation process.

These themes of generational continuity are central to the small-town family comedy, but are, once again, located within the wider pastoral tradition of stressing the intangible but keenly-felt balance and poetry to the life-cycle. For example, *National Velvet* promotes the philosophy of a natural order and inescapable pattern to life – a positive, rather than negative quality, as it is expressed. When the protagonist, Velvet Brown (Elizabeth Taylor), informs her mother (Anne Revere) that she intends to train her horse to win the Grand National, and that there will be many costs and difficulties involved in bringing the plan to fruition, her mother is surprisingly receptive. Despite having been informed by Dick (Mickey Rooney), a former jockey, that the plan is foolish and unworkable, Mrs Brown, the narrative locus of benign authority and wisdom, calmly tells her daughter:

Things come suitable to the time [...] enjoy each thing, but forget it and move on to the next. There's a time for everything. A time for having a horse in the Grand National, being in love, having children. Yes, even for dying. All at the proper order at the proper time.

⁵¹ Tarkington's *Penrod* (1914) was followed by *Penrod and Sam* (1916). Warner Bros. had previously filmed these tales in the late-1930s, starring the Mauch twins, Billy and Bobby.

This speech underpins an underlying concept of linearity governing human existence.

Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites identified a general trend in classical-era Hollywood cinema, reflecting a broader societal expectation, that ‘children should surpass their parents’.⁵² In these films, this expectation is reversed: children simply reproduce the success, beliefs and lifestyle patterns of their parents.

To *surpass* one’s parents, after all, may tacitly imply that there is something unsatisfactory or incomplete with previous generations, or indeed the past as a whole. In the small-town family film, the implication of progress would be counter-productive. Within this narrative tradition, the older generation is generally regarded with deference, as the arbiters of a deeper knowledge, wrought by experience. Nearly all of these texts have post-adolescent, pre-adult characters in the pivotal role, instead of exploring the (more creatively and commercially problematic) experiences of younger children. Although films like *Cheaper by the Dozen*, *Life with Father* and *Little Women* do feature younger children, they tend to operate on the periphery. In *Meet me in St Louis*, we see a hierarchy of socialisation, beginning with the amorality of Tootie and ending with the prim chastity of Rose. It suggests a form of reversal and integration of childhood rebellion, reminiscent of the ultimate trajectory of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* (Lewis Carroll, 1871).⁵³ The numerous child figures in such films often resemble slightly different versions of the same generic archetype. The fundamental point of tension in

⁵² Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study*, New York, Atheneum, 1970, p. 124.

⁵³ I refer to the postscript of Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, which presents an image of Alice’s future – a conventional picture of domesticity, with the fiercely individualistic, slightly amoral child of the fantasy world grown-up, married, and surrounded by children. The trope in children’s literature and film of the inevitable transience of childhood – the destruction of the fantasy world to make way for the world of adult responsibility – is persistent. It is not always presented with such a stark dichotomy, however.

this tradition is the period where ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ converge – often expressed colloquially as ‘that awkward age’.⁵⁴

These pre-adult figures are usually presented with some conflict on the journey to adult responsibility, often manifested as a choice which will determine the ideological correctness of their adult trajectory. Although the parents – particularly the father – remain symbolic figures of authority, their ultimate role is guiding their progeny and passing on their experience, allowing the pattern to continue in future generations. *Ah, Wilderness!* is a good example of this ‘coming of age’ emphasis. The first obstacle faced by the family is the realisation that eldest son Richard (Eric Linden) has been imbibing Marxist philosophy, and, equally scandalously, enjoying the works of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. Although Richard’s mother is horrified, and his father, Nat, responds by confiscating the texts, Nat is later seen secretly enjoying them. Richard, meanwhile, has been chosen as a valedictorian for his High School commencement class. However, Nat learns that Richard intends to denounce the college education system and capitalism in general, forcing his interjection to halt proceedings before the denunciation can begin.

Within the internal logic of the film, Richard’s father is acting within the best interests of his son. He knows that the young man’s dalliance with radicalism is only transitory; it should not be encouraged through overt, militant condemnation. Rather, mild disapproval and appeal to reason will set Richard back on to a correct ideological path. There is a short conversation after the ceremony, in which Nat offers to allow

⁵⁴ To put it another way, such a conflict is never resolved through a rejection of ‘adult’ aspects and a conscious regression into a symbolic childhood state. Once childhood is put away, it is put away indefinitely. This trajectory is slightly reversed in some of the ‘adult children’s films’ of the 1980s and 1990s.

Richard to drive the Stanley Steamer, 'if it's not against your principles'. Richard eagerly accepts, abandoning his anti-capitalist values. Indeed, his political idealism is presented as little more than youthful foolishness and naivety. There is a similar sequence in *On Moonlight Bay*, in which Bill Sherman's graduation address identifies an inevitable trajectory from youthful radicalism to a more proper conservatism through maturity. Conservatism – encouraged, in its more moderate aspects by the 1930s and 1940s valorisation of middlebrow culture – is figured as the default position, associated with wisdom and experience. Socialism and liberalism, by their absence, are rendered aberrant; radicalism is a wild, adolescent flight of fancy.⁵⁵ At best, leftist leanings signify the foolishness of youth, the absence of wisdom, and, perhaps even worse, an unpalatable form of social 'progress' anathema to the ideologies underpinning the small-town genre.

Nevertheless, domineering parental authoritarianism is rarely invoked, as it would damage the overriding projection of benevolent naturalism. Nat Miller, like Judge Hardy in the Andy Hardy series, reacts with a temperate understanding towards the youthful follies of his son. He is still a strong, patriarchal figure, exercising full control over his family, but this is tempered by a 'down-to-earth', homely, mischievous streak. He enjoys getting drunk at the July 4th celebrations, and slapping his wife's buttocks; he responds to her indignation by admitting, 'I just couldn't resist it'. A further misdeed by Richard, which sees him frequenting a dance hall and almost sleeping with a prostitute, culminates in a final man-to-man discussion, the success of which is signalled by Richard's concession that he is 'just like' his father (i.e. unfailingly decent but unashamedly

⁵⁵ There is an interesting sequence in *Our Town*, where Mr Webb, the newspaper editor, reports on some of the town's social and political demographics. 'Politically we're 86 per cent republican, 12 per cent democrat, 4 per cent socialist. Rest indifferent'. Aside from the significance of the figures themselves, the rhetorical point being made is that no-one in the town is politically apathetic; there are no suggestions of indifference or malfunction in a community of deeply-held personal and public beliefs.

'human'). Although it takes place several minutes before the end (and is followed by Richard's reconciliation with his sweetheart), this sequence serves as the effective conclusion to the narrative. *I Remember Mama*, which centres upon a poor Swedish immigrant family in America, is different; it sees the Americanised children *surpass* the social and economic position of their foreign parents. Although the film presents the parents – particularly the mother – as wise and benevolent, their community standing is relatively lowly. It is a structural inevitability that the eldest girl, Katrin, and eldest boy, Nels, achieve bourgeois acceptance and surpass their parents by becoming a successful writer and college student, respectively.

In *Life with Father*, based upon the semi-fictional accounts of Clarence Day Junior (the post-adolescent figure in the movie), the narrative is predicated upon the literal and symbolic qualities of the authoritarian father. Earlier in the film, we witness Clarence Jr. receiving an old cast-off suit from his reluctant, thrifty father. Humour is derived from a number of sequences showing the young man wearing the suit, comically behaving in the same way as his domineering father, particularly towards his romantic interest, Mary. In desperation, Clarence Jr. tells his mother:

Very peculiar things have happened to me since I started to wear this suit. I can't seem to make these clothes do anything father wouldn't do. Mother, I've got to have a suit of my own!

When he finally receives his own suit (through tricking his father, financially), it represents a finding of his own voice, subtly circumventing the implication of direct influence; the inferred possibility that he is simply a carbon copy of his father. He remains, however, tightly bound by the structures and traditions of his previous generations, a fact comically underlined by the fact that all four boys – each of a slightly different age – have, like their father, red hair. Similarly, although such films often

conclude with scenes promising love and lasting marriage between the young protagonist and the love interest, these sequences are largely based upon a structural expectation, or a symbolic token of fulfilment, rather than genuine romantic interest. With the re-enacting of such romantic aspects, continuity is again reaffirmed with the promise of children, future plenitude, and the passing-down of hard-earned experience.

The decline of the small-town family comedy, and the emergence of suburbia

Although such films retain some critical respect, it is in spite of their ideological didacticism. To contemporary critics, who were initially receptive to these nostalgic artefacts, the small-town family comedy came to be viewed as derivative, exploitative and increasingly old-fashioned. *The New York Times*' review of *On Moonlight Bay* criticises the appropriation of Booth Tarkington's *Penrod* stories, highlighting both a valorisation of the apparent authenticity of Tarkington's source material, and the contrary artificiality of the adaptation.⁵⁶ The review concluded that 'although it strives to develop a genuine nostalgic mood, all that "On Moonlight Bay" seems to create, sadly enough, is the feeling that this film format is old hat'.⁵⁷ Bosley Crowther's appraisal of *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, which is described bluntly as a 'Technicolored memento', was equally guarded, and scarcely more positive:

Despite the obviousness of the humour and the conventionality of the small-town tone – achieved and directed by David Butler as though he were reading from a prop department catalogue – the singing of several old song hits [...] is agreeably melodious.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ A.H. Weiler, 'On Moonlight Bay', *The New York Times*, July 27th, 1951, 23:1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Bosley Crowther, 'By the Light of the Silvery Moon', *The New York Times*, March 27th, 1953, 28:2.

Such responses underline the fact that it was not merely the storylines to which audiences responded, but rather the combination of the appeal of the visuals, characters and situations in a period in which there was a sizable market for wistful but essentially happy and untroubled nostalgia. The tension between reality and lived experience in the wake of the Second World War is perhaps a factor in the decline of the genre, although the burgeoning popularity of the family sitcom in the early-1950s, and the increasing use of audience research, also suggests a shift in production patterns and standards, rather than merely a cultural renegotiation.

Nevertheless, the emergence of the concept – and widespread actualisation – of ‘suburbia’ was a powerful factor in this decline. ‘Small-towns’ and ‘suburbia’ share a number of common attributes. Aside from the obvious rejection of ‘the urban’, both embody a controlled equilibrium between the unconstrained forces of the wilderness and the overly intrusive, mechanised qualities of ‘the city’. Shifts within artistic conventions in Hollywood have brought forth quirky, macabre or hostile representations of suburbia and small-town life; *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990) and *Disturbia* (D.J. Caruso, 2007), to name three relatively recent examples. Such films go some way, perhaps, to redressing the hostile representation of the big city that has otherwise prevailed. Emanuel Levy is quick to point out that:

With few exceptions, the portrayal of suburban life was almost from the beginning an object of criticism and satire. Gradually, the tone of the movies changed, from light satire in the early 1950s to criticism in the late 1950s, to outright scorn, ridicule and condemnation in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁹

But whereas both small-town life and suburbia, from the 1950s onwards, have been open to accusations of stifling conventionality or barely-concealed dysfunctionality, their

⁵⁹ Levy, *Small Town America in Film: The Decline and fall of Community*, p. 110.

position within family films has been generally affirmative. Indeed, despite the positive aspects of ‘the city’ displayed most notably in many urban-based romantic comedies, city-based life is frequently deemed unsuitable for the purposes of raising a family.

It becomes increasingly clear that the symbolic associations of concepts like ‘small-towns’, ‘big cities’ and ‘suburbia’ are remarkably persistent, tending to resist the integration of more problematic realities that might detract from their mythical connotations. Kenneth Jackson points out that:

The 1980 census revealed that more than 40 percent of the national population, or more than 100 million people, lived in the suburbs, a higher proportion than resided either in rural areas or in central cities.⁶⁰

As much as suburbia has been embraced as a lifestyle choice, especially by the middle-classes, it is a concept which defies acceptable definition. It is ‘both a planning type and a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism’.⁶¹ The distinction between suburbia and ‘the city’ reflects ideological as well as lifestyle changes:

Suburbia symbolises the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening distinction between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.⁶²

Despite these similarities with urban living, suburbia’s relative freedom from the pressures of urban living is held over from the small-town tradition.

The parallel existence of suburban and urban spaces establishes an ongoing dichotomy. Whereas the term ‘suburban’ once suggested ‘a relationship with the city, the term today is more likely to represent a distinction from the city’.⁶³ The avowed self-

⁶⁰ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanisation of the United States*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

sufficiency of suburban living precludes the community-orientation regarded as the bedrock of the small-town lifestyle. It is interesting to note that, as late as 1980, ‘the decision to live in Middletown, a voluntary one for most of its adult residents, is a vote for custom and against innovation’.⁶⁴ People who choose to live in small-town and suburban communities in the post-industrial age are often motivated by a rejection of social change, and suburbia is the ultimate physical manifestation of the resistance to urban culture and its influences. With a miniature pastoral retreat in every suburban backyard, as Jackson wryly notes, ‘there are few places as desolate and lonely as a suburban street on a hot afternoon’.⁶⁵ Indeed, the predominance of the nuclear family as both social pattern and cultural concept seems to preclude ‘outsiders’ in any form. The self-contained, self-sustaining realm of the suburban home, allied to increasing ideologies of privatism, becomes the perfect domain of the family, the institutionalised system determinately free from outside interference. The post-war explosion of suburban development is roughly coterminous with the decline of the small-town family movie.

While the suburban family is often figured as an ideal incubator for the young, not all associations are positive. Suburbia – which attracts and resists comparisons to the small-town in equal measure – seems to lack not only the authenticity but also the strength of the small-town. Following the U.S. mass-migration to the suburbs from the late-1940s onwards, suburban families became the central focus of live-action family films. One of the pivotal didactic elements to the small-town family movies of the studio era is the centrally-important, powerful father figure. Despite its mainly positive associations, suburban representations of the father figure differ markedly from the small-

⁶⁴ Caplow et al, *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, p. 280.

town figuration, acquiring metropolitan, white-collar overtones. Middle-class suburban families lack the pastoral associations of authority, continuity, and wisdom affiliated with natural surroundings, and although suburban fathers are often presented as loving and attentive towards the needs of their children, this is something of a back-handed compliment from a culture that valorises 'strong' parenthood. Such weak fathers may attract a begrudging respect for their devotion, but scarcely the same levels of admiration afforded the powerful father-figures of the studio-era family features. George McFly (Crispin Glover) in *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) is perhaps the ultimate impotent patriarch, derided by his family, endlessly manipulated, and unable to maintain a healthy conjugal relationship with his bored wife. A rather milder, less exaggerated precursor to such figures can be seen in early-1950s texts, mirroring the rise of the suburban community in the popular imagination.⁶⁶

Unsurprisingly, early-1950s family films moving away from the small-town setting evidence a marked decline in the importance attributed to physical surroundings. Douglas Sirk's trio of family comedies from the period, *Weekend with Father* (1951), *Has Anybody Seen My Gal* (1952), and *Take me to Town* (1953) reflect, in various ways, the weakening of the ties binding the family to the wider community. The nostalgic aura, emanating from the belief that community life enabled specific patterns of family unity,

⁶⁶ The U.S. Housing Act of 1949 contributed to suburban growth through its stated aim of 'housing production and community development', 'the elimination of substandard and other inadequate housing', particularly within built-up areas, and 'the realisation as soon as feasible of the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family, thus contributing to the development and redevelopment of communities and to the advancement of the growth, wealth, and security of the nation'. Cited in Howard P. Chudacoff ed., *Major Problems in American Urban History*, Lexington and Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994, p. 352. Kenneth Jackson confirms that the suburbanisation of the United States was a result of government policy rather than historical inevitability, pointing to the 'national purpose to build subsidised highways and utilities out of cities', in addition to the changing condition of the family unit itself, towards a 'nuclear' model. See *Crabgrass Frontier*, pp. 293, 300. It is crucial to note, however, the stated social significance of such policies at the time, which can be seen to be increasingly reflected in contemporary family films.

is also absent. Correspondingly, the symbolic expectations associated with fatherhood are repeatedly interrogated. *Weekend with Father* focuses upon two lone parents, Brad Stubbs (Van Heflin) and Jean Bowen (Patricia Neal). Both are widowed from their previous marriages, and are raising young children. They meet in the opening scene of the movie while dropping-off their children at summer camp, and the early sections of the film focus largely upon their burgeoning mutual attraction. Despite their romantic interest, they decide to place the requirements of their children above their own needs. Problematically, Brad is involved in a casual relationship with Phyllis Reynolds (Virginia Field), a woman preoccupied with her professional life ('once in a while I wish you could forget about that career of yours'). Brad's dithering reveals an internal conflict between the possibility of romantic fulfilment – or the lack, thereof – and the desire for a complete family unit. Both Brad's housekeeper and Jean's maid repeatedly reinforce the idea that they need to remarry, but whilst the fulfilment of romantic union is preferable, it seems to pale into insignificance when compared to the need to raise a successful family.

By the time the children are introduced to the narrative, the parallel expectation for a loving but authoritative father has been repeatedly underlined. Like many studio-era family films, much of the intended juvenile audience appeal comes from the light mockery of the father figure. However, the variety of satire here is more biting, arising from Brad's comic inability to be the athletic, imposing father his adopted sons, Gary (Jimmy Hunt) and David (Tommy Rettig), want him to be. Brad and David are persistently defeated, humiliatingly, in the camp's father-and-son outdoor activities, invariably because of Brad's comic incompetence when facing any practical challenge. Although Brad appears the correct marital pairing for Jean, his credentials for assertive

fatherhood are undermined by his haplessness, passivity and white-collar image. This is ironically underlined by the fact that whereas Jean's dead husband was a marine, Brad is an office executive who lives by the mantra, 'when I feel like taking some exercise, I lay down until the feeling goes away'. He is eventually chosen over his rival for Jean's affections, the athletic, cocksure Don Adams (Richard Denning), but only when it becomes clear that Don is a health-food fanatic. Brad likes hamburgers and ice cream, demonstrating his kinship with the boys, and this goes some way to effacing his embarrassing lack of pragmatism and potency.

The relocation to the artificial wilderness of the summer camp in the second half of the film can be seen as an ironic comment on the rural/urban opposition. Notably, although Brad and Jean live in the city, visually it plays a very small part in the film. Indeed, the city is symbolically rejected in two significant ways. Firstly, the retreat to the summer camp and subsequent camping adventure in the hills displays an aesthetic preference for the (more picturesque) countryside. Secondly, the corrupt spirit of the big city, as embodied in the character of Miss Reynolds, is rejected by Brad in favour of the more comfortable Jean, who represents the victory of his family's long-term security over his own carnal desires. Brad and Jean are, for all intents and purposes, a suburban couple. White, middle-class, politically conservative and ill at ease in either wilderness or big city, they are yet to discover their natural habitat. Where 'the city' is presented without any apparent attempt to ruralise or suburbanise, its labyrinthine, dizzying and bustling qualities are exaggerated, and presented in overt counterpoint to the relative serenity of the country. When later family films deal with the issue of raising a family in urban conditions, as in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (Vincente Minnelli, 1963), the

response is ambivalent, recognising its convenience, but distrusting its perceived influence upon social interaction and collective immorality.

Changing social mores and lifestyle patterns weakened the format, but the coming of television dealt a final hammer blow to the studio-era family film – at least as a consistent high grosser at the box office. Hollywood initially hoped to weather the storm of television in the post-war period, but gradually, it became apparent that Hollywood could only hope to survive as a prosperous industry by altering its production strategies to accommodate areas that television could not. The major studios cut down on production considerably, and the second-feature movie was abolished. Thereafter, movies tended to have higher budgets and greater levels of spectacle, inaugurating the age of the blockbuster. Television, though, was able to reach the highest number of viewers of all ages, and replaced the need for modest family-based dramas on the big screen, as viewers could watch material of similar thematic content and artistic standard from the comfort of their own homes. Television was in a position to achieve what Hollywood had long sought – cross-demographic audience saturation. The film industry was forced to seek alternatives, and the popular emergence of teenage culture in the mid-1950s prompted the proliferation of the teen pic (which will be looked at in detail in the next chapter). The teen film simultaneously divided the audience, broadened the potential subject matter and permanently altered the style of the American popular movie, confirming what various polls and marketers had been telling Hollywood for over a decade: the largest audience for movies was teenagers and young people, not some universalised, archetypal nuclear family.

Chapter 3: The Family Film in Decline, 1953-1968

In the previous chapter, I argued that various cultural and industrial changes brought a decisive and fairly swift end to the big-budget domestic comedies of the 1940s and early-1950s. This decline was paralleled by a number of economic blows to the film industry in the post-war years. The period dealt with in this chapter was, above all, marked by transition in relation not only to family films, but Hollywood cinema in general. Having begun the 1950s as an increasingly dubious box office prospect, family films declined further to the point that, by the late-1960s, they were in danger of disappearing entirely from mainstream Hollywood production schedules. This chapter examines the reasons for this decline – most notably the emergences of television and the teenage consumer in the 1950s and 1960s – and analyses Hollywood’s creative responses to the financial downturn which ensued. Although Hollywood survived this period of transition, I would argue that it also lost touch with an increasingly youth-orientated mainstream audience that was, by the mid-1960s, beginning to assume control of U.S. popular culture. Family films made during this period became more adult-orientated than ever, a fact brought into sharp focus by the increasing commercial power of youth culture, in its various forms.

The decline of the traditional family film can be traced to the late-1940s, at which point television was beginning to emerge as a mass medium, and enormous swathes of the U.S. population moved to the suburbs, fundamentally changing recreational habits.

The emergence of television was swift:

By 1948, there were 250,000 [television] sets in use; a year later, a million. In 1951 televisions outsold radios for the first time, and by 1952, 15 million television sets were in use.¹

¹ Charles Champlin, *The Flicks: Or, Whatever Happened to Andy Hardy?*, Pasadena, California: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977, p. 28.

Douglas Gomery notes that Hollywood's rapid but sustained decline from its peak in attendance and revenues in 1946 eliminates the rise of television as the major catalyst for industry decline. Instead, he points towards 'the settling of the suburbs... [as] one of the great postwar historical phenomena', with Americans concentrating their income on housing and raising children, and 'suburbanisation [locating] more and more families away from the downtown location of the movie palaces'.² Other historians have variously pointed towards the 1948 Paramount Consent decree, whereby the major studios were ordered to divest themselves of their vertically-integrated theatre chains, and the 1952 reversal of the 1915 Supreme Court First Amendment ruling, as significant watermarks in Hollywood's decline.³ These same cultural and industrial changes drastically affected Hollywood production strategy in the 1950s, and changed the nature of the family film forever.

Most critics agree that Hollywood was forced to adapt radically, both creatively and technically, to survive. As Gordon Gow notes, with cinema audiences declining sharply, 'something new was needed, and, in a complacent industrialised art, something fresh had been long overdue'.⁴ Charles Champlin argues that 'it appeared obvious the survival for the theatrical motion picture surely lay in doing what television could not do so well, or could not do at all'.⁵ And Murray Pomerance suggests that:

² Gomery, Douglas, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, pp. 85, 87.

³ Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989, p. 38. Austin argues that the ruling, which affirmed that the movies did enjoy the protection of the First Amendment, and therefore should not be subject to censorship, 'had the effect of lessening moviemakers' inclination to produce family films precisely when a boom in families was under way'.

⁴ Gordon Gow, *Hollywood in the Fifties*, London: A. Zwemmer Ltd, 1971, p. 7.

⁵ Champlin, *The Flicks: Or, Whatever Happened to Andy Hardy?*, p. 6.

The horizons Hollywood showed us in the 1950s [...] were little short of sublime, and they had to be, for the movie industry to survive. By the early 1950s, theatre attendance had dropped to only 50 percent of its all-time high in 1946.⁶

It was very much a case, then, of change being imposed from the outside. As Gow notes, the decade saw two critical developments in Hollywood's internal policy:

On the one hand, a last big stand was mounted to overwhelm the public with demonstrations of the cinema's superiority as a medium, by complex technical devices aligned with a subject matter of a primarily simplistic kind. At the other extreme, more interestingly, the outdated formulae of the big companies began to give place to independent producers, while the companies served as financial backers and distributors.⁷

The latter development was more significant in terms of the wider history of Hollywood production. Hitherto, under what Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have called the 'producer-unit' system, films had been made in-house by producers in charge of units specialising in specific areas, a system which allowed for a quick turnover of standard program films.⁸ The gradual introduction of this new 'package-unit' system gave further creative control to independent producers, and this system has remained in Hollywood ever since, with various modifications.⁹ However, the attempt to compete with the growing threat of television underpinned Hollywood's creative endeavours during the decade. The major studios invested heavily in 'prestige' or 'epic' productions, often Biblical in theme and setting. Although the blockbuster is commonly thought to have originated in the mid-1970s, Steve Neale has more accurately traced its introduction to the early-1950s, a period which saw the increasing abandonment of small-scale

⁶ Murray Pomerance, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1950s', *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Pomerance, London: Berg, 2005 (pp. 1-20), p. 1.

⁷ Gow, *Hollywood in the Fifties*, p. 7.

⁸ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London: Routledge, 1985, pp. 320-330.

⁹ *Ibid.*

productions in favour of the extraordinary.¹⁰ As Champlin indicates, ‘there were fewer pictures, but the biggest of them were really, really big’.¹¹

The three top earners at the U.S. box office during the 1950s were all ‘epic’ films: *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) and *Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957).¹² These productions were designed to curb the decline in admissions, which had seen movie attendance as a percentage of U.S. recreation expenditure drop from around 25 per cent in the mid-1940s to just 5.2 per cent by 1960.¹³ With television providing more modest, everyday material, these epics ‘carried significance in excess of box office as the loci of quintessential Hollywood spectacle’.¹⁴ *Ben-Hur*, for instance – the decade’s most successful movie, despite its massive budget – ‘[brought] greater prestige to the new MGM company than profits could measure’.¹⁵ Interestingly, Babington and Evans trace the beginning of this ‘golden age’ of the Biblical Epic to the release of DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* in 1949, long before Hollywood had reached a point of widely-acknowledged crisis.¹⁶ At least in generic terms, then, the pre-eminence of the epic form in the mid-late 1950s was not a strategic decision taken by Hollywood to combat falling revenues, but it did provide a suitably grandiose showcase for such technological innovations as Cinerama and 3-D.

¹⁰ Douglas Gomery has pointed to *Jaws* as a watermark, and he is undoubtedly correct in doing so, as the film took the financial limitations of the ‘blockbuster’ to a different level. However, lesser blockbusters had been released long before. See Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, London: British Film Institute, 2005, p. 214. See also Neale, ‘Hollywood Blockbusters: Historical Dimensions’ in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 47-60.

¹¹ Champlin, *The Flicks: Or, Whatever Happened to Andy Hardy?*, p. 46.

¹² See Joel W. Finler, ‘Box-Office Hits 1914-2002’, *The Hollywood Story*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003, pp. 356-363. Finler’s figures, it should be noted, reflect the U.S. ‘rental figure’, which is based upon the size of the audience for each picture. It constitutes around half the total box office gross, with the other half going to exhibitors.

¹³ Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

The 1950s was also the decade in which the requirements of foreign audiences began guiding production strategy. Between the mid-1910s and late-1940s, as Kristin Thompson suggests, Hollywood commanded a hugely powerful domestic theatre-going audience which often allowed production costs to be paid off during the American release; many films, she notes, ‘might begin earning profits apart from revenues coming in from other countries’.¹⁷ The turning point, as Thomas Guback has argued, was the Paramount anti-trust case, which removed the ‘sure outlet’ that had been supplied by block-booking practices and the studios’ hegemonic control of the domestic exhibition sector. In conjunction with the decline in attendances, these factors forced Hollywood to consider an international taste consensus, albeit on a limited scale. For the first time, exhibitors were encouraged to open theatres offering ‘art and foreign pictures in a small way’.¹⁸ More significantly, in 1956, a United Artists representative informed a U.S. Senate Committee that without foreign revenues ‘the industry would soon face insolvency and bankruptcy, or would have to change its method of production in such a way that the type and nature of its films would radically change’.¹⁹ A Columbia executive noted that ‘it has become necessary to produce pictures palatable to tastes in England, Italy and Japan as well as here at home’.²⁰ Initially, the influence of foreign audiences upon film content was rather modest. One executive admitted that ‘if in making an American story [...] we could insert some incident that might take place in Paris, we would be glad to do it, because it would add flavour for the foreign market’.²¹

¹⁷ Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, p. 1.

¹⁸ Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969, p. 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Although this incremental interest in foreign audience tastes was crude and transparent, it no doubt dissuaded producers from making big-budget films appealing predominantly to domestic audiences, such as traditional family fare – the very definition of self-absorbed Americana.

Cultural change, the teen film and the emergence of television

The impression that small-town family comedies had become passé was reflected in Douglas Sirk's family musical *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952). A transitional film, it evokes many of the tropes of 1940s family musicals, while anticipating, in several ways, the imminent emergence of the teen film. Despite appearances – the small-town 1920s setting, the presence of the full extended family, a nostalgic visual texture, and energetic numbers – *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* is essentially an adult- rather than family-orientated comedy-drama, making heavy use of subtly biting satire. Earlier family-orientated features had betrayed an obvious fondness for the modest small-town lifestyles depicted. Although nostalgic elements still remain in Sirk's film, the small-town family setting has become less a medium for reassuring escapism than a backdrop for a thinly-veiled denunciation of greed and class consciousness within the U.S. middle-classes.

The film centres upon the character of Samuel Fulton (Charles Coburn), an impossibly rich, elderly bachelor whose failure to start a family is brought into focus when he is told that he may be dying. As a young and aspiring entrepreneur, Samuel had been rejected by his sweetheart, Millicent, in favour of a 'penniless' book-keeper, whom she married, and started a family. In the absence of an heir-apparent, Samuel decides to visit Millicent's family, the Blaisdells, to gauge whether they are deserving recipients of

his fortune. Incognito, he inveigles his way into their house as a lodger, calling himself 'Mr Smith', and is given a job by the family patriarch (Larry Gates) as a soda jerk in the struggling family drug store. Despite his gruff, cantankerous exterior, Samuel is a sentimentalist at heart, and is soon smitten by his surrogate family. Whilst alone in his room, staring into an old portrait of his now-deceased former lover, Samuel exclaims: 'You've got a lovely family, Millicent. Could've been mine if you hadn't been so darned obstinate!' However, the warning signs pointing to the family's avarice are apparent to the audience from the beginning. Mrs Blaisdell (Lynn Bari) is seen attempting to fix-up her daughter, Millie (Piper Laurie), with rich socialite Carl Pennock (Skip Homeier), despite Millie's attachment to working-class soda jerk Dan (Rock Hudson). When Millie protests, her socially-ambitious mother asserts: 'You should be flattered. The Pennocks are the most important family in town'. In another scene, Mrs Blaisdell, recounting some family history for the benefit of 'Mr Smith', laments that her mother had turned down the advances of Samuel Fulton in favour of a mere book-keeper. Only Roberta (Gigi Perreau), the family's youngest daughter, appears unspoiled by mercenary concerns (another instance of the Hollywood trope of the unspoiled, artless child).

Not yet convinced of his adopted family's restraint, he tests them by anonymously sending the family a cheque for \$100,000, and sits back to observe the results. Mrs Blaisdell immediately swoons upon hearing the news, announcing that: 'all my life, I've dreamed of suddenly becoming wealthy. And now it's come true! Whoopee! Hot diggity-dog!' To Samuel's dismay, the family begins frittering away the money, buying an expensive mansion and a seemingly-endless array of fripperies. He is also hurt by Mrs Blaisdell's insistence that now the family is wealthy, they have no need of his board.

Samuel is forced to share a bedsit with Dan, fellow victim of the family matriarch's status anxiety. Dreaming of 'a new house up on the hill, where all the best people live', Mrs Blaisdell twice manages to offend her husband, firstly by lamenting her failure to marry a man of substance, and secondly through her blasé insistence that he sells the drug store, which he has spent twenty years establishing. To his objections, Mrs Blaisdell can only respond: 'Now that we have money, we're going to assume our proper position in society'. There are certainly shades of 'keeping up with the Joneses' in Mrs Blaisdell's behaviour, but the satire extends to coded attacks on mythologies of the U.S. cultural consciousness. Soon after the family moves into the huge, opulent mansion, she hires a French dance teacher in an effort to learn a 'sophisticated' set of moves, in a sequence apparently intended to imply attraction to continental pretention lurking just beneath the surface of the small-town psyche, despite America's supposed immunity to facile extravagance. As a European noted for his sophisticated melodramas, this hypocrisy may have particularly resonated with Sirk. Roberta seems to be the only family member truly immune to the corrupting power of money. The parents are radically transformed into elitist snobs; children Howard (William Reynolds) and Millie are led astray by their high-society lifestyle, introduced to gambling and alcohol, respectively. Roberta merely bemoans the absence of the old family dog, replaced, in a notably symbolic gesture, by two French poodles.

Because of artistic and commercial restraints, the film's ideologies are admittedly ambiguous. The film certainly launches a double-barrelled attack on the institution of the North American family and more long-standing cultural values, as the valorisation of the rural lifestyle, particularly as portrayed in the 1940s family comedies, gives way to

criticism levelled towards the U.S.' blind faith in the pre-eminence of its moral and spiritual integrity over greed for material wealth. The 1940s family comedies, set in a time before industrialisation had irrevocably altered lifestyles, embraced modest, pre-industrial pleasures which implied superiority over the vicissitudes of post-industrialism. This film's coded rejection of such values represents a partial shift in the ideological climate. On the other hand, the vibrant colour stock and minutely-detailed set designs seem calculated to elicit (perhaps unconscious) approval within audiences. The aesthetic richness of the visuals highlights the nostalgic quality of the semi-pastoral small-town setting. It is perhaps significant that Sirk's earlier family comedy, *Weekend with Father* (1951), which was set partially in the relatively drab confines of the urban landscape, was, by contrast, shot in black-and-white.

The continued emergence of youth culture accelerated changes in production standards, and was one of the pivotal social concerns in 1950s North America. Youth culture was defined, variously, in terms of sociological and economic parameters. The idea of the teenager, which lies at the heart of youth culture, was relatively new, at this point. As Thomas Hine explains:

Standard references cite a 1941 article in *Popular Science* magazine as the first published use of the word 'teenager'. The term came into use during World War II and first turned up in a book title in 1945. It seems to have leaked into the language from the world of advertising and marketing, where demographic information was becoming an increasingly important part of predicting which sales approaches are most effective with particular buyers.²²

Unsurprisingly, the concepts of the 'teenager' and of a burgeoning 'youth culture' – which seemed to place themselves in opposition to the dominant 'adult' culture – were matters of concern to social scientists and the general public alike. Although the teenager

²² Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, New York: Avon Books, 1997, p. 8.

is ‘a social invention’, it also rests quite fundamentally upon ‘the idea of the adolescent as a not quite competent person, beset by stress and hormones’, and therefore not to be trusted.²³ Nevertheless, the concept is expressly North American in origin, and ‘America created the teenager in its own image – brash, unfinished, ebullient, idealistic, crude, energetic, innocent, greedy, changing in all sorts of unsettling ways’.²⁴

Within the climate of distrust and discontent towards youth culture fostered by politicians and the popular press, teenage delinquency became a moral panic in the U.S. during the mid-1950s. As Jon Lewis notes:

The adult public’s morbid interest in the delinquent juvenile [was] fanned by [newspaper] headlines like “Two Teen Thrill Killings Climax Park Orgies”, “Teen Age Killers Pose A Mystery – Why Did They Do It?” and “Twenty-Two Juveniles Killed in Gang War”.²⁵

Public anxiety concerning this supposed moral problem prompted, and was in turn exacerbated, by Estes Kefauver’s Senate Committee Investigation into juvenile delinquency, which ‘saw disorder, chaos, filth, degradation, and corruption everywhere it looked’.²⁶ The social science community, meanwhile, was attempting more temperate investigations into juvenile behaviour and youth culture, but its liberal humanistic conclusions were arguably no more attuned to the realities of teenage culture than conservative, reactionary responses.²⁷ Despite this fact, what is now referred to as the ‘teen film’ has its origins in what were explicitly *adult* reactions to social stimuli. As Lewis argues:

²³ Ibid, p. 4.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁵ Jon Lewis, ‘Movies and Growing up...Absurd’, *American Cinema of the 1950s*, ed. Pomerance, (pp. 134-154), p. 151.

²⁶ Pomerance, ‘Movies and the 1950s’, p. 3.

²⁷ See for example Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1972 (1954).

[1955] was year zero for the modern teen film and, by extension, the modern teenager. Wertham's book, the Kefauver State hearings on the rise of juvenile delinquency, and the 1954 release of *The Wild One*, a film about youthful offenders, all set the stage.²⁸

Rebel without a Cause (Nicholas Ray, 1955) is now regarded as a watermark in the development of the teen film. Although its theatrical poster describes 'Teenage Terror Torn from Today's Headlines', explicitly highlighting the movie's sensationalist, exploitative qualities, the movie's content was codedly sympathetic to the teenage protagonists.

Rebel without a Cause revolves around troubled teenager Jim Stark (James Dean). Lacking a strong patriarchal role-model (with his father [Jim Backus] emasculated by his overbearing mother), Jim has numerous run-ins with the police before falling-in with a gang of delinquents. After a cliff-top 'chicken run' results in the death of his rival, Buzz (Corey Allen), Jim begins spending most of his time hanging out with a psychologically-disturbed schoolmate, Plato (Sal Mineo) and Buzz's needy girlfriend, Judy (Natalie Wood). As Jim's relationship with Judy intensifies, a complex chain of events culminates in a police shoot-out, in which Plato is killed. The film ends with Jim cradling the body of his friend, as his father, Frank, makes a faltering attempt to finally play the authoritarian patriarch Jim desperately craves. Jim's sense of anomie is reflected in his hazy admission that he 'can't even remember what happened yesterday', and the film places much of this emphasis not only on cultural pressures but also the changing institutional role of the family. The film brutally dissects the Hollywood trope of the strong father, most strongly emphasised in the small-town family comedies of the 1940s. By contrast, 'Frank's continued inability to take control of his family, his inability to set

²⁸ Lewis, 'Movies and Growing Up...Absurd', p .144.

an example for his son' is placed at the core of a suddenly-rudderless institution.²⁹ The only adult authority figure with any credibility is Jim's juvenile officer, Ray (Edward Platt), who symbolically signifies his greater affiliation with Jim by politely but pointedly refusing Frank's offer of a cigarette – a characteristically ineffectual token gesture of ingratiation from a father hopelessly out of touch with the new generation.

There are various reasons for the film's critical status as a proto-teen film. The three young leads, particularly James Dean, in his most iconoclastic role, are the clear moral and emotional centres of the movie. They are shown to exist outside the bounds of adult culture and authority, and their identities – unlike those of the teenage protagonists in the family comedies – are not seen in relation to their impending integration into adult culture; nor do they aspire towards adulthood. The story, devised by director Ray, clearly tries to identify with youth culture, rather than merely condemning it. In filmmaking terms, however, the directorial treatment has a melodramatic leaning, while the widescreen presentation and vivid colour palette – foregrounding an often-striking contrast between red and black – are similar to those utilised by Sirk in *Written on the Wind* (1956). Although *Written on the Wind*, in keeping with Sirk's other socially critical films from the period, carries stronger deconstructive elements than the more conventional melodrama of *Rebel without a Cause*, both films articulate a similar sense of unresolved cultural discontent. The content may be different, but the stylised, auteurist means of communication are similar. These stylistic similarities are significant; despite *Rebel's* clear empathy for youth culture, it is essentially an adult melodrama; a movie *about* teenagers, but not necessarily *for* them.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 145.

The film remains a colossal influence upon 1950s youth culture. However, youth culture was not simply innate and self-supporting; it was a commodity, directed towards a large exploitable group with a massive combined disposable income. The nostalgic allusions Pomerance makes to

the icons of James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and Marlon Brando [and] the sounds of Elvis Presley, Little Richard, the Platters, and starchy Paul Anka

are apposite, with each of these individuals having originated through adult marketing and exposure strategies.³⁰ What emerged as the teen film was born from a wider interest in the teenager consumer, which transcended cinema and infiltrated all U.S. consumer markets. As Thomas Hine explains:

The man who had the facts on how powerful [teenage culture] could be, and who is frequently credited with shaping it, was Eugene Gilbert [...] By the time mainstream manufacturers and retailers were willing to pay attention to the young market, Gilbert had 5,000 teenage pollsters throughout the country, gathering information for his corporate clients and providing data for his syndicated column, 'What Young People Are Thinking', which ran in more than 300 newspapers.³¹

By 1958, Gilbert estimated that the purchasing power of teens was '\$9.5 billion – ten times the total receipts of the movie industry – two thirds of which came from their parents, and the other third from their own earnings'.³² The teenage demographic, then, was a vast, exploitable audience which Hollywood had hitherto failed to address directly.

As I have argued in previous chapters, Hollywood built its reputation during the studio-era upon propaganda attesting to its universal, democratic qualities, and there is considerable evidence that industry executives believed their own propaganda. Market-researcher George Gallup, whose Audience Research Institute (ARI) was used by various studios during the 1930s and 1940s, argued that long-standing senior executives such as

³⁰ Pomerance, 'Movies and the 1950s', p. 3.

³¹ Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, p. 237.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Nick Schenck, Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn and Spyros Skouras were the most resistant to adopting new methods for appealing to audiences:

In every field [...] when it goes from an art to a science, the old boys always hate to make the change, hate to accept the new, hate to admit they don't have all the answers [...] we could never get on with some of the old boys [...] couldn't communicate with them at all; to them this was some kind of black magic.³³

Industry executives had a firmly ensconced distrust of 'scientific' methodologies when applied directly to filmmaking. As audience research began – in limited form – to be adopted by the studios in the 1940s, reports by Leo Handel (founder of the Motion Picture Research Bureau) and Paul F. Lazarsfeld again revealed what Hollywood was unable to accept: that audiences were dominated by young people. Such reports ran counter to the conventional wisdom espoused by industry executives. As Thomas Doherty notes, 'despite pleas from exhibitors, the MPAA [formerly the MPPDA] refused to abandon its concept of moviegoing as a familial outing for Mom, Dad, and the kids'.³⁴ Handel recalled that 'in 1942, there was [sic] only a handful of persons who did not reject film research outright. Most condemned it without trial'.³⁵ During the industry prosperity of the early-to-mid 1940s, though, Hollywood saw no reason to change the techniques that had brought profits for nearly thirty years. Only the sharp downturn in receipts during the 1950s finally forced its hand.

Given the industry's innate conservatism, it is unsurprising that the first big hit that specifically targeted the teenage audience was made by an independent producer. As Doherty notes, *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956) '[showed] that teenagers

³³ Susan Ohmer, 'The Science of Pleasure: George Gallup and Audience Research in Hollywood', *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences*, London: British Film Institute, 1999 (pp. 61-80), p. 66.

³⁴ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, p. 50.

³⁵ Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, p. 4.

alone could sustain a box-office hit' and 'pushed Motion Picture Production strategy toward the teenpic'.³⁶ The producer in question was Sam Katzman, who had

[Worked] at Monogram in the 1940s, and later with Columbia [...] He specialised in B-movie matinee fare pitched alternately to the preteen 'cap pistol set' (the serials *Atom Man vs. Superman* [1950] and *Captain Video* [1951]) or to a slightly older group comprising mostly adolescent males (the Bowery Boys and Jungle Jim series). As early as 1946, he had become especially attuned to the latter group, billing himself in Monogram trade ads as a producer for 'Teen Agers'.³⁷

Rock Around the Clock was the first in a series of semi-fictional movies starring DJ Alan Freed and featuring a selection of popular contemporary rock 'n roll stars. *Don't Knock the Rock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (Will Price, 1956), *Mister Rock and Roll* (Charles S. Dubin, 1957) and *Go, Johnny, Go!* (Paul Landres, 1959) followed the blueprint. The films are dominated by live musical performances, but the pretence of narrative is still maintained. Lightweight, soapy teenage storylines are used as connecting material between performances, and with the exception of Freed, all the leading characters are teenagers. As the benevolent benefactor of teen culture, Freed operates as a mediator between the worlds of youth and adulthood. Although replete with blatant self-publicising, these otherwise inoffensive films correspond with the general tone of the rock 'n roll music: energetic, youthful and predominantly carefree.

Doherty identifies various different strains of teen pic in addition to the 'rock 'n roll pic', including 'the delinquent movie', the 'drag-strip cycle' 'weirdies', and 'clean teenpics'.³⁸ In spite of generic differences, of course, they were all essentially doing the same job; they were exploitation films, cashing-in on the cultural zeitgeist. Doherty argues that:

³⁶ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s*, p. 57.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-158.

As a production strategy, the 1950s exploitation formula typically had three elements: (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotion [...] (2) A substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience. Movies of this ilk are triply exploitative, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value) and their teenage participants (for box-office value).³⁹

The movement towards demographic targeting on a mass scale (as opposed to the limited confines of child-orientated B movies in the 1930s) was undeniably facilitated by the rise of independent production:

Attracted by freedom as well as finance, big-name producers, directors, and stars rushed to form independent production companies, 'indies' in trade jargon. In 1958, United Artists Vice President Max E. Youngstein hailed an 'independent revolution' that had supplanted 'the one man studio tsar system'. By his reckoning, independents accounted for only 1 percent of Hollywood output in 1951; in 1958, their share had risen to at least 50 percent.⁴⁰

Companies such as American International Pictures (AIP) directed their attention towards low-budget teen films (specifically horror films in this case), and thrived. AIP's owners, James J. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff, believed that 'teenagers made up the only market that could sustain the modern Motion Picture business'.⁴¹ With the meteoric rise in independent production, it is unsurprising that many of the formal and ideological practices of studio-era Hollywood were subject to radical change.

Hollywood production strategy became increasingly fragmentary and polarised. Although most movies still conformed to studio-era norms, the divergence between the adult-orientated epic form and the youth-oriented teen film demonstrated the industry's weakening grip on the 'family audience'. Television was now catering to the family market with the sort of modest, homely fare that had characterised family films throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Television strategy – unlike that of cinema – was innately geared to tapping the family audience. Television networks also believed that

³⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 17-18.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 125.

women, specifically housewives, were the key to unlocking the profit potential of the family as a whole:

It was in 1951 that CBS, NBC and, to a lesser extent, ABC first aggressively attempted to colonise the housewife's workday with regularly scheduled network programs. One of the central reasons for the networks' move into daytime that year was the fact that prime-time hours were fully booked by advertisers and that, by this point, there is more demand for TV advertisers in general.⁴²

Lynn Spigel argues that NBC's *Today* program (1952-), broadcast daily between 7.00am and 9.00am on weekdays, emerged as one of the first network TV shows calculatedly targeting the 'family audience'.⁴³ It 'attempted to lure men, women and children with discrete program segments that addressed their different interests and meshed with their separate schedules'.⁴⁴ A network poll calculated that 'the audience was composed of 52 percent women, 26 percent men, and 22 percent children'.⁴⁵ With advertising space on major network television at a premium, programming was designed with maximum possible demographic broadness, the exact opposite of Hollywood's strategy at this point.

The two most popular television forms in the late-1950s were soap operas and sitcoms. Soap operas were produced by commercial radio as early as the 1930s, with similar subject matter and audience composition:

In a 1935 article entitled 'Daylight and Drama – Salesmen for Flour', a writer for *Broadcaster* (the unofficial organ of commercial broadcasting interests) described an early soap opera as follows: "*Today's Children* differs from many women's programs in that each broadcast is a chapter or episode in the lives of a typical American family, their friends, and the sweethearts of the younger members of the family [...] It is drama, homey drama of the type that appeal to 'just folks', the mothers, the homemakers".⁴⁶

⁴² Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, pp. 10-11.

In the 1950s, television simply assumed control of this market, and with it the reputation as the dominant medium for family viewing. As Spigel notes, ‘between 1948 and 1950 the family comedy was a marginal genre’, but the success of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) changed this:

When *I Love Lucy* came to the CBS network in 1951, it was a huge popular success, soaring to number 1 in the Nielsen ratings. CBS aggressively developed the genre over the course of the early-1950s, and its successes did not go unnoticed by the other networks, which also increasingly turned to sitcoms and other films formats. By 1960, there were about twice as many sitcoms as there were variety shows.⁴⁷

The family sitcom did not merely reproduce the low-key formula of the movies. Instead, early television was much closer to radio, in that the tone was often self-aware and, in spite of the prosaic subject-matter, inherently unrealistic. As Spigel argues, ‘some early family comedies used studio audiences in order to provide the sense of spontaneity that spectators enjoy at the theatre’.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Spigel does not believe that shows like *I Love Lucy* and *Make Room for Daddy* (1953-1964) were ‘realistic’. Instead, ‘Lucy’s slapstick clowning, trick costumes, and wild antics made for highly unrealistic depictions of domesticity (and, in fact, many critics disapproved of the show for that reason)’.⁴⁹

In spite, or perhaps because of, the extreme, exaggerated depictions of domesticity in such massively popular, long-running shows as *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), they outstripped the popularity of Hollywood’s family features. Pitched very broadly, both thematically and comedically, they relied heavily on pratfalls and unsophisticated or visual gags, easily accessible to viewers of all ages. Their popularity was also derived from their longevity. Long-running family sitcoms were unfolding texts in which events

⁴⁷ Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, pp. 137, 141.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

and characters were afforded time to grow and develop – assuming, that is, that they attained high enough ratings to avoid cancellation. Because of its transparent populism, the family sitcom has, like the soap opera, been persistently denigrated. Whilst Gerard Jones contends that ‘the most successful [sitcoms] usually display a particularly shrewd insight into the concerns of the vast American public and a special kind of integrity of their own’, he concedes that ‘the bulk of sitcoms [...] rarely display either, and that was never truer than in the flood of ’52, ’53 and ’54’.⁵⁰ Most were utterly devoid of genuine conflict, and in this way, ‘characters were allowed to tease each other in an authentic-feeling but completely safe manner’.⁵¹ Because of this, Stedman views *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* as ‘one of the most determinedly bland programs ever broadcast’.⁵² Nevertheless, this lack of conflict and essential ‘blandness’ was intrinsic to audience appeal, not only making the shows broadly-suitable but comfortingly escapist. Inoffensive productions are better-suited to television than commercial cinema. One may passively watch a bland, sentimental television show if one is bored, has nothing better to do, or desires comfort. One is far less likely to visit a cinema and pay money upfront for the same low-key amusement.

The decline of the traditional family film

Most film industry insiders continued to support the *idea* of family films. In November 1954, Elmer C. Rhoden, the newly-elected president of National Theatres, Inc., called for

⁵⁰ Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

an increase in ‘family fare’.⁵³ Rhoden felt that the responsibility fell upon producers, suggesting:

I’d like to see [family films] come back [...] we have a need for more pictures such as ‘Penrod and Sam’ and the ‘Hardy Family’. Those had appeal for the whole family.⁵⁴

Producers, meanwhile, blamed exhibitors for failing to provide adequate support for the family films that *were* produced. As Doherty points out:

By 1960, Glenn Norris, Twentieth Century-Fox’s sales manager, could seriously complain that a distributor peddling traditional family fare had “to go out and [often] knock his head against the wall in order to persuade an exhibitor that by booking and promoting a family film he may well be able to make some good money as well as perform a tremendously important public relations job for the entire industry.”⁵⁵

Norris’s words reveal just how important the idea of the ‘family film’ was to Hollywood. Its value was not only seen in relation to its immediate rental returns, but as propaganda, standing as a symbol for audience inclusivity and popular art. By the mid-1950s, however, the family film was creatively anachronistic. MGM’s extraordinary attempt to resurrect the Andy Hardy series with *Andy Hardy Comes Home* (Howard W. Koch) was a resounding critical and commercial failure. As Norman J. Zierold notes,

just as none of the old gang were there to welcome Mickey Rooney back to the studio where he had been the top box-office draw, so now there were few of the audience left to welcome Andy Hardy back to the screen.⁵⁶

The planned re-launch was quietly abandoned. With movie critics and reformers still clamouring for morally-upright, traditionally-constructed family entertainment, producers and exhibitors bemoaned its absence, blamed each other for the decline, and failed to constructively develop the format.

⁵³ Thomas M. Pryor, ‘Family Film Fare Urged by Rhoden: New National Theatres’ Head Cites Need for Appealing to Children in Audiences’, *The New York Times*, Monday November 8th, 1954, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s*, pp. 149-150.

⁵⁶ Norman J. Zierold, *The Child Stars*, London: MacDonald, 1965, p. 227.

There have been moments in the history of post-sound American commercial cinema – the 1950s, the late-1960s and the early 1970s – in which Hollywood family movies have simply failed to chime with the (North American-driven) cultural consensus. During each of these periods, an abundance of commentators – industry insiders, religious leaders and movie critics – supplicated for an increase in family film production, but these calls fell on deaf ears, because Hollywood makes family movies for profit, and not as a public service. From a commercial perspective, such public appeals seem absurd. It must be remembered, though, that the idea of the ‘family film’ – because of its broad entertainment value, because it tends to reflect changes within society’s most venerated institution, and because of its propensity for nostalgia and conservatism – transcends normative dimensions of production and response. The concept may have emerged in the early-1930s as a commercial enterprise, but family films were soon adopted by a range of bodies for pedagogical, ideological and recreational purposes. More precisely, the term carries a multitude of meanings, and although the films themselves may be privately owned, the concept itself is very much public property. The fervency the concept of the family film tends to promote perhaps blinds commentators to its origins as a commercial product, and its role not simply as entertainment, but in reflecting changes in the mass market and society-at-large. It is an obvious point, but an important one that Champlin makes: ‘it is not simply that the movies have changed. We have changed and the world has changed: they don’t make movies the way they used to because the world isn’t the way it used to be’.⁵⁷

With continual advances in special-effects technology, and the need for Hollywood to differentiate itself from television, big-budget family-orientated fantasies

⁵⁷ Champlin, *The Flicks: Or, Whatever Happened to Andy Hardy?*, p. 11.

seemingly pointed the way to the future. However, every big hit like *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (Richard Fleischer, 1954) and *Around the World in 80 Days* (Michael Anderson, 1956) was balanced out by a costly misfire, like *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T* (Roy Rowland, 1953), or *tom thumb* (George Pal, 1958). Such productions were not only extremely risky and time-consuming, but also violated the established ethos of Hollywood family entertainment, which had almost always been founded upon principles of naturalism, conventionalism and didacticism. Independent and television producers were proving themselves more open not only to formal innovation, but also to questioning the nature of mainstream Hollywood's rigid understanding of audience demographics. Unsurprisingly, it was through the new medium of television that the concept of the 'kidult' audience – which was seen as comprising not only children but childish adults – emerged. In November 1956, G. Ralph Branton, president of Interstate (a subsidiary of Monogram Pictures) announced that a series of TV adventure movies starring Indian actor Sabu would be 'kidult' programs.⁵⁸ It is now widely accepted that intelligent adults enjoy entertainments which apparently 'regress' them to childhood. At the time, however, although it was not dissimilar to the age-old concept of the *puer aeternus* – the eternal boy – the idea of the 'kidult' was revolutionary in its breaking-down of the rigid divisions between the adult and child in mass entertainment.

Perhaps the first explicitly-marketed 'kidult' film was the Ray Harryhausen/Columbia production *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958).⁵⁹ 'Kidult' films were predicated on adventure and spectacle in favour of dialogue and

⁵⁸ Oscar Godbout, 'Sabu, Indian Actor, Will Star in a Series of Adventure Movies for Television', *The New York Times*, November 6th, 1956, p. 70.

⁵⁹ Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *An Animated Life: Adventures in Fantasy*, London: Aurum, 2003, p. 121.

sentiment. The fact that *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* was a notable box office hit was a testament not only to its broad-range audience appeal, but also skilful marketing, which also emphasised its pioneering of a supposedly-groundbreaking process, Dynamation – which was, in reality, simply an extension of the stop-motion animated techniques that had been used to great effect as far back as *King Kong* (1933). This was a film in which the special effects came first, quite literally: Harryhausen’s inspiration for the movie was a piece of concept art in which his hero, Sinbad, fights a sword-wielding skeleton on top of a ruined spiral staircase.⁶⁰ Given the prevailing critical distrust of spectacle at the apparent expense of sophisticated narrative, it is unsurprising that the film was generally received as little more than an exploitation release. In hindsight, Harryhausen’s films from this period – particularly *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *Mysterious Island* (Cy Endfield) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963) – can be seen as early examples of mainstream, live-action family entertainment in which the *implied audience* was undifferentiated. It is ironic that the screen entertainment Harryhausen’s films most closely resembled – *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) – was a British film, whose spectacle-orientated undifferentiated address was totally out of step with Hollywood’s contemporaneous approach to family entertainment. Such films targeted the symbolic child, the ‘child of all ages’, the ‘kidult’. Not until the late-1970s would cinematic entertainment of this ilk become widely-adopted in mainstream Hollywood. At this point, mainstream popular culture was still predominantly middlebrow, and would remain so until the following decade.

By the turn of the early-1960s, teen films were becoming established, and producers were adapting to accommodate the absence of the teenage demographic.

⁶⁰ Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *The Art of Ray Harryhausen*, London: Aurum, 2005, p. 159.

Addressing teenage audiences in family films no longer made logical or financial sense, so family films refocused to accommodate the surviving pre-teen and adult middle-class demographics. Previously, in spite of the concentration upon the entire family, family film narratives had relied heavily upon the central teenage figure, but without this mediatory influence, 1960s family films became polarised; either strongly child-centred, or adult-dominated family 'epics', and teen appeal disappeared from family films. The 'juvenilisation' of Hollywood films in the late-1950s was paralleled by a period of 'adultification' in mainstream family movies which remained until the mid-1970s. In the 1960s, there were two main varieties of family film. The first were large-scale, blockbuster musicals such as *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968) and *Oliver!* (Carol Reed, 1968). Like the small-town family films of the 1940s, they were primarily directed towards adults, but were calculatedly inoffensive. The second were more child-orientated live-action films produced by the resurgent Disney studio, notably *Swiss Family Robinson* (Ken Annakin, 1960), *Pollyanna* (David Swift, 1960), *The Parent Trap* (David Swift, 1961) and *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964). Unsurprisingly, the more adult-orientated family blockbusters found considerable favour with the Academy Awards – a useful register of industry approval. Hollywood's need for such elderly filmmakers as George Cukor and Carol Reed suggests a wilful – though not entirely unprofitable – disconnection with contemporary culture. Ultimately, though, the success of such anti-authoritarian independent films as *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) and *Woodstock* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970), coupled with the lukewarm reception that greeted the release of *Oliver!*, served to heighten the impression that such family films were

anachronisms. The establishment of the MPAA's rating system in November 1968 prompted further industry changes, and few family films were made in the immediate aftermath. The 'juvenilisation' of blockbuster narratives in the mid-to-late 1970s reintegrated the teenage demographic, and finally united the dominant consumers of Hollywood cinema, but it was a long, difficult journey to renewed success.

Disney and the child-orientated family film

Unlike its impact on the other Hollywood majors, the emergence of the teenage consumer was not detrimental to Disney's fortunes. Disney films never appealed substantially to teenagers, so no radical creative overhaul appeared necessary when the teen film rose to prominence. Instead, the studio used the mid-1950s to expand its recreational and synergistic outlets. Disney pioneered a movie-television synergy with ABC television in which, as Jon Lewis explains,

Walt Disney offered a television show (which he himself hosted for years) and licensing agreements whereby the network would screen feature films made by the studio. The other studios, many of which were in dire financial condition, followed suit and exploited their film libraries through licensing agreements with the networks.⁶¹

The show was originally known as *Disneyland* (1954-2008), and its revenues were invested in the famous amusement park of the same name.⁶² In 1956, the park's first year of business, it received about 3 million visitors; by 1966, nearly 7 million people were attending Disneyworld.⁶³ By this point, Disney was truly a family-orientated corporation – reportedly three-quarters of theme park attendees were adults – but another successful television show, *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959), kept the Disney brand ubiquitous

⁶¹ Lewis, 'Movies and Growing Up...Absurd', p. 136.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, pp. 19, 316.

amongst young children.⁶⁴ In addition to the studio's animated features, Disney pioneered live-action child-orientated family films, although Walt continued to insist that the studio 'was not a producer of children's entertainment'.⁶⁵ *Treasure Island* (Byron Haskin, 1950) was Disney's first totally non-animated feature, and its production of live-action films rapidly accelerated during the decade. As Schickel notes, 'just five animated features emerged from the Disney studio in the years 1953-1968, while in the same period over fifty live-action features were released'.⁶⁶ Disney apparently realised that the required outlay for animated productions, in terms of both time and money, was uneconomical. Live-action features, by contrast, could be rapidly produced, and designed to fit the company 'house style'. As Schickel notes, 'the Disney [live-action] films tended to look alike' – they adhered to a finely-honed formula.⁶⁷

By intensifying the rate of production of child-friendly live-action family films at precisely the point at which the teenage demographic had found its own niche, Disney again capitalised on circumstance. In the live-action films of 1960 and 1961 starring Hayley Mills, the child is the focal point. Walt Disney was reportedly enraptured by the child-star qualities of Mills, and was committed to 'get[ting] as much out of Hayley as he could while she was still that certain age, on the verge of womanhood, but not quite there yet'.⁶⁸ However, Walt felt that *Pollyanna*'s title damaged revenues: 'girls and women

⁶⁴ 'Theme Parks: The American Dream and the Great Escape', *The Economist*, Saturday January 11th, 1986, pp. 83-84.

⁶⁵ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, pp. 362-363.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁶⁸ Roy E. Disney, interviewed in 'Caught in The Act: The Making of The Parent Trap', a special feature of *The Parent Trap* DVD, Walt Disney Pictures.

went to it, but men tended to stay away because it sounded sweet and sticky'.⁶⁹ Later films stress more of an equal balance by presenting families in which the strong, paternal father is strongly emphasised. Mills's next Disney feature, *The Parent Trap*, centres upon an estranged family, literally split into two halves, which ultimately reunites, and in *Swiss Family Robinson*, as in the family features of the 1940s, screen time is divided between the parents and children (although here the tone is decidedly lighter and more carefree). The latter film centres on a family marooned on a desert island during the Napoleonic era. Faced with the likelihood of a long enforced stay, they determine to tame the wilderness and build a new, happy life on the island. The first half of the movie plays like a wish-fulfilment fantasy, as the family, in the style of an exaggerated Robinson Crusoe, manufactures a huge, resplendent tree house, more than large enough for the family of five (and two dogs). The tree house even features a retractable staircase, 'to keep out the neighbours', as Father (John Mills) puts it, recapitulating the suburban fantasy of the self-contained, self-sustaining family unit. It is a pastoral idyll, a wilderness truly tamed by human ingenuity, where even the fierce animals which threaten the family upon their arrival later mysteriously disappear; a private sphere insulated from the unwanted intrusion of society.

The function of the parents is universalised and familial, rather than sexual. Underlined by the fact that they only ever refer to each other as 'Mother' and 'Father', their position is not that of lovers, but generic parents, projecting authority but benevolence. The casting of English actor John Mills, scarcely the most sexually-potent or charismatic screen leading man, seems designed to impose a level of benign,

⁶⁹ Jerry Griswold, 'Pollyanna: Ex-Bubblehead', *The New York Times*, October 25th, 1987. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/25/books/pollyanna-ex-bubblehead.html?sec=&spon=>> [accessed 31/3/09.]

unthreatening masculinity upon the story. This was typical of the Disney studio's overall casting strategy, in which performers were hired for basic competence rather than force of personality. As Schickel argues, 'the stars of a Disney movie are utterly interchangeable with others of their type'.⁷⁰ Just as the teenage boys are predictably brave and resourceful, displaying stereotypical adventure-story hunger for daring-do, the parents are archetypes of traditional North American ideology surrounding the required roles of parents. The only moment in the film where Mother (Dorothy McGuire) and Father seem to possess any degree of intimacy comes shortly after the family complete the tree house. Father shows Mother to the highest room in the tree house, their bedroom, which is open to the night sky:

Don't you remember? That summer we went to Interlaken? You said that some day, if you could have your wish, you'd sleep each night so you could see the stars.

The scene is a curious, but isolated allusion to a deeper, more romantic relationship, in a film generally uninterested in the intricacies of adult concerns.

Father appears totally naïve concerning the adolescent needs of his three sons, whilst Mother becomes all too concerned at the lack of a young woman:

Father: Don't you sometimes feel that this is the kind of life we were meant to live on this Earth? Everything we need. Everything's right here, right at our fingertips. You know, if only people could have all this and be satisfied, there wouldn't be any problems in this world.

Mother: Apart from future generations.

As with the small-town family comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, women satisfy the need for generational continuity; for the procreative, rather than recreational aspect of sexual intercourse. A brief allusion to teenage hormones occurs in a scene where the two teenage boys – Fritz (James MacArthur) and Ernst (Tommy Kirk) – begin exploring the

⁷⁰ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, p. 344.

island to seek possible escape. They are seen reclining on the shores of the desert island, both topless:

Ernst: Fritz, listen: do you think if we get to New Guinea, if we ever do, there'll be any girls our age?

Fritz: By the time we get to New Guinea, we won't care what age they are!

The boys are behaving within the bounds of adult expectation, a fact made explicit by Mother's earlier concerns regarding the lack of a woman on the island. Their sexual drive is heavily mediated by the bounds of decorum, hence its complete absence in the family sections. Their relatively short passage into manhood, framed by a brief discussion between the teenagers in which they allude to their greater physical strength and bravery, is heavily sanitised and unproblematic; ideal youth into ideal manhood. Like the island, their burgeoning sexuality is shown to be unaffected, natural, and free from the weight of social intrusion.

Teenagers, we might speculate, were unlikely to have been attracted by such conventional representations of adolescence at a time when more accurate depictions were being offered directly to teenage consumers. Successful independents such as AIP, although limited by modest resources, often had a closer understanding of demographic targeting than did more established majors like MGM or Disney. By the 1960s, television and independent film producers alike had grasped the value of the male teenager, both as consumer and opinion leader. AIP developed a useful syllogism (dubbed the 'Peter Pan Syndrome') which they applied to teenage audience tastes when deciding upon film content:

- a) a younger child will watch anything an older child will watch;
- b) an older child will *not* watch anything a younger child will watch;
- c) a girl will watch anything a boy will watch;
- d) a boy will *not* watch anything a girl will watch; therefore,

e) to catch your greatest audience you zero in on the 19-year-old male.⁷¹

By the mid-1960s, the music and television industries had adopted this philosophy on a grand scale, resulting not only in the massive proliferation of rock ‘n’ roll, but such cross-over hits as *The Monkees* (1966-1968). In comparison, Walt Disney’s quaint insistence that he made movies ‘to suit myself, hoping they will also suit the audience’ seems positively prehistoric.⁷² The major studios failed to learn by these examples, persisting with wholesome family movies concentrating upon young child protagonists and their parents; a time-tested formula, but no longer representative of popular culture.

Regardless of their anaemic reception with young, hip consumers, such films grew into a position of high approval within the industry itself.⁷³ By the 1960s, the Production Code was being regularly disregarded. Having been amended several times over the years to make it marginally less rigid, the Code remained, throughout its various re-writes, a restrictive force upon filmmakers.⁷⁴ The success of such films as Preminger’s *The Moon is Blue* (1953) – one of the first films released without Code approval – and Elia Kazan’s controversial *Baby Doll* (1956) in heavily Catholic areas confirmed that cultural attitudes towards motion picture permissibility were shifting.⁷⁵

Stephen Farber reports that:

Before 1948, it is estimated that about ninety-five per cent of all films shown in America were made with the cooperation of the Code and bore its seal. By 1966, only fifty-nine per cent of films released in the United States carried the seal.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s*, p. 128.

⁷² Schickel, *The Disney Version*, p. 354.

⁷³ Leo A Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience: A Report of Film Audience Research*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1950, p. 89.

⁷⁴ Stephen Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, Washington, D.C., Public Affairs Press, 1972, p. 13.

⁷⁵ See Gregory D. Black’s discussion of attitudes towards the motion picture in the Catholic Church: ‘Changing Perceptions of the Movies: American Catholics Debate Film Censorship’, *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 2001, pp. 79-90.

⁷⁶ Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, p. 12.

The increasing irrelevance of the Production Code, and the appointment of a new, more progressive MPAA President in Jack Valenti, led to the creation of the modern Hollywood rating system, which came into effect in November 1968.⁷⁷

As Geoff King notes, the advent of the rating system ‘heightened and institutionalised’ the ‘targeting of different films to different audiences’.⁷⁸ In a sense, the MPAA rating system had precisely the opposite intended effect as the 1934 Production Code. The Code was designed to symbolise the unity of Hollywood’s ‘great audience’ and underline the industry’s credentials as a democratic system. In contrast, the movie rating system constituted an open manifesto of Hollywood’s new democratic selectivity, and was designed to regulate the already-immutably deep divisions in Hollywood’s audiences. The rating system was the culmination of several years of increasing division. It was a requirement of MPAA membership that studios were prohibited from releasing films without the seal of the Production Code, so the studios, recognising the commercial value of ‘adult’ films, set up ‘subsidiary companies to distribute their unapproved movies’.⁷⁹ While this hypocritical strategy was widely accepted in Hollywood, the Oscars still defiantly rewarded films designed to be suitable for everyone. Notable big winners at the Academy Awards in the 1960s included *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Poppins* and *Oliver!*, all of which recalled a less contentious style of Hollywood movie-making.

But for several stylistic factors which identify it strongly as a Disney production, *Mary Poppins* might have been made twenty years earlier. The film received five

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, London: I. B. Taurus, 2000, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, p. 13.

Oscars: ‘Best Actress in a Leading Role’ (Julie Andrews), ‘Best Effects’, ‘Best Film Editing’, ‘Best Music – Score’ and ‘Best Music – Popular Song’. Overall, Academy Award recognition foregrounded the film’s technical and aesthetic elements, rather than its content. The film centres upon a ‘practically perfect’ but eccentric nanny, reluctantly enlisted by the rigid patriarch of a slightly troubled Edwardian family. The nanny, Mary Poppins (Andrews) has a firm grasp of magic, and promises to re-instil order in the family through a mixture of kindness and firmness. Most of the family’s problems appear to originate with stuffy, autocratic father Mr Banks (David Tomlinson), an executive who believes that since ‘a British bank is run on efficiency, a British home requires nothing less’. Eventually, Mary, aided by chimney-sweep Bert (Dick Van Dyke), manages to convince Mr Banks of the error of his ways, thus revealing the true value of the nuclear family. It is therefore significant that, like the small-town comedies of the 1940s (which were also produced during a period of social anxiety regarding the family unit), *Mary Poppins* is set in the distant past. The action is relocated to Edwardian England, a supposed bastion of etiquette, high-society and family unity. To borrow Fredric Jameson’s term, *Mary Poppins* shares much of the ‘feeling tone’ of such 1940s American family-life films as *Life with Father* (Michael Curtiz, 1947).⁸⁰ In both cases, the mood of overt nostalgia is heightened by tokenistic period detail, such as horse-drawn carriages, gaslights and family servants.

However, although the similarities between the two forms are clear, closer examination reveals an important difference: in the 1940s family comedies, the family unit operated as a bulwark against external pressures. They focused upon individuals about to enter the adult social sphere and frightened of making mistakes, and wise,

⁸⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, p. 13.

benevolent fathers who help them overcome their anxieties in preparation for adulthood. The families were the locus of kindly wisdom and support, capable of overcoming all problems if their members pulled together in a common cause. In *Mary Poppins*, problems do not reside with individual family members; it is the family as an *institutional system* which must be rehabilitated. The rehabilitative process is twofold: the on-screen salvation of an unhappy, malfunctioning family, and the behind-the-scenes attempt to restore 'the family' to its prior, exalted position in the national consciousness. The very thrust of the film, and specifically the character of Mary, can be seen as symbolising the projected re-instigation of order and ideological normality upon an institution widely regarded as disintegrating. Indeed, the radical conclusions of such social scientists as R.D. Laing, whose argument stemmed from the premise that self-interest was the governing force behind the family, were disquieting to a society that has long valorised the nurturing qualities of the family as the fulcrum of the socialisation process.⁸¹ The idea of the family, as Stephanie Coontz has argued, is a concept far more abstract than real.⁸² In the 1940s films, family serves as the solution to life's problems. Here, family *is* the problem.

With its greater focus upon the family unit, Disney was now displaying a more pronounced ideological streak.⁸³ *Mary Poppins* still attempts to tap into a more juvenile mode of appeal with the special-effects-heavy fantasy sequences, the musical numbers and elaborate dance choreography, the man-boy figure of Bert, and the presence of the child protagonists (Karen Dotrice and Matthew Garber). However, the scene in which

⁸¹ R.D. Laing and A. Esterson, *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, London: Penguin Books, 1964.

⁸² Coontz, Stephanie, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, New York: Basic Books, 1992.

⁸³ See Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, p. 452.

Bert chastises Mr Banks for the neglect of his children, pointing out that ‘childhood slips like sand through a sieve’, merely reflects familiar adult regret at the transience of childhood. The persona of Julie Andrews, who starred in both *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*, adds a further level of didacticism to proceedings. The first scene sees Mary sitting on top of a cloud, beautifying herself with make-up and inspecting her precise image in a hand-mirror (a display of vanity making her later claim of being ‘practically perfect’ slightly ironic). The scene immediately establishes her elevated sensibility, separated from the wider social area whether through nature or design, whilst implying her superiority.

As Bruce Babington argues, this didacticism is a recurrent trope in Andrews’s performances, and is deeply imbedded within her star persona: ‘her typical modes of address [are] teacherly, gentle, solicitous, candid, occasionally commanding’.⁸⁴ Her authoritative, ‘teacherly’ manner is exaggerated by her ‘precise enunciation [which] carries messages of the importance of order and neatness’.⁸⁵ Furthermore, as a famous Hollywood star, her on-screen impact is heightened by the ‘pronounced sense in which Julie Andrews is always Julie Andrews’.⁸⁶ Babington argues that:

What emerges [from a reading of Andrews’s persona] is a characteristic high bourgeois mixture of altruism and self-advancement, which, though in an English inflection, has its meanings in American culture, where for the American audience (remembering that Andrews’s films are American) her Englishness also revives historical parent-child relations, and combines with Hollywood’s tendencies to associate British female stars with cultivation and education.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Babington, Bruce, ‘Song, Narrative and the Mother’s Voice: A Deepish Reading of Julie Andrews’, *British Stars and Stardom: from Alma Taylor to Sean Connery* ed. Bruce Babington, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001 (pp. 192-204), p. 194.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

The ties binding the early-1960s Disney films with blockbuster family musicals such as *The Sound of Music* are stronger than they may appear. Although Disney's films retained a more obvious child emphasis than the offerings of the other major studios, the success of *Mary Poppins* appeared to convince Disney that the biggest profits were to be captured replicating the basic structure of their most adult-inflected film to date.

Walt Disney may have protested that he never made a film 'that did not have, as its primary criterion of success, its ability to please him', but the creative direction of his studio in the 1960s casts that statement into doubt.⁸⁸ In attempting to reproduce the successful formula of *Mary Poppins* – the decade's second most successful film at the domestic box office behind *The Sound of Music* – the studio manoeuvred itself even further towards the adult-orientated mainstream.⁸⁹ Admittedly, the studio's products were always *aesthetically*-attuned to mainstream audience taste; as Schickel has noted, Walt Disney appeared to possess 'some almost mystic bond between himself and the moods and attitudes and styles' of the public.⁹⁰ However, by positioning itself within the creative confines of the family unit, the studio was almost bound to articulate the fears surrounding that institution, thereby reflecting the ideological concerns of the adult establishment as never before. Not helped by the death of its founder in 1966, the studio began a slow commercial decline which lasted until the early-1980s. As Schickel argues:

To see how the Disney Product could suffer from a fully conscious attempt to have, as Roy Disney put it in 1967, "at least one Mary Poppins every year", viewers had to wait until the following yuletide season when *The Happiest Millionaire* came crashing down on them. Based on Kyle Crichton's modest little play of the same title [...] the film was a nightmarish blend of dull songs, flat family comedy, fraudulent period charm and insipid juvenile romance, directed by Norman Tokar – a contract craftsman at the studio – as if twenty years of movie history had never happened.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, pp. 362-363.

⁸⁹ Finler, 'Box-Office Hits 1914-2002', pp. 356-363.

⁹⁰ Schickel, *The Disney Version*, p. 361.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

Douglas Gomery suggests that a major factor in the studio's decline lay in the fact that Roy Disney never possessed the intuitive insight of Walt:

Roy never learned from the success of his brother's risk-taking; he remained always the fiscal realist. He and Walt complemented each other. Now only one side of that balance was left. And it was not the side that had pushed the company forward.⁹²

Gomery is also correct in arguing that the studio's decline was exacerbated by the strategic failure in the late-1960s and 1970s to cater to the teenage audience, 'consistently refus[ing] to produce hard-PG and R-rated films'.⁹³

The Sound of Music, and the 1960s adult-orientated family blockbuster

In the short-term, during the mid-1960s, pitching films more towards the adult elements of the 'family audience' was a sound financial strategy which paid dividends. The window of opportunity for these films achieving sizable box office success lasted just over four years: the period between the release of *Mary Poppins* in 1964 and the implementation of the MPAA rating system in November 1968. During this time, although the Code's influence was considerably weaker than in its heyday, it was still widely observed. Furthermore, the influence of the teen film had not yet supplanted many of the formal and ideological constraints of the studio era, and the large-scale, blockbuster epics of the 1950s and early-1960s demonstrated that size, scope and spectacle still attracted large mainstream audiences. Following Disney's success with *Mary Poppins*, Twentieth Century-Fox scored massively with its production of *The Sound of Music*, whilst MGM's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and Columbia's *Oliver!* did reasonable business. These films were adult-inflected, big-budget family musicals. The

⁹² Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, p. 269.

⁹³ Ibid.

'epic' treatment, song-and-dance numbers and broad comedy showed a prevailing faith in the studio-era belief that broad suitability will inevitably capture a broad range of viewers. In most respects, these films were adult in their ideological content. It is surely significant that *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* – comfortably the most juvenile of these films in theme and approach – received far less attention from the Academy Awards than the others.

I would argue that the high esteem with which these movies were received stemmed more from their inherent conservatism in a time of social and industry upheaval than their intrinsic merits as popular entertainment. The massive commercial and critical success of *The Sound of Music* provided ballast to Hollywood in the mid-sixties, and was admittedly a factor in this growing approbation. The film won Academy Awards for 'Best Picture', 'Best Director' (Robert Wise), 'Best film editing', 'Best Music' and 'Best Sound'. Its domestic rental figure has been placed at \$72 million, making it the highest-grossing movie of the decade by a considerable margin.⁹⁴ Julie Andrews was nominated for the second consecutive year for 'Best Actress in a Leading Role'. The U.S. Library of Congress selected the film for preservation to the National Film Registry in 2001, another noted measure of establishment approval.⁹⁵ *Oliver!* received six Oscars, including 'Best Picture' and 'Best Director' for Carol Reed, and was nominated for a further six awards. In contrast, *Meet me in St Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), arguably the most famous and well-regarded family film of the 1940s, only received four minor Oscar nominations. The divergence is easily explained: by the 1960s, such family-

⁹⁴ Finler, 'Box-Office Hits 1914-2002', pp. 356-363.

⁹⁵ 'Films Selected to the National Film Registry, Library of Congress 1989-2008', *National Film Preservation Board*.
<<http://www.loc.gov/film/nfrchron.html>> [accessed 1/4/09.]

friendly productions were exceptions to the rule. Like the early-1930s literary adaptation, the 1960s prestige family film served a public-relations function, and, consciously or otherwise, served to affirm middlebrow cultural values in an era in which the film industry was heading into uncertain territory. Inoffensive films still ascribing to the prescriptions of the Production Code were undoubtedly promoted in favour of more challenging fare which disregarded industry conventions by *only* addressing the ‘adult’ and ignoring the ‘family’.

By the mid-1960s, these defiantly old-fashioned family films were an identifiable bulwark against the emergent, ideologically-threatening ‘youth culture’, a phenomenon still dimly understood and often misrepresented. Many conservatives associated youth culture – as represented by the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll and a large stratum of independent cinema – with liberalism and the counter-cultural movement. In what Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin have described as a second American civil war, the 1960s were marked by a number of political and cultural oppositions, in which

many Americans came to regard groups of fellow countrymen as enemies with whom they were engaged in a struggle for the nation’s very soul. Whites versus blacks, liberals versus conservatives (as well as liberals versus radicals), young versus old, men versus women, hawks versus doves, rich versus poor, taxpayers versus welfare recipients, the religious versus the secular, the hip versus the straight, the gay versus the straight – everywhere one looked, new battalions took to the field, in a spirit ranging from that of redemptive sacrifice to vengeful defiance.⁹⁶

Hollywood’s creative response to these oppositions was ambiguous, reflecting the increasing political diversity within cinema and popular culture. However, middlebrow family entertainment is peculiar in that it naturally presupposes the existence of an undifferentiated ‘public’ driven by conservative ideals. Aside from the greater

⁹⁶ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 3-4.

commercial appeal of custom and sentiment over change and realism, most family film producers were themselves middle-aged and politically conservative. If – in the midst of a cultural and political revolution apparently inimical to these ideals – producers dug their heels and defended themselves against perceived insurgency, it is hardly surprising. With youth culture and liberalism flourishing, and middlebrow culture under constant assault, the family movie was a bastion of adult-orientated popular culture. The resulting productions further disassociated themselves with the realities of childhood and adolescence, descending deeper into self-indulgent fantasy.

This insularity can be seen in the development of the family blockbuster, which, at this stage in Hollywood's development, was still closely-identified with adult audiences. As Thomas Schatz argues:

The biopics, historical and biblical epics, literary adaptations and transplanted stage musicals of the 1950s and 1960s differed from the prestige pictures of the classical era only in their oversized budgets, casts, running times and screen width.⁹⁷

During the 1960s, particularly lengthy films were heavily associated with high-minded 'event movies' (*Birth of a Nation* [D.W. Griffith, 1915], *Gone with the Wind* [Victor Fleming, 1939] and *Ben-Hur* are notable examples). Such films neglect the entertainment needs of children in two important respects. Firstly, the narratives themselves are emphatically 'adult' in orientation. Just as significantly, it had long been acknowledged in Hollywood that particularly long films disengage children, whose attention spans are markedly shorter. The series and serials of the 1920s and 1930s, many of which were made specifically for children, were usually under one hour in length. Even the more mainstream family films of Rooney and Temple were usually

⁹⁷ Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer, London: Routledge, 2003 (pp.15-44), p. 21.

little over one hour long, as were Disney's animated features. Although the average length of features had increased considerably by the 1960s, emphasising the motion picture's grander design over television, a running time of three hours was reserved for large-scale prestige productions targeting the adult audience demographics.

The Sound of Music builds on the emerging formula of the middlebrow blockbuster. Such prestigious source material – a Rodgers and Hammerstein stage musical, premiered in 1959 – is a rarity, demanding exploitation with lavish screen treatment. In this case, hiring high-profile director Robert Wise and leading lady Julie Andrews – fresh from her box office success in *Mary Poppins* – were financially-astute moves, as were retaining the songs from the stage version. The extended length, which ran to approximately three hours, suggests a marquee presentation, as does the intermission halfway through the film. These strategies paid off for the studio; although Barry Keith Grant regards the film as 'a work of calculated sentimental claptrap', he notes that amongst contemporary critics, only Pauline Kael disapproved, dubbing the film 'the sound of money'.⁹⁸ Although its defining qualities – crystalline photography, didactic songs, Julie Andrews, sweet sentiment – are all broadly suitable, they are hardly specifically appealing to young children or teenagers. Like the domestic comedies of the 1940s, *The Sound of Music* may have been imposed upon children by misty-eyes adults. Relatively few children, surely, would have made an independent decision to see a three-hour musical, heavily foregrounding an adult romance, with a roster of virtually undifferentiated, impeccably-behaved children. One scene shows the children enacting a complex song-and-dance routine for the benefit of a group of adult party guests, one of

⁹⁸ Barry Keith Grant, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1960s', *American Cinema of the 1960s*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008 (pp. 1-21), p. 16.

which eulogises: ‘is there a more beautiful expression of what is good in this country of ours than the innocent voices of our children?’ Rather than identifying with youth culture on level terms, it imposes a nostalgic, mythologised view of children as a homogenous entity.



Figure 8: *The Sound of Music* (1965) – an expensive family blockbuster addressed chiefly to adult audiences.

The European settings in *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music* and *Oliver!* may be viewed as attempts to extend film content beyond the usual North American inflection in order to appeal to foreign audiences. In reality, their old-timey, bourgeois respectability constitutes a continuation, rather than disruption, of the cultural imperialism Hollywood was supposedly abandoning in response to economic and cultural globalisation. In 1956, a prominent exhibitor argued that ‘American producers now rarely make pictures

especially adapted to American audiences’ and that this policy ‘has virtually eliminated the American family-type pictures and those featuring familiar American sports and customs’.⁹⁹ In actuality, though, the supposedly radical shift towards movies featuring a ‘continental’ tone – evident in such 1950s musicals as *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951) and *Gigi* (Minnelli, 1958) and continuing in these 1960s family blockbusters – was almost entirely cosmetic. The real concessions to overseas markets were industrial, rather than thematic; Hollywood’s embrace of the blockbuster was pivotal in attracting greater numbers of foreign audiences. Schatz sees *The Sound of Music* as a crucial step in the development of what he calls the ‘New Hollywood’:

the movie industry underwent three fairly distinct decade-long phases after the war – from 1946 to 1955, from 1956 to 1965, and from 1966 to 1975. These phases were distinguished by various developments both inside and outside the industry [...] The key markers in these phases were huge hits like *The Ten Commandments* in 1956, *The Sound of Music* in 1965, and *Jaws* in 1975, which redefined the nature, scope, and profit potential of the Blockbuster movie.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, there is reason to consider it as one of the first hybrids between ‘epic film’ and ‘family film’, a combination constitutive of a prominent facet of the modern blockbuster. *The Sound of Music* harks back to former periods of Hollywood production in terms of content, style and ideology, but also anticipates the future emergence of the mainstream family blockbuster.

Like *The Sound of Music*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *Oliver!*, both released three years later, reveal an industry caught between opposing styles of filmmaking. Champlin argues that ‘of the major films released in 1968, *Oliver!* was one of the few that would have been done in exactly the same way five years before, or five years

⁹⁹ Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Schatz, ‘The New Hollywood’, pp. 16-17.

later'.¹⁰¹ This is not strictly true: like *The Sound of Music*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *Oliver!* are unusually long at 144 minutes and 153 minutes respectively, and both contain an intermission. They were also released shortly before the establishment of the MPAA rating system, which, in conjunction with the emergence of a new generation of challenging independent films and filmmakers, dealt a hammer blow to the old-style family musical. Although *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Mel Stuart, 1971) emerged three years later, it was far more fantasy-orientated than any of these 1960s films, and, with a running-time of well under two hours, much shorter. *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*'s credentials as an early family blockbuster are apparent not only from the on-screen treatment, which foregrounds fantastical special-effects, but from the personae involved in its production. It was overseen by James Bond producer Albert R. Broccoli, designed by Bond designer Ken Adam, and adapted for the screen by Bond script-writer Roald Dahl from a novel by Bond creator Ian Fleming. The make-up of the production crew demonstrates the movement away from the studio-era model of creative personnel having particular generic specialisations, towards the increasing generic irrelevance of the blockbuster – a phenomenon I will examine in more depth in later chapters.

Between the mid-1950s and late-1960s, Hollywood studios were forced to make radical changes, industrially and creatively. The growth of television and the mass-migration to the suburbs damaged Hollywood, but also served to consolidate its strengths. Enormous scope and visual spectacle became the major-selling points in the 1950s, followed by greater artistic freedom and creative diversity in the 1960s. It became apparent that the film industry could no longer afford to overlook specific sections of its audience, namely the teenage and young adult demographics. Although recognising that

¹⁰¹ Champlin, *The Flicks: Or, Whatever Happened to Andy Hardy?*, p. 85.

certain films were more appealing to certain types of viewer, Hollywood failed to cater to younger viewers on a mainstream level before the emergence of the teen film. Its response to this emergence, though, was reactionary. Rather than attempting to reintegrate the younger audience sections into mainstream product by providing more youth appeal (as it finally learned to do in the late-1970s), Hollywood re-focused its attention towards the middlebrow domestic audience. This strategy worked for a time, and defiantly old-fashioned family musicals, inflated by huge budgets and sustained by overwhelming critical support, were again briefly successful. However, the failure of Disney's follow-ups to *Mary Poppins* demonstrated the difficulty faced by less distinguished examples of the form. The MPAA rating system brought a new freedom to filmmakers, and finally acknowledged the existence of deep boundaries in audience composition. However, the family films of this period have had a lasting impact upon the 'New Hollywood', as I will argue in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: The Modern Family Film and the New Hollywood, 1977-1995

As the 1960s drew to a close, the traditional Hollywood family film had reached crisis point. As the previous chapter illustrated, the teenage demographic acquired its own cinematic space in the mid-1950s. The development and popularisation of the teen pic disrupted the supposed all-age, cross-demographic function of the family film. The 1960s was a decade of renegotiation; it was a last hurrah for the traditionally-made family movie and by its close, U.S. popular culture was in the process of transitioning from an adult- to a youth-orientation. The MPAA's movie rating system, introduced in November 1968, served to finally acknowledge long-standing divisions in American audiences, confirming and institutionalising the growing trend towards demographic segmentation. The fact that this major institutional change paralleled changes in the U.S. cultural consciousness can be gauged by *Variety's* review of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968), which reveals frustration at its failure to achieve all-age appeal:

Since [producer Albert R.] Broccoli has publicly acknowledged the production of "Chitty" as deriving from the success of "Mary Poppins", it doesn't seem amiss to explore where the current entry fails in relationship to the Disney smasharoo. For one thing it lacks the sort of "magnetic" star performance so important to the all-ages success of "Poppins" and, for that matter, "The Wizard of Oz", perhaps the only other children's fantasy to achieve adult appeal.¹

By the end of the decade, it seemed a very real possibility that securing a trans-demographic, trans-cultural mass audience – a dream embodied by the family film – was now an absolute impossibility.

In 1969 the film industry was hit by a fiscal crisis which almost brought it to its collective knees. As David A. Cook explains, this recession

¹ 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang', *Variety*, November 20th, 1968.

had produced more than \$200 million in losses; left MGM, Warner Bros, and United Artists under new management; and brought Universal and Columbia close to liquidation.²

A.H. Howe, a Bank of America executive in charge of production financing, argued that the recession was matched ‘in seriousness, dislocation and change by only two events in film history, the sound revolution of 1930 and the television upheaval of the 1950s’.³ The crisis ‘lasted until the end of 1971 and generated another \$300-400 million in losses’, forcing Hollywood into ‘another period of retrenchment’.⁴ There were several reasons for this recession. Firstly, the introduction of three ‘instant majors’ – television networks ABC and CBS, and theatre chain National General – into the film production industry increased competition and thereby inflated prices across the board, whilst ‘glutting the market with pictures’.⁵ Secondly, network television’s ‘insatiable demand’ for feature films during the mid-1960s triggered both over-production and over-spending.⁶ In 1968, with the networks’ rapid demand for buying-up feature films temporarily sated, the bottom fell out of the market. Finally, Hollywood’s strategy of investing in ‘a large number of expensively produced musicals bidding to cash in on the misleading popularity’ of *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) proved a disastrous misreading of the market.⁷ Films like *Camelot* (Joshua Logan, 1967), *Star!* (Robert Wise, 1968), *Sweet Charity* (Bob Fosse, 1969) and *Hello, Dolly!* (Gene Kelly, 1969) were rapidly becoming

² David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000, p. 9.

³ Cited in Tino Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990, p. 259.

⁴ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 9; Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, p. 259.

⁵ Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, p. 260.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 9.

creative and commercial anachronisms, and the scale of their collective losses contributed significantly to a recession facilitated by record-high interest rates of around 10 per cent.⁸

ABC, CBS and General Cinema dropped out of the motion picture industry, but the major studios, as Balio notes,

learned some valuable lessons from the recession. The most important was that attendance had stabilised in size for all practical purposes, meaning that the market could only support a finite number of blockbusters.⁹

Picking up on the success of low-budget youth-orientated films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), the major studios temporarily reduced production budgets and refocused their attention towards the youth audience. A 1968 Yankelovich and Associates survey commissioned by the MPAA revealed that

48 percent of the box-office admissions for that year were from the 16-24 age group, and concluded that “being young and single is the overriding demographic precondition for being a frequent and enthusiastic movie-goer”.¹⁰

Initially, it appeared that the MPAA rating system would not substantially affect production trends. The rating system comprised four categories of supposed audience suitability: G (all ages admitted; general audiences), M (suggested for mature audiences – adults and mature young people; later amended to GP and finally PG – parental guidance), R (restricted; under sixteen requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) and X (no one under sixteen admitted).¹¹ As Peter Kramer notes, ‘early reports in November 1968 seemed to indicate that G would be the most frequently used rating (44

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, p. 260.

¹⁰ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 67.

¹¹ Stephen Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, Washington, D.C: Public Affairs Press, 1972, p. 15.

per cent of all films)'.¹² The G rating was designed 'to serve the motion picture wants of youngsters 6 to 12, their parents, and those in-between', but by November 1969, 'it became clear that G-rated films were a clear minority (32 per cent)'.¹³ This trend continued in the early 1970s. Whereas in 1969 G and GP films comprised 71 per cent of all film ratings, by 1970 'there were more films in R (approximately thirty-seven or thirty-eight per cent) than in any other category'.¹⁴ This can largely be attributed to the growth in films directed towards teenagers and young adults.

The youth-film movement in mainstream cinema was kick-started by the success of *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), described by critic Ryan Gilbey as 'the film that helped liberate American cinema'.¹⁵ Grossing over \$19 million from a miniscule budget, *Easy Rider's* position within U.S. film history is perhaps more symbolic than real.¹⁶ It is, as Gilbey argues,

a work that you are moved to applaud more for the movies that it made possible, than for what the film is or ever was [...] [But] other films had, in turn, made Hopper's picture possible. Its immediately forbears were the down-and-dirty biker movies churned out by Roger Corman's exploitation empire along with numerous other sensationalist or opportunistic quickies.¹⁷

Bringing exploitation genres like sci-fi, horror, pornography and blaxploitation into the mainstream, the industry turned to a new direction of film school-educated writers, producers and directors to exploit the youth market.¹⁸ However, *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) transcended the pejorative associations of

¹² Peter Kramer, 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s', *Genre And Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale, London: British Film Institute, 2002 (pp.185-200), p. 191.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stephen Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, Washington, D.C: Public Affairs Press, 1972, p. 39.

¹⁵ Ryan Gilbey, *It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond*, London: Faber and Faber, 2003, p. ix.

¹⁶ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Gilbey, *It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond*, p. ix.

¹⁸ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 6.

mere exploitation, marking a notable convergence of critical and commercial approval. Balio suggests that the success of such pictures revealed that ‘a segment of the public wanted intellectually demanding and emotionally fulfilling pictures’.¹⁹ Although he traces the demise of the ‘youthpix’ cycle to 1971, the socially-critical slant of such pictures lived on in more adult-orientated 1970s films like Robert Altman’s *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Arthur Penn’s *Night Moves* (1975), Hal Ashby’s *Shampoo* (1975), Alan J. Pakula’s *All the President’s Men* (1976), Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978).²⁰

Motion picture taboos were being broken on various levels. Beyond the increasingly anti-authoritarian slant of a certain strata of mainstream movies since the late-1960s, the ratings system allowed for rapid growth in screen violence, nudity, sexually-explicit material, and swearing. MPAA president Jack Valenti – who oversaw the transition from the Production Code – insisted that the rating system was designed to protect children, aiming ‘to give parents the information that will enable them to make decisions about their children’s moviegoing’.²¹ It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the filmic representation of children and families became markedly critical during this period, both in earnest comedy-dramas like *Paper Moon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1973) and controversial horrors like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). *The Exorcist* can be seen as a key text in an emerging genre in the late-1960s and mid-1970s, the ‘family-horror’ film. Kathy Merlock Jackson traces the beginnings of this cycle to *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), continuing with *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), before declining in the 1980s, during a period of avowed ideological

¹⁹ Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, p. 261.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, p. 24.

retrenchment in American society.²² The shift in the ideological climate was illustrated by *The Exorcist's* success at the Oscars – the film won two Academy Awards and received a further eight nominations. Nevertheless, such films predictably aroused the ire of pedagogues such as Ruth M. Goldstein and Edith Zornow, who deliberately omitted the movie from their 1980 book, *The Screen Image of Youth: Movies about Children and Adolescents*.²³ They regarded *The Exorcist* as a film ‘of little profit except to the box-office’ and concurred with *New York Times* columnist Vincent Canby’s assessment that ‘the \$10 million it cost might have been better spent subsidising a couple of beds at the Payne Whitney Clinic’.²⁴ *The Omen* was dismissed as ‘a movie utterly without class’, and Brian De Palma’s 1976 high-school shocker *Carrie* was similarly condemned.²⁵ Despite the clamour of such morally-motivated dissenters, things had changed within Hollywood cinema, decisively and irrevocably. The days where Hollywood producers felt compelled to show restraint, much less adhere to sweet sentiment when representing children and adolescents, were long gone.

By 1972, former MPAA Code and Rating Administration member Stephen Farber could confidently – if prematurely – claim that ‘fewer and fewer movies have [the] mass appeal’ to ‘cut across all segments of society to reach a huge, undifferentiated audience’.²⁶ Certainly, in the context of the early-1970s film industry, it appeared that the family film was dying a slow death. A 1970 survey found that 68 per cent of

²² Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Images of Children in American Film: A Sociocultural Analysis*, Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1986, pp. 138-141.

²³ See Ruth M. Goldstein and Edith Zornow, *The Screen Image of Youth: Movies about Children and Adolescents*, Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1980, p. viii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Farber, *The Movie Rating Game*, p. 3.

respondents were unhappy ‘with available children’s fare’.²⁷ Although the 1970s was, on the whole, a period of fiscal expansion for Disney with the success of its Walt Disney World and Disneyland operations, in terms of feature film production the company was floundering. The success of the 1969 live-action adventure film *The Love Bug* (Robert Stevenson) – the top-grossing film of the year – proved something of a false dawn.²⁸ The live-action films which had become Disney’s stock-in-trade were returning modest profits, as were the relatively-infrequent animated features, but not on a scale comparable to the worldwide success of *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964). Tellingly, perhaps, Disney’s releases were no longer receiving much Academy Award recognition. Both factors were a sure sign of the company’s ever-loosening grip on mass mainstream audiences.²⁹ Moreover, by this point, Disney’s position within the film industry was increasingly isolated. Other studios had harnessed the potential for artistic freedom offered by the new ratings system, producing edgier fare tailor-made for youth audiences. In the early 1970s, with Disney now the only studio regularly releasing films with a G rating, the rating ‘began to be understood as a label for films “that are unfit for adults”’.³⁰ Donn Tatum and Card Walker, Disney’s co-managers during the early-1970s, ‘consistently refused to produce hard-PG and R-rated films, although they knew that the

²⁷ Cited in Peter Kramer, ‘Disney and Family Entertainment’, *Contemporary American Cinema*, eds. Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond, London: McGraw-Hill, 2006 (pp. 265-279), p. 268.

²⁸ Kramer, ‘The Best Disney Film Never Made’: Children’s Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s’, p. 189.

²⁹ Despite its massive success, *The Love Bug* was ignored by the Academy, as was the 1970 animation *The Aristocats* (Wolfgang Reitherman); the 1971 part-animated musical *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (Robert Stevenson) was more successful, winning 1 Oscar and receiving two nominations; the 1973 animation *Robin Hood* (Wolfgang Reitherman) received 1 nomination, whilst other notable live-action films from the period like *Herbie Rides Again* (Robert Stevenson, 1974) and *Escape to Witch Mountain* (John Hough, 1975) were also overlooked.

³⁰ Kramer, ‘The Best Disney Film Never Made’: Children’s Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s’, p. 191.

new teenage audience wanted more sex and violence than the G rating would allow'.³¹ Even though the company's profits rose from \$21.8 million in 1970 to \$135.1 million in 1980, it went the entire decade without a major box office hit.³²

Reactively, the studios attempted to re-engage the 'traditional' small-town family audience with movies thought to possess 'family/adventure elements', such as Warner Bros.' *Billy Jack* (T.C. Frank, 1971) and *Jeremiah Johnson* (Sydney Pollack, 1972).³³ Robert B. Radnitz's low-key family films from this period were distributed by various studios, including Universal, Paramount and Twentieth Century-Fox. The most interesting of these small-town family films, however, was the Readers' Digest collaboration with United Artists to produce musical adaptations of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (Don Taylor, 1973) and *Huckleberry Finn* (J. Lee Thompson, 1974), starring Johnny Whitaker as Tom and Jeff East as Huck. Opening with the tagline 'The Great Family Musical', *Tom Sawyer* was a notable critical success, receiving Oscar nominations for 'Best Art Direction', 'Best Costume Design' and 'Best Music'. These nominations, it should be noted, are aesthetically-orientated, recognising the film's fine period atmosphere, rather than its value as mass entertainment. The musical emphasis and general style are similar to the literary adaptations of the studio era, as is the pastoral setting. In movies of the 1930s and 1940s, when the majority of people lived in small-towns and pre-industrialism was a fairly recent memory, such invocations did not enter into such a polarised conflict with the cultural present. By this point, urban and suburban living had become the North American norm, and *Tom Sawyer* stands as a cultural relic

³¹ Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, London: British Film Institute, 2005, p. 269.

³² Kramer, 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s', p. 188.

³³ Kramer, 'Disney and Family Entertainment', pp. 269-270.

of a bygone age, notably free from self-consciousness or irony in its presentation. The absence of swearing and the staunch refusal to portray even mild violence appear pregnant with defiance against the status quo in popular entertainment. However wholesome, engaging and tuneful (with music by future blockbuster specialist John Williams) it may be, there is a world of difference between family entertainment of this ilk and the family blockbuster titles to come.

Things changed dramatically – for the family film and for the entire industry – in 1975, with the release of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg). Although blockbusters had already been around for some time, *Jaws* redefined the methods of construction and scales of success. Described by David A. Cook as ‘the paradigmatic “event” film of the seventies’, *Jaws* was also pivotal to the formation of what has been called ‘the new Hollywood’.³⁴ The keys to its success, beyond its perceived merits as a piece of action/adventure filmmaking, were the marketing strategies deployed before release in order to maximise audience awareness. As Cook explains, *Jaws* ‘pioneered the practice of saturation booking, combined with massive television advertising’.³⁵ This pattern of distribution ‘was new to the mainstream but had been used by exploitation producers for years’, and ‘helped institutionalise market research within the industry’.³⁶ The wider industry significance of *Jaws* is neatly summarised by Gomery:

Suddenly one film, largely marketed through the “rival” medium of television, could break box-office records, generate millions of dollars in ancillary sales, fashion a profitable year for its distributor studio, and generate a rise in stock price which made investors into instant millionaires. Studios initiated a new way of doing business, never

³⁴ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 40; see also Thomas Schatz, ‘The New Hollywood’, *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 15-44.

³⁵ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

“killed” by TV, but aided by it. A new era for industry practice had begun as studios looked for that single film with which to convert a poor year into a record one.³⁷

Films that had previously been regarded as substantial hits now appeared comparatively small-fry. As Thomas Schatz argues, ‘these blockbuster hits are, for better or worse, what the new Hollywood is all about’, and ‘if any film marked the arrival of the New Hollywood, it was *Jaws*’.³⁸ Such enormous success – and from a relatively small budget – raised the ceiling of feature film profit potential several notches.

Yet there were still many variables in formulating hit blockbusters. Famed producers Dino De Laurentiis and Peter Guber, respectively, oversaw *King Kong* (John Guillermin, 1976) and *The Deep* (Peter Yates, 1977). Both were heavily orchestrated and calculatedly designed to exploit the success of *Jaws*. They also embody traits typical of what has become known as ‘high concept’, as Justin Wyatt explains:

High concept can be understood as a form of differentiated product within the mainstream film industry. This differentiation occurs in two major ways: through an emphasis on style within the films, and through an integration with marketing and merchandising.³⁹

More bluntly defined by Steven Spielberg as ‘a striking, easily reducible narrative which also offers a high degree of profitability’, high concept has become synonymous with high-end mainstream Hollywood filmmaking since the mid-1970s.⁴⁰ As Wyatt suggests:

King Kong offers an unusual number of high concept traits which integrated the film with its promotion. Primarily, a pre-sold classic story, the visual presence of Kong as a character, and the simplicity of a beauty and the beast story.⁴¹

Additionally, however, De Laurentiis attempted to tap the movie’s merchandising potential:

³⁷ Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, p. 214.

³⁸ Schatz, ‘The New Hollywood’, pp. 17, 24.

³⁹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

Adults were to be attracted by to the Jim Beam *King Kong* cocktail and the Jim Beam *King Kong* commemorative bottles; the youth market was targeted with *King Kong* cups, *King Kong* peanut butter cups, and *King Kong* GAF viewmaster slides.⁴²

In manufacturing his blockbuster, Guber concentrated on marketing the film as fully as possible prior to release. Cook suggests that Guber ‘raised the marketing of event movies to a level of perfection that all Hollywood admired [...] in the process, the film itself became largely irrelevant’.⁴³ In the event, both movies were sizable hits by previous standards, but scarcely approached the success of *Jaws*. Blockbuster hits still depended heavily upon the content of the film itself, and the publicity created by favourable word-of-mouth. John Friedkin, former vice-president of Twentieth Century-Fox’s advertising department, once remarked:

All that [exhibitor] guarantees and promotions can buy is a couple of weeks’ business and after that it has to be word of mouth. If the picture is bad, you might as well shoot everybody coming out of a theatre – they will quickly enough kill any film.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the intensification of movie marketing was one of the defining innovations of late-1970s Hollywood filmmaking. As Cook notes, ‘Events [...] were no longer enough – films had to offer something approaching a mystical experience’.⁴⁵ In this regard, the Holy Grail for studios is the film that cuts across boundaries, tapping into so-called ‘all-age’ appeal by simultaneously attracting children, teenagers, young adults and parents. *Jaws* had illustrated the potential for galvanising audiences beyond the regular cinema-goers; now the marketing and promotional frameworks were in place to exploit a potential blockbuster as fully as possible. All a studio needed was the right film.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Cited in Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1989, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 46.

Reassembling the family audience for contemporary Hollywood: *Star Wars* and the family-adventure movie

The film was *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), and the studio Twentieth Century-Fox. Created on a \$9 million budget and expected to recoup between \$16-25 million at the box office, *Star Wars* had an inauspicious production history.⁴⁶ Fresh from writing and directing his first feature, *THX 1138*, for Warner Bros. in 1971, Lucas pitched an early version of *Star Wars* to United Artists, which rejected it.⁴⁷ Two years later, in February 1973, following completion of his second feature, *American Graffiti*, Lucas approached Universal with the idea, and again, the pitch was rejected.⁴⁸ When Twentieth Century-Fox executive Alan Ladd Jr. finally gave Lucas the green light, it was allegedly on the strength of Lucas's obvious talent, rather than the believed merits of the film concept.⁴⁹ Lucas originally envisaged *Star Wars* as 'a modern myth', as well as an update on the child-orientated serials of the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁰ His decision to develop *Star Wars*, which had been put on the back-burner following these rejections, was prompted by his failure to acquire the rights to Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*.⁵¹ After the enormous box office success of *American Graffiti*, Lucas declined the opportunity of a higher fee for writing and directing *Star Wars* on the condition that he retained ownership of the sequel, television, music, soundtrack, and merchandising rights; this astute piece of bargaining cemented his position in the upper echelons of the filmmaking industry.⁵² However, during the film's production, Lucas became concerned regarding its potential audience appeal. Fearing the movie – with its brash, pulp fiction, B movie overtones, comic book

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁷ Marcus Hearn, *The Cinema of George Lucas*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2005, p. 80.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 81.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 78.

⁵¹ Gilbey, *It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond*, p. 46.

⁵² Hearn, *The Cinema of George Lucas*, p. 82.

villains, space battles and colourful aliens – would appeal *only* to children, Lucas lamented, ‘I’ve made a Walt Disney movie [...] It’s gonna do maybe eight, ten million’.⁵³ These concerns appeared justified when he showed a rough cut of the completed film to a group of friends and fellow filmmakers. Only Jay Cocks – a critic for *Time* magazine – and fellow filmmaker Steven Spielberg liked the film.⁵⁴ Fox studio executives were similarly unimpressed, and did not believe they would recoup their investment.⁵⁵

In the event, when it was released in May 1977, *Star Wars*

wasn’t just an immense success, as *American Graffiti* had been, it was *the* immense success of the 1970s, setting box-office records, sparking the merchandising revolution, providing a sanctuary for family audiences left out in the cold by the last (or rather first) big blockbuster, Spielberg’s 1975 *Jaws*, and generally redefining mainstream cinema.⁵⁶

A large part of the movie’s success was down to its colossal merchandising campaign, which redefined the meaning of ‘ancillary markets’ and effectively inaugurated franchise cinema. As Cook notes, before the release of *Star Wars*,

it was not uncommon for studios to give merchandising rights away for free publicity [...] even when licensed for profit, as in the case of *Jaws* and *King Kong*, product tie-ins like T-shirts, jewellery, and candy had little life or value apart from the film once its run was completed. But with *Star Wars* – known to industry analysts as “the holy grail of licensing” – merchandising became an industry unto itself, and tie-in product marketing began to drive the conception and selling of motion picture products rather than vice versa.⁵⁷

At the root of all this success was the basic appeal of the film itself. It is easy to misconceive the relationship between the film and its many ancillary products as a sprawling, incoherent web of related products, but the extension of the franchise depended, in the first instance, on audience response to the movie. *Star Wars* transcended boundaries of suitability *and* appeal. It satisfied the initial criterion of being suitable for

⁵³ Cited in Kramer, ‘“The Best Disney Film Never Made”: Children’s Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s’, p. 190.

⁵⁴ Hearn, *The Cinema of George Lucas*, p. 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵⁶ Gilbey, *It Don’t Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond*, p. 50.

⁵⁷ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 51.

viewers of all ages, particularly children – the only audience demographic automatically barred from certain films. It also satisfied the more problematic criterion of successfully *appealing* to a wide demographic cross-section. Arguably only a handful of prior films had approached this commercially-ideal state, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), primarily because they, too, were based around technical innovation and sensorial appeal. Such mid-period family films as *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music* and *The Love Bug*, although highly successful, made very little play towards the teenage and young adult audiences. *Star Wars* can, in retrospect, be seen as the movie that reintegrated the teenage demographic into the mass audience, bringing AIP's so-called 'Peter Pan Syndrome' and television's 'kidult' from the relative obscurity of the teen quickie and low-budget family movie to the very heart of mainstream Hollywood audience address. From this point, nearly all family films have been constructed with this pivotal cross-demographic potential.

If the manner of its extraordinary success seems almost childishly simple, then it is only because the conditions were exactly right. Five primary factors present themselves. Firstly, *Jaws* had opened up the possibility of reaching a genuine mass audience in contemporary cinema, showing the importance of heavy marketing given the right film. Secondly, because of the abandonment of the 'family audience' following the adoption of the rating system, there had been a product starvation in this sector. Thirdly, Hollywood's audiences were becoming demographically younger than ever before. According to one source, by 1976, 62 per cent of the film audience were aged between 16-29 years old.⁵⁸ Cook reports that between 1977 and 1979, 'the number of tickets sold

⁵⁸ Cited in Gary R. Edgerton, *American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry's Market Structure 1963-1980*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983, p. 175.

to 12 to 20 year-olds increased by 8 percent, while those sold to 21 to 39 year-olds declined by the same number'.⁵⁹ Fourthly, *Star Wars* emerged at a point where Hollywood's technical capacities had just reached the point where the complex visual demands of the script could be realised. In fact, the movie pioneered various processes that later became standard industry practice. As Hearn notes, Lucas

knew that some sequences of *The Star Wars* [sic] – notably the attack on the Death Star in the final act – were so unlike anything that had been seen before that he would have to develop groundbreaking techniques.⁶⁰

Finally, the increasing conglomeration of the Hollywood studios more easily enabled the creation of film franchises. The movement began in 1962 when MCA acquired Universal, after which studios became just one section of media conglomerates holding interests in broadcast media, publishing companies, merchandise manufacturers and other synergistic outlets.

The modes of appeal in *Star Wars* are comparatively – perhaps misleadingly – straightforward. Lucas described the film as being 'on the same intensity level as a Roger Corman movie only a hundred times bigger', but Gilbey argues that the plot and narrative are 'actually even more rudimentary than Corman's most ramshackle rush job'.⁶¹ *Star Wars* is essentially an action-adventure film. The basic plot is simple enough – a young man, Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), with the assistance of a gang of fellow rebels, battles to overthrow a tyrannical galactic empire. In the process, he learns about his own abilities, specifically how to harness the power of 'the force', a pseudo-mystical energy field used by a powerful, ancient order of warriors, known as the Jedi. Ironically, the complexity of the back-story (which necessitated Lucas dividing the over-arching plot

⁵⁹ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ Hearn, *The Cinema of George Lucas*, p. 89.

⁶¹ Gilbey, *It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond*, p. 47.

over nine separate movies, the final three of which have remained unfiled) makes a mockery of the high-concept notion that a plot should be simple enough to articulate ‘using a key phrase of ten or fewer words’.⁶² At the core of the film’s success, though, is the drive towards universal appeal. It is intellectually undemanding – an important quality for a film targeting mass audiences – whilst evoking well-established patterns of fantasy in its resurrection of the tone and pace of the studio-era serials.

Many of the action sequences, such as the climactic assault upon the Death Star, are standard action-adventure set-pieces transposed to a deep-space setting. The shoot-‘em-up scenes consciously invoke B movie westerns – a genre that Lucas admitted influenced his approach.⁶³ The violence, however frequent, is as ‘clean’ as mass-slaughter gets; the laser battles are bloodless and much of the fighting involves the mystical, invisible energy of ‘the force’. The characters of Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) and C-3PO (Anthony Daniels) are broadly comedic, counter-pointing the heroic archetypes of Luke and Han Solo (Harrison Ford). The special-effects are calculatedly designed to evoke exhilaration rather than wonder (in contrast to Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 epic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Like Lucas, it seems, the audience ‘wanted to see this incredible aerial ballet in outer space’.⁶⁴ The Academy – always disproportionately inclined to reward the box office smash – apparently shared the audience’s approbation, awarding the film six Oscars from ten nominations.

Later the same year, Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* emerged. Although markedly dissimilar to *Star Wars*, it similarly galvanised mass

⁶² Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*, p. 22.

⁶³ Hearn, *The Cinema of George Lucas*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

audiences, partly as a result of a hugely successful pre-release marketing campaign. As Cook points out, *Close Encounters*

had no pre-sold elements except the post-*Jaws* reputation of its director. Therefore, Columbia allocated \$9 million to saturation advertising intended to burn the film's "expectant skies" into the consciousness of every sentient American.⁶⁵

Like *Star Wars*, the film's popularity can partly be attributed to its modes of appeal.

Described by Gilbey as 'surely the most intimate piece of filmmaking ever to merit the label "blockbuster"', the pace is determinedly slow, gradually building-up anticipation, and finally releasing it spectacularly with the revelation of the alien mothership in the final sequence.⁶⁶ Thematically-speaking, *Close Encounters* is a drama about the psychological impact of extraordinary events upon the human psyche. The story centres on a group of resolutely demographically-'average' residents of small-town Muncie, Indiana – the 'Middletown' of the Lynds' classic sociological texts of the 1920s and 1930s – who each experience a close-up UFO sighting. On an aesthetic level, the film presents an overwhelming amount of visual information to feed the senses, creating a heightened dialectic between the ordinariness of the geographical location and interpersonal relationships with the extraordinary context of alien visitation.

The central concept evidently resonated with the filmmaker on a personal level. It is an oft-repeated piece of biographical trivia that Spielberg believes in both UFOs and poltergeists, and for a director who has built a career on reconciling technical virtuosity with a more intuitive aptitude, his contention that 'in every movie I've ever made I've essentially believed in what the films were about' is probably a true reflection.⁶⁷ Only

⁶⁵ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 46.

⁶⁶ Gilbey, *It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws, Star Wars and Beyond*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ Susan Royle, 'Steven Spielberg in his Adventures on Earth', *Steven Spielberg: Interviews*, eds. Lester D. Friedman and Brent Notbohm, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000 (pp. 84-106), p. 94.

during the post-production process, it seems, did Spielberg realise that mass audiences wanted the same thing. As the director explains:

On *Close Encounters*, I had a very important decision to make: whether or not to use the Walt Disney song, “When you Wish upon a Star” at the end of the movie, with Jiminy Cricket’s actual voice performing it. And the only way I could tell was to have two different previews, on two different nights: one night with the song, and one night without it. I then analysed the preview cards very carefully, interviewed the people who left the theatre, and made a determination that the audience wanted to be transported into another world along with Richard Dreyfuss as he walked about the mothership. They didn’t want to be told the film was a fantasy, and this song seemed to belie some of the authenticity and to bespeak fantasy and fairy tale.⁶⁸

Spielberg’s camera alternates between evocations of sweeping grandeur and intimate probing of ordinary people. Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), whose marriage and family are seen falling apart as he obsesses over discovering the truth behind the UFO, is established as the viewer’s emotional and sensory avatar. As one of the first people to spot the UFO, the camera tracks his emotional journey from uninterested family man, to introverted, agonised fanatic, and finally liberated symbolic child. The manner of this probing suggests a creative desire to tap basic, universalised emotional responses. Roy’s bedazzled, inarticulate responses to emotional stimuli are not those of a mature, reasoning adult. They are more intuitive, reactive; Roy feels – and the audience feels with him – but he does not reason. Like many other Spielberg protagonists, Roy is a ‘man-boy’; ‘the man who never quite abandons his boyhood although [...] he may have sufficient trouble understanding it’.⁶⁹ As he boards the mothership as the credits roll and the music swells, Spielberg’s identification is with his protagonist, and the viewer is similarly directed.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 97.

⁶⁹ Murray Pomerance, ‘The Man-Boys of Steven Spielberg’, *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinities and Youth*, eds. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, Detroit and Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005 (pp. 133-154), p. 137.

Close Encounters is perhaps the first 'regressive' family film of the New Hollywood. What I will call 'regressive' texts are best summarised in Robin Wood's description of

the curious and disturbing phenomenon of children's films conceived and marketed largely for adults – films that construct the adult spectator as a child, or, more precisely, as a childish adult, an adult who would like to be a child.⁷⁰

From the late-1970s onwards, regressive (or 'kidult') films have been dominant forces in Hollywood, and Spielberg perhaps their keenest exponent. *Close Encounters* is, in many regards, a childish film – or, perhaps more accurately – a film for the childlike. Roy's evident lack of empathy with his wife and son suggest an individual ill at ease with the complexities of adult life. An early scene shows his unsuccessful attempts to help his son with homework, with an awkwardness totally absent in his later, intuitive responses to the alien arrival. Shortly before his wife leaves, Roy is chastised by his son as a 'cry baby' because of his emotional immaturity. In fact, it is only when Roy is freed from the distractions of family life that he is able to deduce the location of the alien landing. In the final analysis, it is not only Roy's ordinariness but his childlike view of the world that makes him the perfect candidate for 'abduction'. Both of these qualities mark him out as the representative of the mass audience: those emotionally regressed to childhood, and those still inhabiting it. Roy's departure with the aliens is certainly figured as the narratively 'correct' option. His guilt-free expression of childlike wonder as he enters the mothership confirms that he has found his true calling. His uncomprehending family have been narratively effaced – a positive thing, as it is presented, for they represented the chains of adult culture preventing his complete regression to symbolic childhood. Roy's ultimate trajectory confirms his everyman status, textually and contextually

⁷⁰ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 163.

(childhood being a universal human experience). In this light, Nigel Morris's contention that the film carries a 'children's adventure tone' and goes to inordinate lengths 'not to be taken seriously, certainly not to present itself as realist' seems somewhat hard to credit.⁷¹

On the contrary, it is at the very core of the movie's appeal that it presents the intersection between the ordinary and extraordinary as seriously as possible.

Alongside *Star Wars* and *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), *Close Encounters* pioneered a new type of family movie that has dominated the American box office ever since. Critics coined terms like 'bubblegum blockbusters' and 'all-age blockbusters' to describe such films, but Peter Kramer has more accurately dubbed them 'family adventure movies'.⁷² In their infancy during the late-1970s, they were a specialised type of family film, far beyond the run-of-the-mill family product, but they have since broadened-out considerably to a position of box office dominance. Despite this, Hollywood continues to differentiate its family product between high-end blockbusters and lower-budget offerings, catering for differences in age, culture and taste within family film audiences. Family-adventure movies tend to contain a relatively high action/adventure quotient, and are typically removed from the domestic environment, whether through utilising a fantasy or science-fiction framework, or simply through an extremely heightened representation of 'reality'.

Notable examples of family-adventure movies include the *Indiana Jones* (1981-2008), *Star Wars* (1977-2005) *Superman* (1978-1987; 2006) and *Batman* (1989-1997; 2005-) franchises, *Ghost Busters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984), *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984),

⁷¹ Nigel Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007, p. 16.

⁷² Peter Kramer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?: The Cultural and Social Work of The Family Adventure Movie', *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 294-311.

Back to the Future (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997), and, latterly, the *Harry Potter* (2001-), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005-) franchises. Successful family-adventure movies will usually produce at least one sequel, with the probability of a successful multimedia franchise. By the late-1980s, the expectation for hit sequels to yield hit movies had escalated to the point where *Ghost Busters II* (Ivan Reitman, 1989) – released five years after the original and grossing over \$100 million at the box office – was considered a disappointment.⁷³ One of the key executive decisions now made when planning major blockbusters is whether a movie has franchise potential.⁷⁴ The higher the budget, the greater the necessity to extend the life-span of a given movie product. The increasing proliferation of movie franchises is due to the importance of ‘synergy’ (which refers to the cooperation between diversified sections of the same horizontally-integrated conglomerate in marketing and perpetuating a given product). As former Disney CEO Michael Eisner suggested, ‘if you don’t have synergy, you have nothing but new products [...] If you have synergy, it goes on and on’.⁷⁵ Since *Star Wars* and *Jaws*, theatrical revenues have been just one component of a wider commercial enterprise.

While Lucas and Spielberg successfully demonstrated how to produce wildly successful family films, their methods were not immediately replicated. Disney’s films, in particular, were still mired in excessive and anachronistic juvenility. The studio virtually abandoned animated features – none were released between 1977 and 1981 –

⁷³ Jennifer Holt, ‘1989: Movies and the American Dream’, *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Stephen Prince, New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007 (pp. 210-231), p. 212.

⁷⁴ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Robert C. Allen, ‘Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the “Family” Film’, *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, London: British Film Institute, 1999 (pp. 109-131), p. 121.

concentrating instead on quirky live-action productions such as *Return from Witch Mountain* (John Hough, 1978) and *The Cat from Outer Space* (Norman Tokar, 1978). Disney's biggest gambit was the 1979 production, *The Black Hole* (Gary Nelson). Conceptualised as a space-opera version of *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1955), the film's gestation period was lengthy, having originally been announced in 1975.⁷⁶ In 1978, Walt Disney's son-in-law and former football pro Ron W. Miller succeeded Card Walker as studio president. For Miller, luring an older (i.e. teenage) audience back to Disney movies was high on the agenda, and he regarded *The Black Hole* as a film capable of re-engaging the mass audience,

that slightly older crowd – the audience we used to have in the 1950s with films like *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* [...] Ideally, this is the film that will take Disney to the all-important 15- to-30 year old group. The people who have seen *Star Wars* or *Close Encounters* two or three times.⁷⁷

Disney's public perception as a purveyor of juvenile entertainment was an acknowledged problem within the corporation. Audience testing had revealed that 'the Disney name was actually off-putting to young adults since they associated it with a world of childhood from which they were trying to graduate'.⁷⁸ With this in mind, and considering that *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters* and *Superman* had succeeded by galvanising an older audience demographic, *The Black Hole* was released under a PG rating – a notable watermark in the studio's production history. In the event, it was not a success at the box office. Hindered by poor reviews, its reception ensured that Disney failed, as Peter Kramer suggests, 'to break out of the children's ghetto'.⁷⁹ Fortunately, motion pictures

⁷⁶ Kramer, 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s', p. 192.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1995, p. 372.

⁷⁹ Kramer, 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s', p. 193.

were no longer the company's main source of revenue, constituting less than 10 per cent of the operating income of \$200 million in 1982.⁸⁰ By 1984, Walt Disney World was reportedly the world's most popular tourist attraction, but three-quarters of Disneyland's patrons were adults.⁸¹ Miller was heavily criticised for 'los[ing] touch with the core movie-going audience' and was eventually ousted in late 1984 by a corporate team headed by former President of Paramount Pictures Michael Eisner, and backed by Walt's nephew, Roy E. Disney.⁸² Only after Eisner and new president Frank Wells took over did Disney's fortunes begin to improve.

Adapting to the demands of the new mainstream audience was a problem faced by all the major studios. In December 1980 – one month after the 1970s auteur movement took its last gasp with the spectacular failure of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate – Flash Gordon* was released. Produced by Dino De Laurentiis, *Flash Gordon* was one of the most significant flops of the period. Its failure illustrated the growing importance of style and tone over generic orientation; had it been produced by George Lucas with the same spirit he imbued *Star Wars*, this 1950s comic-book adaptation might well have been enormously successful. As it was, no doubt mindful that a straight adaptation may have jarred with the comic aspects of the story, the filmmakers adopted a tone of high camp, all but guaranteeing its failure in a mainstream market grown accustomed to earnestness. The ironic mood was reinforced by deliberately eccentric casting: former football professional and Playgirl centrefold Sam J. Jones as Flash – with all his dialogue dubbed by an uncredited voice artist; Max von Sydow as dastardly inter-galactic villain Ming the

⁸⁰ 'Walt Disney Grows Up', *The Economist*, Saturday July 23rd, 1983, pp. 86-87.

⁸¹ 'Theme Parks: The American Dream and the Great Escape', *The Economist*, Saturday January 11th, 1986, pp. 83-84.

⁸² Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, p. 270; Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney*, p. 268.

Merciless; veteran British film actor Peter Wyngarde, unrecognisable as Ming's right-hand, Klytus; Israeli actor Topol as a mad scientist intent on saving the world; and the notoriously over-the-top Brian Blessed as a suitably belligerent bird-like prince.

Flash Gordon makes no attempt to replicate the polish of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*. The wide-eyed wonder of Spielberg's and Lucas's films mirrored the tone of national optimism surrounding the possibilities of space travel, but *Flash Gordon* trades on their inherent pomposity and lack of self-awareness by offering faux-glitzy, cheap-looking sets belying the film's large budget, constantly underscored by the campy soundtrack by rock band Queen. By imbuing the film with a mood of arch irony, *Flash Gordon* invites a sophisticated viewer response, but its fantasy narrative and vibrancy suggest an incompatible youth audience. If there is a conclusion to be reached regarding post-*Star Wars* genre movies, it is that family audiences will accept almost any generic form: science-fiction (*Star Wars*, *Close Encounters*, *Back to the Future*); fantasy (*Superman*, *Honey, I Shrank the Kids*, Joe Johnston, 1989); pulp action-adventure (*Indiana Jones*); horror (*Arachnophobia*, Frank Marshall, 1990); domestic comedies (*Uncle Buck*, John Hughes, 1988, *Home Alone*, Chris Columbus, 1990) and even westerns (*Back to the Future III*, Robert Zemeckis, 1990). The generic variety of such commercial hits shows that the key to successful family films are the methods of communication; the broad modes of appeal employed to attract mass audiences.

By the early-1980s, the family-adventure movie was well established. Lucas's and Spielberg's unique position in the industry was cemented by the rapturous reception engendered by the release of their franchise collaboration, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981). Their lucrative rapport with the tastes of mass audiences

afforded them considerable power. Having decided that they wanted to retain financial and artistic control of the franchise, they brokered an unprecedented deal with Paramount, wherein the studio operated solely as a distributor.⁸³ Paramount's concern that it might not receive much of a profit for its distribution services proved unfounded. Like *Star Wars*, *Raiders* consciously evokes early twentieth century pulp fiction, specifically the age of the comic strips and cheap movie serials of the 1930s. Perhaps to an ever greater extent than the filmmakers' earlier projects, *Indiana Jones* is an explicitly North American fantasy. Mild-mannered university archaeology professor by day and gung-ho adventurer by night, Indiana (Harrison Ford) is far from infallible. It is part of the film's self-conscious comedy that Indiana's occasional clumsiness belies his image of phallic omnipotence. Indeed, there is deliberate irony in the exaggerated double life he leads, a duality consciously evoking such all-American heroes as Superman, Spiderman and Batman. Perhaps the homage is too blatantly an exercise in technique; box office aside, *Raiders* was not received with quite the same chorus of critical approval as Spielberg's earlier works. As Morris notes, 'shot quickly and under Lucas's supervision and with Lucas retaining final cut, it was [...] Spielberg's least personal effort'.⁸⁴ Other critics regarded it as playing to the lowest common denominator – a criticism associated more closely with Lucas's work (Spielberg having retained some credibility as an auteur).⁸⁵ The film's four Oscars seem to validate this perspective: each emphasises its visual and aesthetic qualities, recognising its technical supremacy but relative lack of gravitas.

⁸³ Royle, 'Steven Spielberg in His Adventures on Earth', p. 86.

⁸⁴ Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, p. 81.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

In spite of such critical judgements, mainstream audiences continued to adore the films of Lucas and Spielberg. As the family film reasserted its dominance during the 1980s, the duo became ever-more identified with the form, extending their influence to near-hegemonic proportions. Both worked extensively in producing other people's films. Spielberg's production credits during the decade included the following movies tailored towards the family audience: *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), *Gremlins*, *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), *Back to the Future*, *An American Tail* (Don Bluth, 1986), *Harry and the Hendersons* (John Dear, 1987), **batteries not included* (Matthew Robbins, 1987) and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988). Aside from his own *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* franchises, Lucas oversaw the production of *Labyrinth* (Jim Henson, 1986), *Howard the Duck* (William Huyck, 1986) and *Willow* (Ron Howard, 1988). The notion of two men dominating the family market – thus capable of exerting a sizable influence upon children's culture as well as popular tastes – would doubtlessly elicit distaste in some quarters. However, as Stephen Prince notes, during this period 'both filmmakers fashioned work that went against this style' and exercised their influence to develop the sometimes-unorthodox work of less established filmmakers.⁸⁶ Although 'Spielberg's work as producer generally emphasised special effects fantasy and adolescent adventure', Lucas's work included:

Co-produc[ing] Akira Kurosawa's samurai epic, *Kagemusha* (1980), Francis Ford Coppola's period film *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988), Lawrence Kasdan's film noir update *Body Heat* [1981], and, most remarkably, Haskell Wexler's *Latino* (1985), a pro-Sandinista film that was one of the few pictures in the period to explicitly criticise U.S. support for the contra rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government.⁸⁷

By the end of the decade, Spielberg had sickened himself of family films:

⁸⁶ Prince, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1980s', p. 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

Hitting 40, I really had to come to terms with what I've been tenaciously clinging to, which was a celebration of a kind of naivety that has been reconfirmed countless times in the amount of people who have gone to see *E.T.*, *Back to the Future* and *Goonies* [...] I just reached a saturation point.⁸⁸

Likening repetitive family film production as analogous to over-indulging on sweets, Spielberg conceded, 'I have been in the candy factory for the last three years as a producer making sugar substitutes, and I've gagged on it myself'.⁸⁹ Reflexively, he attempted a more adult film with *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and even stated his intention to abandon his well-known desire of mounting a lavish adaptation of *Peter Pan*. This disenchantment proved only temporary, however, and Lucas and Spielberg continued to lead the way in family-adventure movies into the 1990s.

A less obvious but equally important development in Hollywood family entertainment during this period was the multiplex theatre, which coincided with the emergence of the 1970s U.S. shopping mall. Shopping mall multiplexes arose from economic practicality. A larger number of smaller theatres, each showing different films, allowed for greater product differentiation, while the location of multiplexes was designed to increase accessibility and approachability. Multiplex theatres are now found in economically-developed countries across the globe. Alongside accessibility, their key characteristic is uniformity. Theatres are small, featureless, and architecturally, almost impossible to differentiate from one another. Previously, conditions of exhibition had been pivotal. The 'picture palaces' of the classical era were identifiably middlebrow, designed to make the film-going experience as comfortable and prestigious as possible. Their architectural splendour, great size and facilities overtly positioned audiences as privileged observers, secure in the comfort of their well-furnished seats, rather than active

⁸⁸ Myra Forsberg, 'Spielberg at 40: The Man and the Child', *Steven Spielberg: Interviews*, p. 129.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

participants in the action. The multiplex theatre – through its absence of distinct, identifiable surroundings – forces audience attention towards the movie. There is no pleasant architecture or in-house orchestra to remind audiences that they are simply spectators; rather, audiences watching immersive blockbusters are encouraged to *forget* their surroundings and position themselves *within* the film. Clearly, this immersive potential only works if there is correlation between the mode of spectatorship and the film being exhibited. Because contemporary family films privilege sensorial appeal based on dazzling visual spectacle, they are best suited to exploit this shift in film spectatorship. I will discuss the intricacies of immersion in more depth in the final chapter.

The family film in the 1980s: generic proliferation and innovation

The family film exploded into the release schedules of all the major studios in 1984. The development of ancillary markets in the early-to-mid-1980s was one the major factors stimulating immense growth in the family sector of the entertainment industry. With family-adventure movies illustrating the potential for massive profits in family-orientated programming, ancillary markets – notably cable TV, merchandising and especially home video – took this trend to a new level. In the 1980s, the family film became the most lucrative production type in Hollywood cinema. Although the potential audience had been there since the 1970s, the technologies had not. As Balio notes:

Home video and pay television [...] extended both the market and the revenue stream for filmed programming. It all started with the launching of geosynchronous satellites in the mid-seventies. As Michelle Hilmes states [...] “Satellite transmission capability finally began to transform television into a true “broadcast” medium, loosening its dependence

on the nineteenth-century technology of wired transmission and giving it the ability to offer an almost limitless variety of channels and services”.⁹⁰

The VCR became commercially available in the 1970s, but was highly expensive, and did not achieve widespread market saturation. Both the hardware and software became more affordable in the 1980s. In 1984,

VCRs had been installed in 15 percent of American homes; by 1986, the percentage reached 50 percent, and for the first time, the revenue from the sale of videocassettes equalled the box-office gross.⁹¹

To put the impact of these new technologies in perspective:

With the explosion of ancillary markets in the eighties [...] box office returns accounted for just 28 percent of total income – down from 54 percent in 1978 – with another 12 percent from pay cable and 40 percent from home video, which had contributed only a combined 4 percent in 1978.⁹²

Paramount was the first studio to risk lowering prices for videotapes to stimulate demand, retailing *Airplane!* at \$29.95 – much lower than the average price of around \$70.⁹³ The strategy was successful, triggering a general price-drop and, as Thompson argues, inaugurating the common practice of buying rather than renting videotapes. This move had the biggest significance in the family market – ‘kids could watch [family films] time after time on the electronic babysitter’.⁹⁴ The dominance of the family market in the home video sector prompted a broader industry embrace of family film production.

As Kramer suggests, the period between 1977 and 1984 saw family entertainment returning to ‘the centre of Hollywood’s operations’.⁹⁵ Considering the incubation period for a large-scale Hollywood film is typically at least two years, the beginning of the industry-wide family film craze can be more accurately traced to 1982, a key year for

⁹⁰ Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, p. 262.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 268.

⁹² Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. 65.

⁹³ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, p. 219.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Kramer, ‘‘The Best Disney Film Never Made’’: Children’s Films and The Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s’, p. 193.

several reasons. Special effects and computer animation were continuing to develop rapidly. *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer), released in early June 1982, featured sixty seconds of computer graphics.⁹⁶ More significantly, the following month saw the release of *Tron* (Steven Lisberger) – Disney’s attempt to re-establish itself at the forefront of industry innovation – which contained forty minutes of computer graphics.⁹⁷ These films ‘signal[led] the dawn of the age of digital special effects’ and illustrated the continued technical strides the industry was taking, creating imagery that would have been thought impossible only a decade before.⁹⁸ By far the most significant development of the year, however, was the release of Spielberg’s *E.T.* Although Spielberg claims that *E.T.* was a ‘personal film’ and expressed surprise at its box office success, it was perfectly timed, and apparently calculated for mass audience appeal.⁹⁹ *E.T.* had considerable marketing potential and tie-in merchandise alone ‘grossed \$1 billion, nearly half as much again as the film’.¹⁰⁰

The proliferation of family films in the mid-1980s brought a wide diversification of genres. Before *Star Wars*, family films were marked by relative product *standardisation*. Since then, family films have been characterised by stylistic and generic *differentiation*. Loose generic patterns operating under the family film umbrella include: **1)** the family-adventure movie, as noted above; **2)** the family fantasy film, e.g. *E.T.*, *The Dark Crystal* (Jim Henson, 1982), *The NeverEnding Story* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1984), *The Goonies*, *Flight of the Navigator* (Randall Kleiser, 1986), *Labyrinth*; **3)** the family-

⁹⁶ Stephen Prince: ‘Timeline: the 1980s’, *American Cinema of the 1980s*, p. xi.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Royle, ‘Steven Spielberg in His Adventures on Earth’, p. 87; Stephen Prince, ‘Timeline: the 1980s’, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁰ Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, pp. 84-85.

friendly science movie, e.g. *WarGames* (John Badham, 1983), *Short Circuit* (John Badham, 1986); **4**) the family-friendly teen pic, e.g. *Gremlins*, *Back to the Future* and its sequels, *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988), *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (Stephen Herek, 1989), *Wayne's World* (Penelope Spheeris, 1992); **5**) sword and sorcery films, e.g. *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), *Ladyhawke* (Richard Donner, 1985), *Legend* (Ridley Scott, 1985), *The Black Cauldron* (Ted Berman and Richard Rich, 1985), *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987), *Willow*; **6**) the body-swap film, e.g. *Like Father Like Son* (Rod Daniel, 1987), *Vice-Versa* (Brian Gilbert, 1988), *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988), *18 Again!* (Paul Flaherty, 1988); **7**) the adult-driven domestic family film, e.g. *Uncle Buck* (John Hughes, 1989), *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (Jeremiah Chechik, 1989), *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990), *Hook* (Steven Spielberg, 1991), *Father of the Bride* (Charles Shyer, 1991), *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus, 1998); **8**) the slapstick family domestic comedy, e.g. *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990), *Ghost Dad* (Sidney Poitier, 1990), *Beethoven* (Barry Levant, 1992), *Getting Even With Dad* (Howard Deutch, 1994); **9**) the family-friendly literary classic adaptation, e.g. *The Secret Garden* (Agnieszka Holland, 1993), *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994), *A Little Princess* (Alfonso Cuarón, 1995); **10**) the Christmas family movie, e.g. *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, *Home Alone*, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (Brian Henson, 1992), *The Grinch* (Ron Howard, 2000), *Elf* (John Favreau, 2003); and **11**) the animated family feature, e.g. *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale, 1991), *Aladdin* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1992), *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995).

As will be seen, there is some overlap, and this list is intended to be indicative rather than exhaustive. Its usefulness lies in illustrating not only the stylistic variation within family entertainment of the 1980s and 1990s, but also its culturally-determined intermittency. The concept of commercially- and culturally-driven development seems particularly valuable when considering contemporary family films. From the early-to-mid 1980s, family entertainment was dominated by family-adventure movies and fantasy films. Although ‘real-world’ concerns (like divorce, and the threat of outside forces infiltrating family harmony) play a part in such fantasy family films as *E.T.* and *Flight of the Navigator*, their narratives are still largely driven by the experiences of the child protagonists. In the mid-to-late 1980s, this began to change. Narratives became increasingly driven by the experiences and anxieties of adults, particularly middle-aged men. The seeds were sown by the body-swap cycle of films in 1987 and 1988 (most famously typified by Penny Marshall’s *Big*). By the following year, even renowned teen film director John Hughes had moved into adult-driven family films with the release of *Uncle Buck*, and a spate of similar movies followed over the next few years. This shift from child- to adult-centric narratives was one of the defining features of late-1980s and early-1990s Hollywood family entertainment.

The reasons behind this preoccupation with adult concerns are complex. A dominant factor appears to be the size, power and influence of the baby boom generation, and its relationship with mass audiences. The cultural power of the baby boom generation has been best explored by Landon Y. Jones, who provides the following definition:

For two centuries the birthrate in the United States and the world has steadily declined. It is still declining. There is only one exception: the single, unprecedented aberration we call the postwar baby boom. It was not, as is often thought, a short rise in the birthrate

caused by returning GIs making up for lost time. It began that way in 1946, but instead of stopping in the 1950s (as in Europe), the tidal wave of births continued, affecting all races and classes with astonishing uniformity. This national euphoria – what I shall call the “procreation ethic” – peaked in 1957, when more than 4.3 million babies were born. At least 4 million babies were born in each of the bumper-crop years from 1954 through 1964, the last real year of the baby binge. All totalled, 76,441,000 babies – one third of our present population – arrived in the 19 years from 1946 through 1964.¹⁰¹

Through sheer force of numbers, Jones argues, the baby boom drove the explosive emergence of the teenage market in the 1950s. Then, in the 1960s, ‘teenagers accounted for 55 percent of *all* soft drink sales, 53 percent all movie tickets, and 43 percent of all records sold’.¹⁰² The power of the baby boom generation was threefold: in addition to its demographic size, it was also the richest and best-educated in U.S. history.¹⁰³

As the older sections of the baby boom matured to child-rearing age, the generation continued to be the dominant voice in U.S. culture:

In the 1980s, the boom children are continuing their imperious ways. They are turning a youth-centred society into an adult-centred one as they make their particular concerns, whether housing prices or tax reform, into national obsessions. They are a generational tyranny.¹⁰⁴

By the 1970s, however, the birth rate was in sharp decline. This ‘baby bust’ coincided with a period in U.S. history where long-established norms of social behaviour appeared either outmoded, or in terminal decline. The institution of the family was at the forefront of this development. Most notably, the divorce rate grew dramatically. Reynolds Farley suggests that North Americans in the 1970s ‘adopted new views about personal fulfilment and about whether unhappily married couples should stay together’.¹⁰⁵ Baby boomers were getting married and having children later than previous generations, partially a corollary of gender-role reassignment since the counter-cultural movement of

¹⁰¹ Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, New York: Coward, McCann & Geohagan, 1980, p. 2.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Reynolds Farley, *The New American Reality*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996, p. 113.

the 1960s.¹⁰⁶ Although sociologists such as Theodore Caplow and Stephanie Coontz have argued that actual changes in familial and social structures were less significant than is commonly thought, psychologically the baby boomers entered the 1980s, as Jones argues, as ‘a generation of uncertainty, unsure about their role in society, unsure about marriage and family, unsure even about reproducing themselves’.¹⁰⁷ But while anxiety may have been widespread amongst baby boomers, priorities regarding the relationship between self and family changed significantly:

The Good Times Generation never doubted its priorities: first family, then marriage, and finally self. But the baby boomers turned it upside down: their first priority was the self. Then came marriage, if it worked. And finally family, if that worked, too.¹⁰⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s, ‘the cult of the child [became] the cult of the adult’.¹⁰⁹

There were, however, significant socio-political reasons for this social retreat into domestic self-interest. The failure of the Vietnam War and subsequent resignation of President Nixon in 1974 following the Watergate conspiracy sapped U.S. confidence in its own supremacy. Historian Irving Louis Horowitz argued that:

Watergate is more than a historic event in American politics. It is an apocalyptic event in American morality. It represents a benchmark abruptly terminating 200 years of innocence, empirical confirmation that providence has abandoned America for parts as yet unknown.¹¹⁰

Although such statements now may appear excessively portentous, U.S. anxiety regarding the state of society ran deep during the late-1970s. In July 1979, President Carter broadcasted his now-infamous ‘crisis of confidence’ speech to the nation. This

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 110.

¹⁰⁷ See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families*, New York: Basic Books, 1998, and Theodore Caplow et al, *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982; Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰⁸ Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, p. 212.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 207.

¹¹⁰ Irving Louis Horowitz, *Ideology and Utopia in the United States 1956-1976*, London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 46.

sense of anomie was a poorly-understood phenomenon, and Carter's response to the crisis was correspondingly nebulous, identifying

a fundamental threat to American democracy [...] the threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.¹¹¹

In retrospect, Carter's speech was a political error that contributed to his defeat to Ronald Reagan in the Presidential elections of the following year. Reagan 'turned this crisis of confidence into a successful presidential campaign', and came into office promising to 'cut income taxes, boost military spending, and make Americans "feel good"'.¹¹²

Under Reagan, the U.S. became a far more conservative nation. Warren Buckland argues that:

Reagan rhetoric became synonymous with the following cluster of terms: nostalgia, populism, anti-intellectualism, aggressive self-confidence, spiritual uplift, and reassurance, all focused around an attack on liberalism and secular humanism.¹¹³

The worst economic recession since the 1930s hit America in 1981, and lasted almost two years, yet the Reagan years were marked by an ever-widening gap between rich and poor.¹¹⁴ Although Reagan professed to believe that 'America's true greatness lay less in material riches than in its values that gave pre-eminence to individual freedom', monetary income 'became the accepted measure of one's value to society'.¹¹⁵ The so-called 'cult of conspicuous consumption' is perhaps best exemplified by the yuppie class, who 'plunged joyously into the American mainstream ready to consume'.¹¹⁶ By 1988,

¹¹¹ Jimmy Carter, 'The "Crisis of Confidence" Speech', July 15, 1979.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carter/filmmore/ps_crisis.html> [accessed 24/02/2007].

¹¹² Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: American and its President in the 1980s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 66, vii.

¹¹³ Warren Buckland, '1982: Movies and Other Worlds', *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, p. 63.

¹¹⁴ Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: American and its President in the 1980s*, pp. 49, 76.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 72.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

'yuppie' had become a slur; *Newsweek* announced that the group were 'in disgrace' and even suggested that 'the 1980s were over, two years early'.¹¹⁷ In spite of the public dishonour of the Iran-Contra affair, which implicated Reagan in the secret selling of arms to Iran to fund right-wing Sandinista rebels overthrow the democratically-elected communist government of Nicaragua, the President remained overwhelmingly popular.¹¹⁸

It has become *de rigeur* in film criticism to invoke 'Reaganism' as the key to unlocking a deeper understanding of 1980s Hollywood films. Many critics have noted that the socially-critical auteur movement, which had flourished in the 1970s, withered and died during the Reagan era. Cook argues that:

The election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency marked the loss of two illusions fabricated during the decade that preceded it. First was the illusion of a liberal political consensus created by the antiwar movement, the Watergate scandal, and the subsequent resignation of Richard Nixon as President of the United States [...] The second illusion, intermingled with the first, was that mainstream American movies might aspire to the sort of serious social or political content described above on a permanent basis.¹¹⁹

Cook concurs with Robin Wood, who contends that Spielberg's and Lucas's family-adventure movies typify 'Reaganite entertainment'.¹²⁰ Cook argues that such movies privilege 'a juvenile mythos of "awe" and "wonder" in movies that embraced conservative cultural values', mirroring Reagan himself, who 'still exuded the boyish charm and facile optimism of a Saturday matinee idol'.¹²¹ Reagan became 'the perfect simulacrum of blockbuster heroes like Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones'.¹²² Both critics have a point, although the analogy is perhaps teleological. After all, these films – emerging several years before Reagan swept to office – hardly rode the crest of a tidal

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 76.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 66.

¹¹⁹ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, pp. xv-xvi.

¹²⁰ Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, p. 162.

¹²¹ Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, p. xi.

¹²² Ibid.

wave of Reaganite conservatism. However, popular culture and popular politics certainly fulfilled a cultural need, playing the emotions rather than challenging the intellect of the U.S. public.

Hollywood films continued to reveal cultural anxiety in the socio-political context of 1980s America, but the ideologies of unease were far more displaced. By 1980, as Edward Reiss explains,

“Middle America” was concerned about relative U.S. economic decline; loss of U.S. strategic superiority; the failure of détente, and perceived vacillation among NATO allies. Events in Iran, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua coincided with a wave of militarist revanchism in the USA and the resurgence of a “New Right” which sought a technical or military solution, unilaterally enforceable by the U.S., to the problem of super-power relations [...] Presenting itself as the party of prudence, the Republican platform of 1980 called for a massive military build-up, “more modern” ABM technologies and “overall military and technological superiority over the Soviet Union”.¹²³

Culture and politics became powerfully intertwined. The most significant expression of this symbiosis was Reagan’s conception of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), nicknamed ‘Star Wars’. The SDI began life as a U.S. military initiative designed to combat the threat of ballistic missiles. Under Reagan’s regime, its scope was widened considerably. Dubbing the program ‘Star Wars’, no doubt as a public-relations exercise, the President announced the SDI to the nation on March 23, 1983.¹²⁴ Reagan outlined a vision of using advanced technology to make nuclear weapons ‘impotent and obsolete’, promising to change ‘the course of human history’ with the program’s supposed ability to maintain an impervious ‘shield’ against nuclear missiles.¹²⁵

¹²³ Edward Reiss, *The Strategic Defence Initiative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 39-40. Reiss provides a rigorous technical and cultural history of the SDI from its origins, its popularisation in the 1980s, and its increasing marginalisation after Reagan left office due to recognition of its inherent limitations as conceived.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

The proposal was founded upon the idea of using orbiting satellites to shoot down enemy nuclear missiles upon launch, but Reagan's rhetoric greatly exceeded the abilities of the technology. On the day of the speech announcing it to the world, 'the head of directed energy weapons development had told a senate sub-committee [...] that, because of disappointing performance, the SDI did not merit extra funds'.¹²⁶ The whole concept of 'Star Wars' rested, as Reiss has observed, on 'a strange mingling of science and culture, expertise and populism'.¹²⁷ Despite the paradox of the ultimate super-weapon being presented as 'inherently defensive', Reagan's offer of a water-tight defensive shield offered rhetorical appeal 'to all those who yearn for security, or subconsciously hope that the Absolute Bomb should be matched by an Absolute Defence'.¹²⁸ Furthermore, the promise of 'Star Wars' tapped into deeply-held mythologies surrounding U.S. cultural history, such as intellectual and technological supremacy, and the desire to expand the frontier (in this case deep space, rather than wagons west). The 'Star Wars' initiative also played on the nation's perceived vulnerability, appearing – falsely – to offer a scientific solution to a scientific problem. Although the scientific community widely discredited Reagan's public conceptualisation of the SDI, recognition of its failure was more of a slow realisation for the U.S. public. From the start, therefore, 'Star Wars' was a rhetorical fabrication; an attempt to gain political capital from two dominant cultural themes of the period: unease surrounding the condition of U.S. society, and the escapist promise of a better future as embodied in the fantasies of Lucas and Spielberg.

In this context, it is unsurprising that family films of the early-1980s reflected unease in Middle America regarding state-regulated scientific advance, intensified in its

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 38.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 153.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 159.

relationship with the domestic sphere. Mick Broderick and Tim Shary have both noted the abundance of early-1980s Hollywood films concerned with either the uses of nuclear power or the relationship between science and the wider social arena. Shary considers the ‘science film’ one of the five key genres in contemporary teen films, typified by such productions as *Weird Science* (Martha Coolidge, 1985) and *Real Genius* (John Hughes, 1985).¹²⁹ Whilst Broderick concedes that ‘most nuclear movies eschew direct action by children in challenging the military-industrial complex’, he argues that a selection of 1980s films reverse this trend.¹³⁰ Citing *WarGames*, *The Manhattan Project* (Marshall Brickman, 1986), *Project X* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1987) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991) as key examples, Broderick suggests that

a repeated fear in such movies is the removal of human choice from the nuclear decision-making “loop”. This becomes a narrative trope that the “wisdom” of children and adolescents narratively seeks to redress’.¹³¹

Noteworthy family films from this period which are similarly preoccupied with the use of scientific technology include *E.T.*, *Back to the Future*, *Flight of the Navigator* and *Short Circuit*. This variety of unease might be regarded as ‘public-world’ anxiety, as opposed to the more emphatically ‘private-world’ anxiety of the later adult-driven family films.

The beginnings of this complex textual relationship can be traced to *E.T.*: perhaps the archetypal modern family film. It purports to cross demographic boundaries not by addressing children and adults as separate entities, but by tapping into an appeal of the senses, consciously drawing upon ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’, sweeping orchestral music, cutting-edge visuals, and an avowed naivety in narrative and sentiment. Its wide appeal

¹²⁹ Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, pp. 2, 181-208.

¹³⁰ Mick Broderick, ‘Rebels with a Cause: Children versus the Military Industrial Complex’, *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, eds. Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007 (pp. 37-56), pp. 37-38.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

stems partially from its appeal to the emotions, rather than the intellect: even a critic as hardened as Robin Wood is forced to admit that he ‘enjoys being reconstructed as a child’.¹³² I would, however, tend to agree with Kramer’s assessment that the pleasures of regressive texts for adults are far from ‘mindless’ in nature.¹³³ On the contrary, the act of an emotionally-mature adult sitting down to watch a regressive family film has the capacity to be emphatically self-conscious. Furthermore, I would argue that the adult appeal in films like *E.T.* emanates partially from the textual dialectic between aspects of so-called ‘pure fantasy’, and the occasional infiltration of real-world adult anxiety. All of Spielberg’s family narratives maintain this dialectic between the fantastic and the mundane; perhaps this suggests the influence of his auteur principles, specifically the need to give his fantastic narratives some solid grounding. Alternatively, perhaps Spielberg is himself aware of the audience appeal of this real world/fantasy world dialectic. In either case, his narratives persistently allude to such emphatically adult concerns as divorce, family breakdown and outside intrusion, before usually drawing back and allowing the fantastic, the magical, to triumph.

These agendas ultimately serve to deepen the pleasurable association, particularly amongst adult audiences, as they concede the existence of an unpalatable alternative to utopian fantasy which is vanquished in the end. It is ironic, given that Columbia’s market researchers allegedly found that the film would interest no-one over the age of 4 and advised scrapping the production, that:

¹³² Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, p. 164.

¹³³ Kramer, ‘Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?: The Cultural and Social Work of The Family Adventure Movie’, p. 297.

Children were not the primary makers of *E.T.*'s success. *The New York Times* on 30 December 1982 reported a "significant increase" in over-25s attending movies. The headline was unequivocal: "Adults lured back to films by E.T."¹³⁴

Morris, in fact, argues that *E.T.*'s success stemmed from its appeal to a *specific* section of the adult audience:

E.T.'s New York audiences queuing around the block comprised not families but heterosexual childless couples in their late 20s and 30s. Many belonged to the emergent yuppie class, wealthy manifestations of enterprise culture, identified by power dressing, expensive eating tastes and designer accessories.¹³⁵

All family films must maintain a dialectical balance of appeal between the needs of children and adults to maintain profitability, and in this sense, *E.T.* is a model production: offering cross-demographic appeal, it was hugely successful at the domestic and international box office, and on home video, and in ancillary markets. Moreover, it was more than merely a film; it was a cultural phenomenon, enabling the manufacture of a franchise that endures long after the film has left movie theatres.

The story begins when a suburban schoolboy called Elliott (Henry Thomas) discovers a small alien in his back yard. Accidentally stranded on Earth by his mother-ship, the alien – E.T. – is adopted by Elliott and his family. Before long, the government becomes aware of the creature's presence and takes both Elliott and E.T. – whose relationship has somehow become symbiotic – for experimentation. Ultimately, Elliott, with the assistance of a gang of friends, manages to take the alien back to the forest in which he landed, and the alien ship promptly returns to collect him. In an ending closely mirroring the final sequence of *Close Encounters*, the mother-ship departs in a blaze of special effects and grandiose music, as the humans look on in amazement. There is, however, a key difference between the films. The aliens in *Close Encounters*, however

¹³⁴ Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, London: BFI Publishing, 2005, p. 266; Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, p. 85.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 85.

benevolent their intentions, are explicitly 'other'. E.T.'s 'alienness' is more cosmetic. As reflected in his simpatico relationship with Elliott, E.T. is symbolically a small child, moving between the contrary poles of innocence and experience as the narrative structures of the films demands. His occasional glowing red heart is highly suggestive. But even where the film's regressive trajectory appears most strongly defined – the relationship between E.T. and Elliott – the conflict between the public and private spheres powerfully emerges. It is soon established that this domestic environment is far from healthy. Elliott's unseen father has recently set up home with another woman in Mexico, leaving his emotionally-stressed mother, Mary (Dee Wallace) struggling to cope in his absence. Her refusal to believe that Elliott has met an alien prompts the sullen response, 'dad would believe me', a piece of dialogue doubtlessly reflecting adult remorse over the culpability of family breakdown. As Mary walks out, tearfully, Elliott's older brother, Mike (Robert MacNaughton) strikes back: 'why don't you grow up and think about how other people feel for a change?'

The most significant scene in the movie – darkly incongruous in tone, if not in underlying message – occurs later in the film, between Mike and Elliott. The brothers are seen sifting regretfully through artefacts of their young childhood, at a time when their father was still present:

Elliott: Remember the time when he used to take us out to the ball games, and take us to the movies, and we had popcorn fights?

Mike: [reassuringly] We'll do that again, Elliott.

Elliott: [disbelievingly] Sure.

Unbeknownst to the boys, their conversation is being monitored. Although the precise identity of the intruders is not revealed, and we do not see their faces, we are left to assume that they are government operatives investigating E.T.'s arrival. As signalled by

unusually ominous music, this is one of the few moments of genuine unease in the film. Surely it is no coincidence that the filmmakers chose to portray this intrusion taking place at the moment of greatest family intimacy. The intruders clearly represent state abuse of power. This theme is later reinforced when Elliott and E.T. are taken for experimentation, and hordes of scientists – rendered anonymous by their full-body protective suits – invade the house. Only one scientist, Keys (Peter Coyote), identifies with the family and eventually helps E.T.’s escape. Although the alien’s departure signifies the ultimate triumph of fantasy over paranoia, these anxieties are not entirely effaced. Most 1980s family films are located, predominantly, not in a Tolkienian world of imagination, but in the contemporary adult world, with all its attendant threats, concerns and complexities.



Figure 9: An assortment of government scientists and officials invade the suburban home in *E.T.* (1982).

WarGames and *Short Circuit* explicitly confront abuses of power. *WarGames* centres on school-age computer hacker David (Matthew Broderick). Accustomed to breaking into the school computer records to change his grades, he comes across a system containing a folder called ‘Global Thermo-Nuclear War’, which he misinterprets as an innocent computer game. In reality, he has hacked into an automated government computer system regulating nuclear weapons. Sparking a military panic, David is taken into custody, and the situation escalates to the brink of nuclear war before the boy uses his computing faculties to shut down the system. Although an interesting text in its own right, *WarGames* is positioned more towards the teenage than all-age market; Badham’s later film, *Short Circuit*, explores similar territory, but is more overtly family-orientated. As with *WarGames*, *Short Circuit* centres on a highly-advanced government-affiliated scientific endeavour that spirals out of control through irresponsibility and abuse. In this film, it is a private computer technology corporation, Nova Laboratories, whose project is being developed for the U.S. military. Nova is developing a specialised type of heavily-armed robot for use on the battlefield. As in *WarGames*, this technology is explicitly offensive, with the potential for destruction on a massive scale.

The filmmakers obviously mistrust the government’s motives and competency to handle dangerous technology. An early exchange sees the unscrupulous head of the facility, Howard Marner (Austin Pendleton) – significantly, a former scientist who has renounced his principles and now describes himself as ‘a businessman’ – attempting to secure support for the project in the Senate. The military’s plan to use the robots as weapons is ineffectually but bitingly reprovved by the robots’ creator, Newton Crosby (Steve Guttenberg):

Military official: It is the ultimate soldier. Obeys orders, never asks questions.

Crosby: Originally, I had non-military purposes in mind. I designed it as a marital aid.

Marnier: [laughing nervously] Very funny. No, I think we'll all agree that Dr. Crosby has designed a weapon that will keep our world safe for all time.

Crosby: Howard, what's safe about blowing people up?

This exchange evokes Reagan's rhetoric surrounding the supposedly-defensive function of the 'Star Wars' program. The mood changes shortly afterwards, as a laboratory accident accidentally makes one of the robots – Number 5 (Tim Blaney) – sentient. Escaping from the lab, Number 5 encounters the dizzy Stephanie (Ally Sheedy), who mistakes him for an alien. Their early scenes together, in which Ally attempts to educate him in the ways of contemporary North American life, amiably recall *E.T.* Much of the film centres upon the pursuit of Number 5 by Nova's military arm, which believes the robot has gone rogue and represents a threat to the public. As with the pursuit of David in *WarGames*, the military have mistaken an innocent party for a dangerous foe, implying not only a dangerous lack of perception, but that *they* represent more of a threat to public safety than the supposed enemies they determine to destroy. Tonally, the film fuses socially-relevant themes like the use of technology in a responsible way; domestic and military worldwide armament; adult relationships and budding romance – with a rather juvenile treatment in the scenes featuring Number 5, a creation clearly designed to thrill and amuse young children. Leaving aside the comic interaction between the robot and his human friends, the cultural frames of reference are strikingly grown-up.

Back to the Future – one of the highest-grossing films of the decade – can be seen as an intermediate step between the overt fantasy of *E.T.* and the adult-driven domestic narratives of the late-1980s. The film centres on down-to-earth teenager Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox). Although his school career and family life are floundering, Marty has a stable relationship with his long-term girlfriend and a close friendship with eccentric

local inventor Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd). After years of botched attempts and scrounging for materials, the Doc has finally succeeded in piecing-together a fully-functioning time machine, retro-fitted to the chassis of a DeLorean sports car. Through a complex series of events, Marty succeeds in accidentally transporting himself thirty years back in time, to his own neighbourhood, circa 1955. There he meets his own mother and father, and discovers the reasons behind their failing relationship in the present: his mother, Lorraine (Lea Thompson), behind her demure exterior, is actually a devil-may-care rebel, whilst his father, George (Crispin Glover) is comically gauche, passive and inept. Realising that his own future – and that of his entire family unit – depends on him reshaping the present and forging a successful relationship between the pair, Marty begins match-making. In the process, he must encourage his father to become a more assertive, responsible figure, more attractive to Lorraine and a better father to himself. He must also figure out a way of transporting himself back to 1985, with time running out and the prospect of being marooned in the 1950s an increasing possibility.

Like the adult-driven, small-town family dramas of the 1940s, *Back to the Future* uses nostalgia for a bygone age as a form of social commentary on the inadequacies of the present. As Coontz has argued, U.S. society has a fixation with the 1950s.¹³⁶ It was a period of relative social and ideological stability, before the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s. Polls have also shown that North Americans regard the decade as ‘the best time for children to grow up’.¹³⁷ The 1950s embody more masculine than feminine fantasies of ideal domesticity, which is unsurprising, given that career opportunities for women were fewer, and that ‘a number of studies suggest that the 1950s style of

¹³⁶ Coontz, *The Way we Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*, pp. 33-43.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

marriages were good for men's health and well-being'.¹³⁸ In an era of supposed family crisis, this nostalgic yearning can be seen here as a repetitive, blatant identification with 1950s archetypes. Marty possesses an affinity with James Dean denim jackets and rock 'n roll, and a disregard for overbearing authority. At the same time, his apparent proclivity towards rebellion is deeply-rooted in conformity. His relationship with his girlfriend is stable and loving (according to the Doc, freshly returned from a trip to the future at the end of the film, the relationship will eventually result in marriage). He also has a steady job, drives a car and still attends school. A more clean-cut rebel can scarcely be imagined. Although he is bafflingly regarded as a semi-delinquent by the authoritarian school principal, his actions and dialogue tend to mark him out as adult masquerading as child.

As if to disavow suggestions of an ideological agenda ill-befitting its self-appointed status as popcorn entertainment, the film features a number of satirical references to contemporary politics. The 1950s variant of the Doc, disbelieving Marty's contention that he has travelled back through time, asks the name of the President in 1985. Upon hearing the response, the Doc exclaims, 'Ronald Reagan? The actor? Then who's vice-president? Jerry Lewis?' Later, the Doc remarks, 'no wonder your president has to be an actor. He has to look good on television'. Such comments may have chimed with viewers cognizant of Reagan's admission that 'his job was "something like shooting a script" in which characters appeared, departed, and the plot advanced'.¹³⁹ Moreover, these humorous allusions to political currents serve to divert attention from any actual agenda the film may be seen as promoting, creating the illusion that it is both apolitical

¹³⁸ Andrew J. Cherlin, 'The Changing American Family and Public Policy', *The Changing American Family and Public Policy*, Washington: The Urban Institute Press, 1988 (pp. 1-29), p. 16.

¹³⁹ Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s*, p. 57.

and open regarding its political affiliation (i.e. it does not have one). This theme is reinforced by a sub-plot concerning the electoral campaigns of two mayoral candidates, one from the 'present' and the other from 1955. Both promise 'progress', the 1950s candidate offering 'more jobs, better education, bigger civic improvements and lower taxes'. Such scenes suggest a preoccupation with the kind of social galvanisation Reagan offered the electorate. In all cases, however, these allusions take place in the background, and the film is careful to show Marty's disconnection and apparent lack of interest in this dull and corrupt arena. Instead, Marty is closely affiliated with the Doc, whose homespun and benign eccentricity delineates him as the 'acceptable' face of scientific innovation and technical advance. The Doc stands in sharp contrast to the shady and morally-dubious state-regulated activities depicted in *WarGames* and *Short Circuit*.

Back to the Future's family drama unfolds against a striking backdrop of fantasy and expensive-looking special effects. This aesthetic innovation, however, ultimately serves to obfuscate the conventionality and ideological conservatism of the narrative. This is not really a fantasy movie; the impressively-realised time-travelling car is little more than a framing-device which allows the filmmakers to differentiate the disparate ideologies of past and present. The dissatisfaction at the heart of Marty's 1980s family is quickly established. The 24-year-old Lea Thompson's make-up depicts Lorraine as tired and downtrodden, and her emotional need for love and attention is obviously left unfulfilled by the pathetically ineffectual George, whose guffaws at inane television shows drown-out the plaintive sentiments of his wife. Nothing short of a reversal of established history, as it is configured through Marty's brittle 1980s family unit, is satisfactory to the creative team behind the movie. The success of Marty's mission is

signalled by the ending, which depicts a happy, functional family unit, underpinned by George's transformation into a confident, assertive patriarch. The purportedly feel-good emphasis of the movie is actually little more than a veneer, masking the unsubtle remodelling of the family unit to a state of ideological acceptability. With this in mind, the apparent guilelessness of the protagonist usefully diverts audience attention from the blatancy of the film's agendas. *Back to the Future*, after all, holds a well-established reputation as a feel-good drama and special-effects vehicle. However, the conventionalism of its narrative, if recognised, is more likely to be seen as another pleasing evocation of its nostalgic qualities, rather than as a form of social commentary.

This shift towards the domestic arena was confirmed by the body-swap series. 1988 was year zero for the contemporary adult-driven domestic family film, a genre that continued to hold sway well into the 1990s. The body-swap cycle responded to two major social concerns in the late-1980s. The first was the visible emergence of the yuppie class, and the question of how this group of career-minded individuals would respond to the demands of parenthood. There are two factors to consider here: the obvious distaste the yuppie class provoked in certain sections of the U.S. media and general public, contrasted with its size, economic and social influence, which ensured that its issues as a dominant social group remained visible. The second major concern, heavily related to the first, was the social and political obsession with childhood and parenthood in the late-1980s. These issues moved to the forefront of U.S. political campaigning. The debate surrounding the contemporary conditions of childhood and parenthood was, as Coontz contends, highly artificial in nature. By 1994, according to *The Los Angeles Times*, 'candidates of both parties were "lining up" to join the family

values bandwagon’, while in 1996, politician Dan Quayle reported that ‘America has truly reached a new consensus’ to ‘support the unified model of father, mother, and child’.¹⁴⁰ In the late-1980s, much of this attention surrounded the contemporary role of the father. In 1988, sociologist Frank F. Furstenberg could confidently proclaim that ‘fatherhood is in vogue’.¹⁴¹ Furstenberg argued that late-1980s fathers were subject to a labelling process dividing them between ‘good dads’ and ‘bad dads’. The phenomenon emerged because ‘the good provider role is on its way out [...] but its legitimate successor has not yet appeared on the scene’.¹⁴² The growing realisation that ‘more than half of all children growing up today will spend at least part of their childhood in a single parent childhood, usually headed by a woman’ provoked considerable unease.¹⁴³ This social preoccupation with the family provoked an escalating, cyclical relationship between popular politics and society-at-large. Hollywood cinema, often a barometer of social trends, was quick to address these issues.

Although a number of body-swap titles emerged between 1987 and 1988, the film which made the biggest impact – and grossed the most money – was *Big*. Like *Back to the Future*, *Big* utilises a pseudo-fantasy framework as a narrative device with which to manoeuvre its characters into impossible situations. The story centres on thirteen-year-old Josh Baskin (David Moscow). Denied many pleasures of adulthood, and lacking the courage to speak to older girls, Josh fantasises about adulthood. Encountering a mysterious contraption at the local fairground promising to grant wishes, he asks to be a grown-up. He is informed that his wish has been granted, but nothing appears to happen,

¹⁴⁰ Coontz, *The Way we Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families*, p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Frank F. Furstenberg, ‘Good Dads – Bad Dads: Two Faces of Fatherhood’, *The Changing American Family and Public Policy*, ed. Andrew J. Cherlin (pp. 193-218), p. 193.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 200.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 204.

so he returns home. The next morning, however, he awakes to find himself in the body of a thirty-year-old man (Tom Hanks). Terrified, he turns to his mother for reassurance, but she runs him out of the house, believing him to be a burglar. Fortunately, Josh is spotted by successful toy manufacturer MacMillan (Robert Loggia). Impressed by his spirit, charm and vitality, MacMillan immediately offers him an executive position evaluating new toy lines. Also impressed by the freshness of the newcomer, fellow executive Susan (Elizabeth Perkins) quickly falls in love with Josh and they begin a relationship. Although initially successful, the relationship gradually falls apart, due to a combination of Susan's insecurities and Josh's emotional immaturity. He finally tells Susan the truth about his true nature. They part company, and Josh – suddenly transformed back to childhood – returns home to his family.

As may be gauged from this synopsis, *Big* is highly convoluted. Concerned with exploring the relationship between childhood and adulthood in the contemporary world, the film certainly struck a chord with audiences and the Academy (who nominated the film for Best Screenplay) alike. The blurb on the back cover of the home video release – 'You'll never forget Tom Hanks in "Big" – a special comedy that'll make you feel years younger' – heavily implies a largely adult target audience. Indeed, Josh is not really a child: he is an adult's conception of childhood, all innocent frozen smiles and awkward mannerisms, ignorant about sex and adult relationships, and obsessed with mindless play to an extent bordering on caricature, especially for a 12-year-old. Josh is the polar opposite of such cocksure, wised-up and cynical teen film protagonists of the eighties such as Ferris Bueller and Jeff Spicoli, characters only a few years older than Josh on-screen, but clearly concocted for very different audience demographics. Even child

protagonists such as Elliott in *E.T.* or David (Joey Cramer) in *Flight of the Navigator* are not shown to be as naïve or – for want of a better term – ‘childish’ as Josh Baskin. *Big* emerged in a period in which Hollywood was making a concerted effort to engage more realistically with the intricacies and complexities of adolescence – and not solely for commercial purposes. Hollywood’s depiction of children, though – at least in films supposedly intended for younger audiences – was seemingly becoming *less* realistic.

The movie’s agendas become apparent soon after Josh assumes his position on MacMillan’s executive board. His success in the corporation, it is implied, stems from the fact that he alone retains the innocence embodied by the ‘essential’ child. He can still have fun, and he is usually generous and loving. Initially, Susan is only slightly more sympathetic than her joyless, soulless colleagues. We learn that she has had several unfulfilling affairs with office co-workers, and presents herself to Josh as bored with the lifestyle and looking for something more. Misconstruing her interest as purely platonic, he innocently invites Susan to spend the night at his flat. When they arrive at the apartment, which is littered with childish toys, Susan is introduced to his bunk-bed and allocated the bottom bunk. Josh wishes her goodnight, without so much as a kiss on the cheek; Susan misunderstands his naivety for respect and restraint, and her fascination with him deepens further. As the narrative unfolds, however, Josh begins to lose his childish innocence as he becomes more deeply enmeshed within the back-stabbing corporate structure inhabited by the high executive. The implication is clear – the yuppie lifestyle is inherently harmful on two levels: upon the individual, and upon society-at-large. At the same time, the qualities he embodies are themselves equated with ‘ideal’ adulthood. When Josh’s rival Paul (John Heard) asks Susan ‘what is so special about

Baskin?’ Susan can only respond, ‘he’s a grown-up’. Later, as the cracks in Josh’s and Susan’s relationship begin to widen and he decides to reveal that he is only a child, Susan again misunderstands, replying, ‘Oh, and who isn’t? You think that there isn’t a frightened kid inside of me, too?’ By implication, then, the self-aggrandisement and excessive professional ambition constitutive of the yuppie are not only corrupt, but inherently immature. It takes the artless, unaffected ‘wisdom’ of childhood to bring that fact into focus. In the midst of such observations – which purport to offer a therapeutic function for adult audiences, but which were surely lost on many child viewers – the realities of childhood become obscured to the point of invisibility.

1989 was a very strong year for the family film. Ron Howard’s *Parenthood*, an adult drama concerned with the intricacies of raising a family in contemporary North America, was highly successful critically and commercially, underscoring the importance of ‘family’ to U.S. society at the time. Correspondingly, adult-driven domestic family comedies, which traded upon similar preoccupations, were gathering pace with *Uncle Buck* and *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*, and this genre would continue to flourish during the early-1990s. There were two massively successful franchise-based family-adventure movies, *Batman* (Tim Burton) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg), alongside lesser entries in the genre such as *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* and *Ghost Busters II*. *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* was an important step in an emerging genre of films with dual teen- and family-appeal. Most significantly of all, animation had made a successful mass-audience return with Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*. All in all, the Hollywood family film was in fine health as the 1980s drew to a close. The foundations had been built solidly.

Consolidation vs. innovation: the family audience in the 1990s

The final section of this chapter is a tale of two distinct halves. On the one hand, family movies as an entertainment format did not dramatically change during the 1990s. The 1970s and 1980s had seen the reconfiguration of Hollywood's entire conception of family movies, as production became attuned to developments in technology, demographic composition and popular culture. Although Hollywood embraced family entertainment on a much wider scale in the early-1990s, in terms of composition the trend was more towards consolidation than innovation. On the other hand, seismic changes were occurring within the fabric of Hollywood's corporate structures. Almost imperceptibly to casual observers, the major studios become part of global entertainment systems, through a seemingly endless series of mergers and partnerships. Beginning in the early-1960s and gathering pace in the mid-1980s, the merger movement continued into the 1990s and beyond, offering major film producers vertically-integrated access to a variety of other media to fully exploit the power of the movie brand. While the fruits of such corporate deal-making did not become wholly apparent until the new millennium, family entertainment became increasingly important to these international conglomerates, desperate to capture the broadest cross-section of the global audience.

In front of the camera, however, Hollywood continued to exploit successful production trends from the previous decade. The early-1990s were dominated by adult-driven domestic comedies, most notably *Home Alone*, *Hook*, and *Mrs Doubtfire*; knockabout family comedies like *Kindergarten Cop*, *Ghost Dad* and *Beethoven*; Disney animated features, notably *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*; and family-adventure blockbusters like *The Addams Family* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991), *Batman*

Returns (Tim Burton, 1992) and *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993). There is little more to be said of the family-adventure movie, which progressed along similar lines to its late-1970s and 1980s predecessors. However, the predominance of adult-driven domestic comedies, and the continuing emergence of animated features, requires further discussion. After failing to capture the mass-market in the 1980s, the return of animation to the big-time was kick-started by the enormous success of the Disney/Warner Bros. collaboration *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, which fused animation and live-action to high acclaim. By mid-decade, Disney had a major competitor in the animation field in Dreamworks SKG, co-founded by director Steven Spielberg, producer Jeffrey Katzenberg and music mogul David Geffen. Computer graphics technology continued to develop at a rapid pace, and 1995 saw the release of the first totally computer-animated feature, *Toy Story*. By mid-decade, the adult-driven domestic comedy was in decline, and the family market became dominated by animated features such as *A Bug's Life* (John Lasseter, 1998), *The Prince of Egypt* (Brenda Chapman and Steve Hickner, 1998) and *Toy Story 2* (John Lasseter, 1999), and family-adventure movies – both of which were now perennial forces in Hollywood because of their generic flexibility and the constant demand for blockbusters. During this period, Disney also managed to reassert its place in the mainstream live-action family market, remaking many of its 1950s and 1960s films, such as *The Nutty Professor* (Tom Shadyac, 1996), *Flubber* (Les Mayfield, 1997), *Doctor Doolittle* (Betty Thomas, 1998) and *The Parent Trap* (Nancy Meyers, 1998). Overall, family film production methods and sub-generic developments in the 1990s ran along a reasonably safe, linear, and logical path.

After the massive success of *Home Alone* in 1990, the adult-driven family comedy reached its apotheosis with Spielberg's *Hook* and Chris Columbus's *Mrs Doubtfire*. The release of *Hook* in December 1991 saw Steven Spielberg finally bring his vision of *Peter Pan* to the screen. Watching the film now, it seems clear that Spielberg intended the film to be a grand modern parable about the condition of the family in contemporary America. At the time, *Hook* was 'reputedly the second most expensive production ever' after *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, with a \$79 million production budget.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps Spielberg felt that the prestige treatment, all-star cast, and even the long gestation period were necessary to give the film the gravitas demanded by the strength of sentiment. Spielberg has admitted intending to film the story as early as 1985, but lost enthusiasm for the project after the birth of his son: 'suddenly I couldn't be Peter Pan any more. I had to be his father'.¹⁴⁵ Like *Big* – another movie sacrificing clarity of story in order to fully express its socio-political agendas – the plot of the movie is markedly convoluted. The movie centres on Peter Banning (Robin Williams), a beleaguered American yuppie who devotes so much of his time to his stressful job that he rarely sees his family, and often misses out on significant moments in the life of his children. As the narrative unfolds, it emerges that Peter Banning was once Peter Pan. Many years earlier, in one of his occasional visits to the real world, Peter encountered Moira (Caroline Goodall). Falling instantly in love, he renounced Never Land, married Moira, started a family and gradually lost his memory of his fantastical past. Peter is forced to return to Never Land when his old nemesis, Captain Hook (Dustin Hoffman), kidnaps his children, Jack (Charlie Korsmo) and Maggie (Amber Scott). This forces him

¹⁴⁴ Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, p. 176.

¹⁴⁵ Ana Maria Bahiana, 'Hook', *Steven Spielberg: Interviews*, (pp. 151-156), pp. 152-153.

to let go of his uptight-executive identity and re-engage with his inner child; with the identity he has renounced.

Peter Banning ultimately succeeds in working through his problems. He uses his visit to Never Land as a therapeutic self-correcting mechanism, a timely reminder that his essential child – the values of play and fun represented by Pan – has been lost, but can be re-discovered. Perhaps more significantly, in terms of the film's blatant address to the adult sections of the audience, Peter's childlike qualities are ultimately able to co-exist with his adult skills. One of the most cathartic scenes in the film is Peter's war of words with his successor as head of the lost boys, Rufio (Dante Basco). It is his 'adult' skills with wordplay, using his expertise as a lawyer, which allow him to defeat Rufio and re-emerge, victorious, as Peter Pan. Spielberg has admitted personally identifying with the figure of the modern father who is too busy with his career to give the required attention to his children. He admits feeling 'guilty and wanting to do something about it', and *Hook* serves as his platform.¹⁴⁶ In this light, *Hook* becomes, at least conceptually, a release valve for the anxieties of a generation; the fears and failures that had, perceptually at least, bedevilled the baby boomers for over a decade. It also attempts to resolve these anxieties, for whilst Banning may have temporarily lost touch with his inner self, he has also gained skills as an adult to compensate for that loss. The ideal state, the film self-servingly implies, is a composite between the wonder and imagination of childhood with the responsibilities and skills of an adult man.

The film had a mixed reception upon release. It was 'severely panned by critics for excessive blockbuster values' and 'became synonymous with Hollywood's

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 154.

shortcomings'.¹⁴⁷ Christopher Frayling found *Hook* 'a deeply regressive experience' that 'should have been the apotheosis of Steven Spielberg' but was instead 'a "filming by numbers" version of a work he has done many times before. And better'.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, after a sluggish start, the film made strong profits and obviously 'contained something family audiences responded to'.¹⁴⁹ It was those same audiences, presumably, that also made *Mrs Doubtfire* – again starring Robin Williams as a patriarch desperately trying to make good on his family obligations – a massive hit. *Mrs Doubtfire* centres on Daniel Hillard, an out-of-work actor. Although devoted to their three children, Daniel and his wife, Miranda (Sally Field), have fallen out of love. Daniel is perennially childish and irresponsible in his demeanour, whilst Miranda is stolidly earnest. After a hostile divorce played out in the courts, Miranda is given sole custody of the children, a ruling which devastates Daniel. Ever the performer, though, and not to be outdone, Daniel learns that Miranda is seeking a nanny to look after the children after school, and sees his opportunity. With the help of his brother – a prosthetics expert, who makes him a rubber mask and full-body suit – Daniel invents a character called Mrs Doubtfire, a firm but kindly elderly Scottish widow, and the perfect nanny. Before long, the whole family has embraced Daniel's creation.

As with *Uncle Buck*, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* and *Hook*, *Mrs Doubtfire* expends far more time developing convincing characterisations for its adult protagonists than for its children. Earlier films in the cycle privileged adult agendas with a self-preoccupation bordering on the obsessive. *Mrs Doubtfire*, whilst retaining themes

¹⁴⁷ Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, pp. 176, 178.

¹⁴⁸ Christopher Frayling, 'Hook', *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Jose Arroyo, London: British Film Institute, 2000, pp. 220, 222.

¹⁴⁹ Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*, p. 179.

of divorce and social breakdown, fuses these preoccupations with a recurrent strain of grotesque humour, emphasising sight gags and slapstick. The film is replete with the kind of visual comedy widely assumed to appeal specifically to children. There are a number of sequences showing Daniel's body suit in jeopardy, including a comic sequence where he sets fire to one of his rubber breasts whilst cooking.



Figure 10: Mrs Doubtfire (Robin Williams), complete with body suit, prosthetics and wig.

In another scene, Daniel accidentally knocks his mask out of a window on to the road below, and looks on in horror as it is destroyed by a passing truck. To maintain the masquerade for the benefit of a visiting court liaison officer, he sticks his face into a cream pie. All of these sequences establish Daniel as a figure of safety and fun, and it is surely significant that Daniel is, by trade, a children's entertainer. Although his irresponsible character traits are clearly defined, it is equally established that he is a morally-good man who never transgresses the projected frontier between childishness as

foolish bravado and childishness as familial disregard. In fact, Daniel emerges in a better light than Miranda, whose po-faced rejection of childish play threatens not only Daniel's sense of fun, but also that of the audience. Miranda Hillard exemplifies the patronising, misogynistic belief, identified by Susan Faludi, that 'women are unhappy precisely because they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation'.¹⁵⁰ Women's increased freedom to embark upon successful careers seems to have done little for Miranda but make her as tense and guilt-ridden as her male yuppie counterparts. As parents, Daniel and Miranda resemble the opposing, unreconstructed facets of Peter Banning's persona in *Hook*; one is happy and fun but lacking in responsibility; the other is miserably aware of the impossibility of reconciling professional and domestic duty.

Despite its massive success, a number of elements in *Mrs Doubtfire* suggest the impending end of the adult-driven domestic family comedy. Firstly, the abundant presence of the grotesque embodied by 'Mrs Doubtfire' carries the film away from the self-absorption of earlier films in the genre. Secondly, the film seems to reflect a greater sense of acceptance regarding new social structures. *Big* and *Hook* implied a need to regress to the symbolic properties of childhood as a means of coping with modern life. In *Mrs Doubtfire*, a film more grounded within realistic pragmatism, the difficulties posed by family breakdown and status anxiety are simply facts of life which must be accepted. There is a sense that the social issues and concerns triggering the emergence of this cycle of films had either dissipated or changed their form; the political battle for equality between men and women, for instance, has not so much been won or lost, as obscured. Moreover, attitudes towards divorce and family structures were changing: *Mrs Doubtfire* is the first mainstream family film willing to concede the potential *benefits* a divorce

¹⁵⁰ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, London: Vintage, 1993, p. 2.

might bring to the long-term welfare of a family. The film does not end with Daniel and Miranda reconciling – for a film that places such value upon the truth of its social representations, this would place too great a strain on audience credulity. They do arrive at an understanding, though, based upon their shared love for their children. Although Daniel’s/Mrs Doubtfire’s direct-to-camera address at the end of the movie – in which, via his new television show, he gently explains that divorce (and, by implication, the emergence of alternative social structures) need not spell the end of family – is ostensibly directed to his own children watching at home, it also appears designed to impress the message upon children watching in theatres around the world.

The natural end of the adult-driven domestic comedy demonstrates that production patterns are determined not solely by box office, but also by the cultural and political concerns of the social context. The genre’s absence from production schedules after the early-1990s, though, left something of a gap within the family film market, which animation quickly filled. As Tino Balio notes,

animated feature production increased yearly. The *Los Angeles Times* calculated that the output in 1999 would be “roughly equal to the number of features produced in America during the 13 years between *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 and *Cinderella* in 1950. Not only did the number increase, but also the varieties of animation including the traditional cell, computer-generated, stop motion and Claymation.¹⁵¹

After a prolonged slump in the 1970s and 1980s, Disney was brought decisively back into the Hollywood mainstream by a fresh and commercially-astute new creative team during the mid-to-late 1980s. Both Christopher Finch and Tino Balio have remarked upon the new-found ability of Disney films in the late-1980s to engage with the mass audience. *The Little Mermaid* was, as Balio notes, ‘Disney’s first open attempt to court

¹⁵¹ Tino Balio, ‘Hollywood Production Trends in the Era of Globalisation, 1990-1999’, *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (pp. 165-184), p. 172.

baby boomers and their children'.¹⁵² Like family-adventure movies, though, well-constructed animated features have an ability to mobilise audiences cutting across normative demographic boundaries.

Beyond superficial taste- and technically-related development, it is clear that both animated features and family-adventure movies are now permanent fixtures in Hollywood production schedules. Their strength is flexibility, transcending the taste-specific limitations of genre, and adapting to the mores of the cultural context. Both formats emerged suddenly: the family-adventure movie with *Star Wars* and the contemporary animated feature with *The Little Mermaid*. Both films offered audiences broad-based appeal – spectacle, uncomplicated thrills, and aesthetic innovation – but crucially, they also gave mass audiences what they required at the time of release. *Star Wars* offered basic and uncomplicated pleasure in a period of social unease and ponderous, excessively-mature mainstream films. *The Little Mermaid* offered successful engagement with the baby boom generation, as well as their children. The major legacy of the 1980s family film was generic proliferation; films adhering to the commercial philosophy of the family film but spanning numerous genres and styles of filmmaking. A corollary of this was the introduction of low- and mid-budget family films. These mid-range offerings plug the gap between family-adventure blockbusters and big animated features, and entail considerably less risk for major studios. With a generally lower yield, they operate roughly as the modern equivalent of studio-era programmers.

Such films cannot be viewed in isolation, but as part of a broader Hollywood trend which saw major studios' corporate structures and global entertainment products evolve co-dependently. It is a fundamental requirement of capitalist enterprise that

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 171.

successful businesses continue to expand their operations exponentially, and the media merger movement was not an articulated, industry-wide strategy, but logical cooperative expansion. From a creative perspective, though, entertainment was increasingly manufactured to exploit the global reach of the Hollywood studios by targeting international, rather than merely domestic, audiences. To this end, several studios formed family film divisions during the 1990s (as I will detail more comprehensively in the next chapter). Although this strategy produced a number of box office flops, the homely, saccharine domesticity of *Home Alone* and *Mrs Doubtfire* began to make way for blockbusters of a more international flavour, less culturally-specific and more aesthetically-orientated, building upon the templates of successful family-adventure franchises. At the start of the decade, the majors typically released about thirty films a year, but only around half that number by the end.¹⁵³ As Balio suggests, ‘the goal of every studio was to gross \$1 billion worldwide each year’, and blockbusters provided much of this income.¹⁵⁴ However, he also notes that ‘no studio had the financial means to produce blockbusters exclusively’ so mid-range films and indies still held a prominent position in release schedules.¹⁵⁵ Overall, ‘familiar formulae in familiar production trends aided by increasingly sophisticated computer-generated imagery and attuned to changing pop-culture trends kept audiences entertained’.¹⁵⁶

Beyond these corporate developments, a number of technologies originating in the 1990s have since proven particularly significant. Firstly, in November, 1990, the first

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 165.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 171.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 181.

known webpage was written.¹⁵⁷ It is now almost impossible to conceive of the global entertainment business without invoking the World Wide Web in some sense, with its almost limitless potential for publicity and commercial enterprise. Secondly, videogames emerged as a mass-market home entertainment in the 1990s. In August 1991, the Super Nintendo games system was released in the U.S., followed by the rival Sony PlayStation in 1994.¹⁵⁸ Both platforms took videogames to a new level. Although the immediate significance of this rival medium upon the film industry was slight, since the turn of the century, videogame ports of Hollywood movies have become a valuable ancillary market for major franchises.¹⁵⁹ Finally, computer graphics made giant leaps, allowing for the creation of hitherto-impossible visions, and palpably deepening aesthetic spectacle in Hollywood movies. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Hollywood made good use of these emerging technologies to extend the reach and life-span of the movie brand. Family blockbusters are now the major weapon in the battle for the global entertainment audience, as films with non culturally-specific flavours and easily-exploitable branding opportunities have become increasingly important. As the following chapter will show, domestic family comedies floundered as the power of the global audience increased exponentially.

¹⁵⁷ Chris Holmlund, 'Timeline: the 1990s', *American Cinema of the 1990s: Themes and Variations*, p. ix.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ See Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, pp. 226-228.

Chapter 5: The Family Audience and the global media environment, 2000-2010

The first decade of the new millennium saw both the Hollywood studios and their family-orientated products become positioned even more firmly within global mechanisms.

There will, undoubtedly, be further corporate synergies within these organisations, technological developments enabling further formal media progression, and the opening-up of currently inaccessible foreign markets. However, the major battle – formulating a type of entertainment capable of captivating international audiences – appears to have been won.

To understand both Hollywood filmmaking in the new millennium and the current status of Hollywood family entertainment, we must turn our attention to the 1980s media merger movement, which has continued apace into the 1990s and 2000s:

The current wave began with the premature purchase of MGM by Turner Broadcasting in 1985. A more enduring merger in that same year was the takeover of Twentieth Century Fox by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Coca-Cola bought Columbia Pictures the next year and sold it again to Sony in 1989. Warner Communications took over Lorimar in 1988 and merged with Time-Life in 1989 to form Time Warner. Matsushita bought MCA/Universal in 1991 and sold it again to Seagram in 1995. The 1993 takeover of Paramount by Viacom was significantly financed by Blockbuster. The trend continues to this day.¹

The late-1980s and early-1990s were key periods for the Hollywood majors, which increasingly concentrated on vertical integration and synergy. As Paul Grainge notes, Hollywood 'has been seen as an exemplary model of capitalist restructuring in its move from a studio system to a flexibly specialised part of a global image business'.² Taking their place within international entertainment systems, these media empires turned their

¹ Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*, Austin: Texas, 2001, pp. 185-186.

² Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 6.

attentions towards the family audience in an effort to reach the broadest international market. Warner Bros. and Twentieth Century-Fox created their own family film units in 1993 in an effort to compete with Disney.³ Universal, Sony and Paramount followed suit in 1998, 1999 and 2002, and in 2007 Universal created a specialised independent unit, Illumination, headed by Chris Meledandri, former head of Fox Animation.⁴

The point, of course, is that the increasing globalisation of the major studios' industrial organisation and the increasing globalisation of their filmic products are far from separate phenomena. The most cursory glance at box office statistics confirms that movies pitched at the 'family audience' have been the most successful blockbusters worldwide over the last three decades. As Grainge notes, 'family entertainment has been at the forefront of Hollywood's contemporary industrial strategies and branding efforts'.⁵ By the turn of the century, only around 30 per cent of Hollywood's revenues derived from the global box office (with television accounting for 46 per cent, and home video 25 per cent).⁶ Both TV and home video depend heavily on family-orientated product, and Hollywood family movies carry significance far beyond their formidable box office value. Corporate recognition of the increasing significance of family movies has led to

³ Christian Moerk, 'Family Volume at WB', *Variety*, Friday May 14th, 1993.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR106838.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009]; Kathleen O'Steen, 'Matoian Makes Fox His Family', *Variety*, Monday November 18th, 1993.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR115672.html?categoryid=30&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009].

⁴ Adam Sandler, 'Feola Tops U Family Unit', *Variety*, Wednesday February 4th, 1998.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117467391.html?categoryid=18&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009]; Dan Cox and Cynthia Littleton, 'Sony in Family Way: New Division Aimed at Kid-Friendly Pix, TV Fare', *Variety*, Friday February 26th, 1999.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117491707.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009]; Charles Lyons and Cathy Dunkley, 'Paramount, Producer in a Family Way', *Variety*, Sunday April 14th, 2002. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117865423.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed

19/10/2009]; Michael Fleming, 'Meledandri, Universal Team on Deals: Illumination Puts Focus on Family Fare', *Variety*, Wednesday March 5th, 2008.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117981911.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009].

⁵ Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, p. 49.

⁶ Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, London: British Film Institute, 2005, p. 22.

studios remorselessly pursuing this line of production, which in turn has stimulated some interesting shifts in Hollywood in recent years. In 2004, *The New York Times* cited a Harvard School of Public Health study which argued that film ratings were becoming more lenient.⁷ The study demonstrated that ‘a movie rated PG or PG-13 today has more sexual or violent content than a similarly rated movie in the past’ and accused the MPAA of tolerating more extreme content in family-friendly ratings.⁸ The following year, *Variety* reported that R-rated films, ‘once the studios’ mainstay, are on the decline, both in numbers and in lure’.⁹

Equally significantly, in 2004 PG-rated films outperformed R-rated films for the first time since 1984.¹⁰ PG-13 films have also become more common, and a greater proportion of family films, such as *The Simpsons Movie* (David Silverman, 2007), *The Golden Compass* (Chris Weitz, 2007) and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (David Yates, 2007), have fallen into this category. As demonstrated by a 2007 MPAA market statistics study, the most lucrative categories currently are PG and PG-13, with G and R-rated films lagging far behind.¹¹ This is despite R-rated films having constituted 59 per cent of all MPAA-rated films between 1968 and 2007 (G 6 per cent, PG 20 per cent and PG-13 13 per cent).¹² Most family-suitable blockbusters are released under PG or PG-13 tags; in fact, this is almost a prerequisite for non-animated blockbuster success. The G rating, as Peter Kramer has argued, has traditionally carried an unfounded

⁷ Sharon Waxman, ‘Study Finds Film Ratings are growing more lenient’, *The New York Times*, Wednesday January 14th, 2004. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/14/movies/study-finds-film-ratings-are-growing-more-lenient.html?fta=y>> [accessed 24/8/2009].

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gabriel Snyder, ‘Don’t Give me an ‘R’: Film Rating Slips in Light of Political Climate’, *Variety*, Sunday February 20th, 2005. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117918193.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 19/10/2009].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ ‘Entertainment Industry Market Statistics’, *Motion Picture Association of America*, 2007, p. 13.

¹² Ibid.

reputation for 'children's entertainment'.¹³ However, with the meteoric rise of animated features, and hits like *Monsters, Inc.* (Peter Docter and David Silverman, 2001), *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton, 2003) and *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008), this rating now carries far less of a stigma than in previous decades. All of this data suggests that Hollywood is seeking greater product standardisation. Although R-rated films remain potentially good box office business, positioning films within a broadly family-suitable milieu increases the chance of a large general audience. One studio marketing executive wryly suggested: 'you're leaving tens of millions of dollars on the table with an R rating. Why? For artistic integrity? Get real'.¹⁴ In 2009, there was even debate concerning the tenability of the MPAA, the film industry trade organisation, formed in 1922. In an era marked by divergent interests and agendas from the media conglomerate member companies, there is, at least, widespread acceptance that things are changing rapidly, and that the film industry must continually adapt to these changes.¹⁵

Despite the Hollywood family film's increasing global dominance, the path has not always been straightforward. At the beginning of the decade, the format encountered something of a commercial blip. Disney in particular, was criticised for losing its creative spark and under the short-lived regime of Peter Schneider, the company cut not only its production schedule but also 4,000 jobs, settling on a more conservative roster which saw it slip to fourth position in major studio market share.¹⁶ In 2003, Roy E.

¹³ Peter Kramer, 'The Best Disney Film Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema Since the 1960s', *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* ed. Steve Neale, London: British Film Institute, 2002 (pp. 185-200) p. 193.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ted Johnson, 'Is MPAA 2.0 Next? As Glickman Exits, Biz Mulls Org's Future', *Variety*, Monday October 19th, 2009. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118010142.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 22/10/2009].

¹⁶ Rick Lyman and Geraldine Fabrikant, 'Suddenly, the Stakes are high for Disney's Film and TV Businesses', *The New York Times*, Monday May 21st, 2001.

Disney, Walt's nephew, publicly criticised the management.¹⁷ By this point, the studio was relying heavily upon its alliance with Pixar, the company which had inaugurated the computer-generated animated feature with *Toy Story* in 1995. It was Pixar and DreamWorks, not Disney, that were pushing boundaries in feature animation. In 2003, the Disney animation department had no new hand-drawn movies in the pipeline.¹⁸ Meanwhile, live-action family blockbusters were treated with suspicion. As Tribeca Films executive Jane Rosenthal observed, 'there's always been an interest in family entertainment' but 'if you make these big, spectacular movies [...] you've got to make sure that the market is going to ignite [...] This is not a business that comes with guarantees'.¹⁹ The pivotal movie in this regard was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001). The rights to J.K. Rowling's immensely-popular *Harry Potter* series of books (1997-2007) were acquired by Warner Bros., which decided to give the film the prestige treatment befitting the established cultural status of the franchise. Nevertheless, *Harry Potter* was apparently viewed in the industry as 'a unique cultural phenomenon whose worldwide success is all but impossible to duplicate'; that is, prior to release, the series was regarded as an exception, and not as the magical key to unlocking the global potential of family entertainment.²⁰

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/21/business/suddenly-the-stakes-are-high-for-disney-s-film-and-tv-businesses.html?scp=26&sq=direct-to-video%20family%20film&st=cse>> [accessed 17/10/2009]; Charles Lyons, 'What's Disney's Tomorrowland? Mouse Hunt Must Stoke Creative Fires as Execs Vie for Power', *Variety*, Tuesday June 26th, 2001.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117801968.html?categoryid=18&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009].

¹⁷ Sharon Waxman, 'Bitter Parting Words from a Disney', *The New York Times*, Tuesday December 2nd, 2003. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/02/business/media/02studio.html>> [accessed 2/11/2009].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bing, 'Pottermania Lures H'Wood to Kids Lit: Execs Backed off Genre Due to Pricey F/X, Young Casts', *Variety*, Wednesday January 31st, 2001.

<<http://variety.com/article/VR1117792938.html?categoryid=21&cs=1>> [accessed 19/10/2009].

²⁰ Ibid.

In the event, three films released in 2001 shaped the trajectory of family entertainment for the entire decade. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001) and *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson, 2001) generated almost 10 per cent of the \$8 billion worldwide gross for the year.²¹ What is more, all three films spawned immensely successful franchises and have prompted Hollywood to pursue projects of a similar type. Equally as important as theatrical revenues, though, are the synergistic opportunities these franchises allow vertically-integrated media corporations. Franchises focusing on the family market are 'the perfect fuel for the synergy machine'.²² All three films were received by critics and audiences with overwhelming enthusiasm, and while they share a number of common attributes, they are sufficiently different to demonstrate the insignificance of genre to the success of family blockbusters. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* may have been 'the most highly awaited movie of the year', but its defining characteristic, aside from the impressiveness of the expensive visual effects, is its fidelity to the source material.²³ This literal-minded fidelity was, no doubt, a calculated strategy on the part of the producers, who realised that audiences were expecting less an independent movie event than a tie-in with a well-established franchise. In contrast, much of the discourse surrounding *The Lord of the Rings* centred upon its status as a 'cult franchise', rather than a 'calculated franchise', as Grainge describes the dichotomy.²⁴

²¹ Jonathan Bing and Cathy Dunkley, 'Kiddy Litter Rules H'Wood: Tyke Tomes Ascendant in Studios' Post-Potter Parade', *Variety*, Tuesday January 8th, 2002.
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117858043.html?categoryid=21&cs=1>> [accessed 19/10/2009].

²² Ibid.

²³ Elvis Mitchell, 'Wizard School without the Magic', *The New York Times*, Friday November 15th, 2001.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/16/movies/16POTT.html>> [accessed 27/10/2009].

²⁴ Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, p. 142.

In truth, of course, *The Lord of the Rings* is every bit as calculated as *Harry Potter*, and its bespoke authenticity derives from several factors. A filmic adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's complex 1950s fantasy trilogy was long considered impossible.²⁵ Directed by New Zealander auteur Peter Jackson, financed by 'independent' studio New Line (actually owned by Time Warner) and filmed by a Wellington-based production crew, the franchise possessed attraction as an antidote to *Harry Potter* (which was released only one month earlier). Thompson observes that many of the cast and crew working on the film regarded the project as a 'once in a lifetime' experience, whilst *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Mick LaSalle affirmed that 'watching it, one can't help but get the impression that everyone involved was steeped in Tolkien's work, loved the book, treasured it and took care not to break a cherished thing in it'.²⁶ *The Lord of the Rings* franchise, then, trades upon its paradoxical intimacy. In contrast, *Shrek*'s success stems partially from its self-awareness, the flaunting of its artificiality. Drawing on fairy-tale convention for comedic, 'postmodern' effect, it was recognised upon release as a landmark in computer animation and was awarded the inaugural Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2002, a measure of the growing appreciation of animation's significance to contemporary Hollywood.²⁷

²⁵ Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007, p. 2.

²⁶ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, p. xiii; Mick LaSalle, 'Lord' Rings True: Tolkien's Epic Fantasy Springs to Wondrous Life Onscreen', *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Wednesday December 19th, 2001. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2001/12/19/DD208022.DTL&type=movies>> [accessed 30/10/2009].

²⁷ Dade Hayes, 'Kudos Crown a Rich Run for 'Shrek': Toon Nabs Inaugural Oscar for Best Animated Feature', *Variety*, Sunday March 24th, 2002. <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117864390.html?categoryid=13&cs=1> [accessed 26/11/2009].

Global appeal and audience immersion

The relationship between the global audience and the nature of appeal requires some analysis. The global audience for family films is particularly large, and has continued to grow since the turn of the century. In 2006, *Variety* announced that ‘family fare’ is ‘golden around [the] globe’, citing the worldwide success of the *Harry Potter* (2001-), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *Chronicles of Narnia* (2005-) and *Ice Age* (2002-) franchises.²⁸ In 2008, the adaptation of Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass* made the headlines because of the extraordinary superiority of its international box office performance over that of the U.S. domestic market.²⁹ *The Golden Compass* was the first film to gross \$300 million in foreign revenue without hitting \$100 in North America.³⁰ *Variety* suggested that overseas distributors marketed the movie more effectively as a family movie than did domestic marketers.³¹ The Italian distributors claimed that they targeted the 8-13 demographic, whilst according to *Variety*, in the U.S. ‘the pic’s biggest demographic was young adult males, who came looking for the next “Lord of the Rings”, left disappointed and told their friends not to bother’.³² It is undoubtedly true, though, that family-friendly fantasies are the biggest business in the global market. How has Hollywood tried to accommodate this international audience? Largely the global strategy has again succeeded through an appeal to universals.

²⁸ Dave McNary, ‘Family Fare Golden around Globe: ‘Ice Age’, ‘Narnia’ Trump Conventional B.O. Wisdom and Join \$100 Mil Club’, *Variety*, Sunday June 18th, 2006.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117945463.html?categoryid=2236&cs=1>> [accessed 19/10/2009].

²⁹ Adam Dawtrey, ‘“Compass’ Spins Foreign Frenzy: Film’s Overseas Success Raises Questions in U.S.’’, *Variety*, Friday March 7th, 2008.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117982066.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 24/8/2009].

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

On a purely practical level, overseas audiences are especially attuned to family blockbuster titles because, on average, they attend fewer movies than their U.S. counterparts. Movies are more significant events, and international audiences tend to privilege 'event' movies with family suitability.³³ Additionally, numerous foreign markets enforce strict codes of censorship, so the least offensive Hollywood films stand a better chance of avoiding censure. However, the big change in Hollywood's family blockbusters since the millennium has been a reduction in the socio-cultural specificity of movie content. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* franchises, although inevitably retaining a Western emphasis, are not as identifiably 'American' in origin as, say, *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*. Disney executive Mark Zoradi argues that 'the fantasy genre travels exceptionally well, partly because there's nothing that makes it geographically unique [...] and its themes are pretty universal – good vs. evil, loyalty, the family sticking together'.³⁴ Beyond this thematic and tonal broadness, visual appeal operates as a leveller; everyone appreciates impressive spectacle. Domestic comedies from *Meet me in St Louis* to *Home Alone* demarcate appeal between the representational demographics, offering sub-plots and strains of humour clearly divided between child and adult audiences. The international conglomeration of the studios, the increasing economic power of foreign markets, and developments in technology, particularly CGI, have all contributed to the shift towards an appeal of the senses.

Immersion and the intentional disavowal of socio-cultural specificity are closely related. Effacing social, cultural and political overtones makes products more globally

³³ Dave McNary, 'Fantasy Movies a Hit Overseas: 'Compass' is Latest Family-Friendly Pic to Thrive', *Variety*, Friday March 3rd 2008.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117982057.html?categoryid=19&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

³⁴ *Ibid.*

accessible, facilitating audience immersion on an experiential level. The desire for audiences to *experience* films rather than merely observe them has always been present, to a certain extent. Big screens, low lighting and loudness – ever-present conditions of movie exhibition since the early twentieth century – are all designed to hold audience attention. The more involved audiences are, the deeper the experience, and the more likely they are to part with their money in return for an experience they cannot find anywhere else; that is the theory, at least, but there are some caveats. Immersive cinema is still fairly primitive, and not yet sufficiently developed to elevate cinema far above competing media, in terms of the allure of film, or conditions of exhibition. It must also be emphasised that while effacing socio-cultural specificity is an ongoing agenda on the part of Hollywood filmmakers, it is scarcely a fully realised reality. It relates mostly to local humour, and to parochial allusions to internal politics and culture, such as the concerns regarding divorce and family breakdown distinguishing the adult-driven domestic comedies of the 1990s. References to international political currents – such as the climate change allegory in *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) – remain acceptable, as they trade on international, rather than simply domestic, matters of importance. This agenda does not extend to populist and cosmetic brand-based aspects of national identity – the comic-book Americana of *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*, or the genteel ‘Englishness’ of *Harry Potter* – forms of exoticism which might be profitably exported.

However, it is apparent that since many of the ideologies running through Hollywood family films take place below the conscious threshold, they cannot be easily expunged. Whether globally-consumed or otherwise, family films remain products of the society in which they are manufactured. Their abundant potential as vehicles for political

and ideological ideals is a quality many wish to preserve. Right-wing U.S. Christians have staked their claim on the family film since the 1930s interventions of the Catholic Legion of Decency. Since then, they have been vocal supporters of family films – unsurprisingly, as family movies have often functioned as vehicles for ideologically-conservative Americana. Now that such blatant ideological emphases are being deliberately removed to facilitate appeal to multicultural, multiethnic audiences, conservative Christian film producers are resorting to making their own family movies. While *The Golden Compass*, a largely secular narrative, was denounced by the Christian establishment as being ‘anti-religious’, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in contrast, was financed by evangelical Christian billionaire Philip Anschutz, owner of producer Walden Media. According to *Village Voice* critic Anthony Kaufman, the Christian establishment regarded the film as a ‘discipleship tool’, relating to a 2004 announcement from Anschutz that Walden Media would produce ‘family films that are “entertaining” but also are “life affirming” and “carry moral messages”’.³⁵ Didi Herman argues that ‘the Christian right has adopted an approach that involves attempting to reshape dominant culture from the inside [...] Get conservative Christians into the media, into the film industry, and the values and politics of those institutions will change’.³⁶

Although the incursion of political agendas into mass entertainment is a subject of persistent concern, perhaps what is most striking is critics’ and audiences’ lack of awareness of such aspects. Liberals may fear that right-wing Christians are co-opting the format for their own devious ends, but critical reception to the *Narnia* franchise has

³⁵ Anthony Kaufman, ‘Heavenly Features: Moving into the Mainstream, the Christian Right Tells Hollywood to Have a Little Faith’, *Village Voice*, Tuesday November 29th, 2005.

<<http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-11-29/film/heavenly-features/>> [accessed 30/10/2009].

³⁶ Ibid.

tended to focus more on the films' worth as family-adventure material, making obvious comparisons with the *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* franchises. This suggests one of two things: either religious messages are working, and are so insidious that they are not being recognised for what they are, or audiences do not really care one way or another. The latter possibility seems the more likely. Nevertheless, it is equally apparent that certain well-made family blockbusters have the capacity to transcend ideology, even when recognised and disparaged. A classic example is Robin Wood's analysis of *Star Wars* in his famous monograph *Hollywood: from Vietnam to Reagan*.³⁷ A Marxist, Wood admits to enjoying the *Star Wars* films even as they articulate 'values and structures my adult self has long since repudiated'.³⁸ In other words, even when they betray their cultural and political origins, these family blockbusters may yet emerge unscathed because of their powerful, primary function as 'total entertainment'.³⁹

'World-building' is an increasingly important tool for producers eager to make their family films as generic as possible. Originally coined by David Bordwell, the term describes the intricate construction of a fictional universe, intended to make fantasy narratives as plausible as possible. This phenomenon has reached its apotheosis in the fantasy franchises of the new millennium. Although Bordwell traces the filmic origins of world-building to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), it really started on a wide scale with *Star Wars* in 1977.⁴⁰ This extended fictional universe not only helps to

³⁷ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 164.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ The phrase coined by Warner Bros. executive Robert Daly to describe the synergistic expansion of the company in 1997, and quoted in Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, pp. 54-56.

⁴⁰ Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, p. 84.

immerse viewers deeply within the multivalent experience of the movie, but also creates almost endless merchandise opportunities. As Grainge suggests:

Warner Bros. intensified its concern at the turn of the millennium with serials, spin-offs and genres that were based quite specifically on the filmic realisation of a pre-sold, inveterately marketable, narrative universe. This governed the studio's primary investment in animation [...] fantasy [...] comic book adaptations and science fiction. Seeking films that could be targeted at a global audience and that could mutate into other products, Warner Bros. amplified its stake in movies that could imagine inhabitable worlds (and generate licensable characters) for children, teenagers and adults alike.⁴¹

With its stake in the *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* franchises, Warner Bros. led the way in world-building. Perhaps the key to the appeal of world-building is the way it fuses elements of our own world with familiar forms of fantasy and dense layers of back-plotting.

If blockbusters are indeed becoming increasingly immersive, then it follows that the fictional world must be as plausible and fully-realised as possible. But although Thompson suggests that 'the Middle-earth created in Tolkien's novel is perhaps the epitome of a fully-realised world', it still draws upon our own collective historical traditions (such as the Crusades).⁴² In *Harry Potter*, the parallels are more obvious. For the Hogwarts school of Wizards, with its archaic traditions and rigid caste system, read the British public school. For the fictional game Quidditch, read traditional gentlemanly sporting pursuits, like cricket or polo. Although this relative world-building undoubtedly carries narrative and ideological functions – what's the point of a fictional world that tells us nothing about our own? – in *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Chronicles of Narnia*, it invites the complicity of the viewer in manufacturing a fictional meta-universe which might almost be real. The active viewer participates by recapitulating these

⁴¹ Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age*, p. 59.

⁴² Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, p. 84.

elements through word-of-mouth via social networks and fan-clubs, and by purchasing the merchandise, extending the life of the media franchise and simultaneously giving it a new life of its own. In this sense, although the intellectual property is retained by the copyright holder(s), the fictional universe becomes a site of negotiation between the producers who own the property, and the millions of fans who participate in the experience. World-building is integral to this phenomenon, allowing the property to transcend the confines of theatrical exhibition and into the experiential realm of individuals and social groups across the globe.

The contemporary family blockbuster is preoccupied with audience immersion. Narrative and aesthetic components, such as the heavy use of CGI, increasing reliance upon 3-D, world-building, and the falling away of socio-cultural specifics, all point to a desire to reconfigure the relationship between the film and the spectator. More precisely, such films require a sensual as well as intellectual response. As cognitive theorist Torben Grodal notes, 'when we watch a film, our heart rhythms change, we sweat, and our muscles alternately tense and relax throughout'.⁴³ Movies always had this capacity, but family blockbusters intensify physical and emotional responses. In this regard, James Cameron's CGI-heavy, 3-D blockbuster *Avatar* is a landmark movie. The convoluted narrative concerns humanity's attempts to plunder mineral wealth from a fertile alien planet after exhausting its own resources. The plot is scarcely worth detailing; many critics viewed it as a crude allegory of the U.S.'s pernicious exploitation of less powerful nations possessing precious natural resources, while others identified criticism of U.S.

⁴³ Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 4.

neo-conservatism.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most important lesson to be taken from *Avatar* is that while immersive, regressive blockbusters do not destroy narrative, they make it *appear* irrelevant. Although 3-D is far from a new innovation, CGI has considerably deepened its potential. As Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times* enthused:

In Cameron's hands, 3-D is not the forced gimmick it's often been, but a way to create an alternate reality and insert us so completely and seamlessly into it that we feel like we've actually been there'.⁴⁵

The success of the CGI and 3-D can be seen in Turan's assessment of the film as 'a total immersion experience'.⁴⁶ Other critics have drawn even more grandiose conclusions from the success of the phenomenon. Scott Foundas saw the movie as a 'rebirth' in context of the supposed 'death of cinema', while Shawn Levy declared, portentously: 'starting today you live in a post-"Avatar" movie world'.⁴⁷

Avatar may indeed be a milestone in the development of this form of experiential cinema, but its significance is scarcely epoch-making. The successful integration of 3-D is just one step in the ongoing campaign of using cutting-edge technology to draw audiences more deeply within the fictional world. Hollywood is fixated by technology; it is at the very core of contemporary family movies, because technological advances not only facilitate viewer immersion, but they arouse an enormous quantity of publicity and hype. Viewers marvelling at aesthetic technical virtuosity are less likely to be concerned

⁴⁴ Shawn Levy, "'Avatar" is a Movie-Movie That Might Just Change All Movies', *The Portland Oregonian*, Thursday December 17th, 2009. <http://blog.oregonlive.com/madaboutmovies/2009/12/review_-_avatar_is_a_movie-mo.html> [accessed 12/3/2010]; Scott Foundas, 'Avatar: On Top of a Distant World', *LA Weekly*, Thursday December 17th, 2009. <<http://www.laweekly.com/2009-12-17/film-tv/avatar-on-top-of-a-distant-world>> [accessed 12/3/2010].

⁴⁵ Kenneth Turan, 'Avatar', *The Los Angeles Times*, Friday December 17th, 2009. <<http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-avatar17-2009dec17,0,7145753.story>> [accessed 12/3/2010].

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Foundas, 'Avatar: On Top of a Distant World'; Levy, "'Avatar" is a Movie-Movie That Might Just Change all Movies'.

with narratives that are too childish, too derivative, or too pedestrian. A regressive, immersive movie experience is a great leveller in audience response, going a long way towards effacing social and cultural boundaries. Technology makes this possible. As Warner Bros. executive Kevin Tsujihara explains, ‘you have to stay in front of the technology [...] If you don’t, consumers will find a way to get what they want’.⁴⁸ This preoccupation with using technology to push back the boundaries of the movie-going experience is as old as commercial cinema itself, but relatively recent advances in CGI have allowed blockbusters to tap into the aesthetic sensibilities of mass audiences in a manner never before achieved.



Figure 11: Audiences in China watching James Cameron’s 3-D blockbuster *Avatar* (2009).

The embrace of CGI has allowed traditional, firmly-drawn distinctions between live-action and animated filmmaking to fall away. Animation is no longer an anomaly

⁴⁸ Marc Graser, ‘Hollywood Tickled By Technology: Digital Lockers and Home 3D Pose Growth, Hurdles’, *Variety*, Friday January 10th, 2010.
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118013861.html?categoryid=3866&cs=1>> [accessed 12/3/2010].

within mainstream entertainment. As the boundaries between ‘traditional’ live-action and ‘traditional’ animation have broken down, its well-established, slightly pejorative association as ‘children’s entertainment’ has also been largely dispelled. As a result, competition between rival companies has intensified. As noted above, Disney began the decade in a period of slight disarray, outpaced by rival DreamWorks and distribution partner Pixar. In the second half of the decade, Disney worked to extend its media empire and re-assert its dominance via a series of mergers and partnerships. In January 2006, Disney announced that it had acquired Pixar Animation Studios for approximately \$7.4 billion.⁴⁹ Pixar executives John Lasseter and Ed Catmull were charged with reviving Disney’s fortunes, and executive Dick Cook enthused, ‘you can’t come close to calculating what [this acquisition] means in the long term for the company in terms of new characters, stories, and lands for films and parks and publishing and more’.⁵⁰ In February 2009, Disney and DreamWorks announced a film distribution deal, and in August of that year, Disney acquired Marvel Entertainment for \$4 billion, further extending its synergistic outlets.⁵¹ Following news of the acquisition, *The New York Times* appraised Disney CEO Bob Iger as ‘now firmly one of the media world’s most powerful dealmakers’.⁵²

⁴⁹ Jill Goldsmith, ‘Disney Confirms Pixar Acquisition: Jobs Joins Mouse Board’, *Variety*, Tuesday January 24th, 2006. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117936732.html?categoryid=18&cs=1>> [accessed 29/9/2009].

⁵⁰ Ben Fritz, ‘Disney Animation Gets Pixar-ization: Catmull Thinks a Radical Shift is needed’, *Variety*, February 24th, 2007. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117960093.html?categoryid=1019&cs=1>> [accessed 29/9/2009].

⁵¹ Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply, ‘DreamWorks and Disney Agree to a Distribution Deal’, *The New York Times*, February 9th, 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/business/media/10disney.html?scp=8&sq=dreamworks%20family%20films&st=cse>> [accessed 17/10/2009]; Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply, ‘Disney Swoops into Action, Buying Marvel for \$4 Billion’, *The New York Times*, August 31st, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/business/media/01disney.html?_r=1> [accessed 29/9/2009].

⁵² *Ibid.*

Although Disney has succeeded in re-establishing itself as the main player in feature animation, several other majors have developed their own animation divisions, opening-up the market. Again, this is partly due to the general shift from hand-drawn to computer-generated animation. Hand-drawn animation requires a great deal of resources, expertise, and time. It is also strongly identified in the popular consciousness with Disney. Computer-generated animation is more of a level playing-field, less associated with a specific house style. Chris Meledandri was a key figure in Fox's successful incorporation of animation in the early part of the decade, and his recently-established production company Illumination allows co-owner Universal rapid entry into the market. Again, advances in technology have made the form an attractive investment. CGI animations are easier to adapt for digital 3-D projection than live-action films, and 3-D is also a popular innovation.⁵³ DreamWorks announced that all of its films, from *Monsters vs. Aliens* (Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, 2009) onwards, will be made in 3-D.⁵⁴ As *Variety* suggests, CGI animations 'remain the industry's most reliable genre', despite such box office failures as DreamWorks' *Flushed Away* (David Bowers and Sam Fell, 2006) and Disney's *Meet the Robinsons* (Stephen J. Anderson, 2007).⁵⁵

One of the main reasons for this reliability is the power of the home video market. Family entertainment has been central to home video since its emergence in the early 1980s. Initially, Disney was reluctant to release its animated classics on video, fearful that glutting the market with such products would reduce revenues for future theatrical

⁵³ Ben Fritz and Pamela McClintock, 'Animation World Gets Competitive: Studios Challenging Pixar for Toon Throne', *Variety*, Friday March 21st, 2008.
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117982758.html?categoryid=1019&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

re-releases.⁵⁶ By the mid-1980s, however, under a new management regime, Disney embraced the home-video strategy of sell-through – pricing the video cheaply in order to sell the maximum number of copies – starting with the 1940 feature *Pinocchio*.⁵⁷ The entire run of 300,000 copies sold out, earning the company \$8 million, and from that point, home video has been an integral component of the family market.⁵⁸ However, it was not until the early-1990s that studios began manufacturing what became known as ‘kidvids’. In 1994, Disney released *The Return to Jafar* (Tad Stones), a direct-to-video sequel to its 1992 theatrical hit *Aladdin* (Ron Clements and John Musker). The venture was highly successful, selling over 7 million copies, placing it within the top-10 all-time best-selling videos.⁵⁹ Direct-to-video animations can be made relatively cheaply. The budget of *The Return to Jafar* was estimated as \$6 million. Producer-director Tad Stones admitted that ‘we didn’t have Disney’s best animators working on *Jafar*’, but pointed out that ‘you don’t compare a TV movie-of-the-week to *Schindler’s List*’.⁶⁰

Direct-to-video has since become common industry practice. *Variety* noted in 2000 that ‘even a modest-selling video premiere can generate \$25 million-\$50 million in revenue for a studio’.⁶¹ Despite the development of direct-to-video in other genres, families remain the dominant market. By 2000, ‘kidvids’ had generated over \$1 billion

⁵⁶ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*, pp. 163-164.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Kenneth M. Chanko, ‘Who Says a Movie Sequel Can’t be Made for Home Video?’, *The New York Times*, Sunday June 19th, 1994. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/19/movies/film-who-says-a-movie-sequel-can-t-be-made-for-home-video.html?scp=3&sq=return%20to%20jafar&st=cse>> [accessed 17/10/2009].

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Scott Hettrick, ‘Video Bows Mint Coin: Pic Franchises Mine Straight-to-Video Gold’, *Variety*, Friday June 23rd, 2000. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117782996.html?categoryid=20&cs=1>> [accessed 1/11/2009].

in international revenue for Disney, despite a lingering reputation for inferiority.⁶² This dominance actually accelerated as DVD replaced VHS as the leading home video technology.⁶³ DVD allows for higher returns because of lower production costs than videocassettes, and by 2004 the annual revenue from 'kidvids' had increased to \$3 billion.⁶⁴ One of their major strengths is relative immunity to theatrical market forces, such as the industry recession of 2008/2009. Marc Rashba, Vice President of marketing for Sony Home Entertainment, suggests that 'family audiences, even in this sort of down market [...] continue to support family titles overall on DVD'.⁶⁵ Strategically, they are a safe bet, because they do not require large investments of capital, and because many 'kidvids' are sequels to theatrically-released films, much of the marketing and development work has already been done. Furthermore, their appeal to parents arguably stems more from their practical function (as an 'electronic babysitter') than content.

Hitherto, 'kidvids' have largely been an American phenomenon, but international producers are increasingly attempting to exploit the potential of the format. In October 2003, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the U.K. Film Council and the Children's Film and Television Foundation (CFTF) announced a collaboration to produce a series of British family films, promising £900,000 over a three-year period to develop

⁶² Don Grover, 'Made-For Kidvids Become Global Goldmines for Disney's Cooffers', *Variety*, Sunday September 1st, 2002. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117872068.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 16/10/2009].

⁶³ Scott Hettrick, 'A DVD Family Affair: Demo is the Format's Main Attraction', *Variety*, Wednesday September 11th, 2002. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117872675.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

⁶⁴ Marc Graser, 'H'Wood's Direct Hits: DVD Preems Boffo, But Biz Frets over Sequel-Mania', *Variety*, Sunday September 1st, 2004. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117910286.html?categoryid=20&cs=1>> [accessed 30/9/2009].

⁶⁵ Thomas McLean, 'Family Fare Does Well in Down Market: In Tough Economy, Original DVD Titles Chug Along', *Variety*, Wednesday January 7th, 2009. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117998133.html?categoryid=3510&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

both live-action and animated productions.⁶⁶ Jenny Borgars, head of the Film Council development fund, explained: ‘big-budget successes such as ‘Chicken Run’ and ‘Harry Potter’ have shown that there is an audience for distinctively British family-friendly films’.⁶⁷ The fund is now closed, although the CFTF website reports that five projects are in development as of mid-2010.⁶⁸ In 2006, the Australian government-funded Film Finance Corporation announced its intention to develop more home-grown ‘broad-appeal movies and children’s pics’.⁶⁹ Effectively a public body because of its state sponsorship, Chief Executive Brian Rosen told *Variety* that the Corporation was responding to a public call for greater family films.⁷⁰ Such films are also being strongly encouraged in Scandinavian countries, which offer state subsidies to home-grown productions.⁷¹ Denmark produced nine such movies in 2006.⁷² Charlotte Giese, head of the Danish Film Institute’s Children and Youth department, admitted that ‘it means a lot to us that Danish children are watching Danish films’.⁷³ Certainly, a backlash over the near-hegemony of Hollywood productions in the global arena is almost inevitable. As Hollywood’s productions have become more global and less culturally-specific, a growing number of smaller industries have directed their family movies towards local markets, rather than the generic culture of international mass entertainment.

⁶⁶ Adam Dawtrey, ‘U.K. Trio Funds Family Pix: BBC, Film Council, Children’s Foundation Pool Cash’, *Variety*, Sunday October 12th, 2003.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117893816.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>> [accessed 24/8/2009].

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Children’s Film and Television Foundation*. <<http://www.cftf.org.uk/>> [accessed 23/6/2010].

⁶⁹ Michaela Boland, ‘FCC Broadening its Scope by Calling the Shots: Org Wants to Fund More Broad-Appeal Movies, Children’s Pics’, *Variety*, Sunday May 7th, 2006.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117942616.html?categoryid=2226&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nick Vivarelli, ‘Scandi Markets Drive Kidpic Biz: Laws Set Aside Coin for Children’s Films’, *Variety*, Friday February 2nd, 2007.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117958607.html?categoryid=1444&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Cultural tradition and globalised family entertainment

Ironically, one of the few markets capable of significant independent profitability is North America. Arguably the most interesting – though by no means the most lucrative – family film cycles of the decade was the return of the slapstick domestic comedy.

Twentieth Century-Fox's remake of the 1950 comedy *Cheaper by the Dozen* (Shawn Levy, 2003) was a surprise success, and re-launched the genre, which – in its most recent incarnation – comprised such films as *Daddy Day Care* (Steve Carr, 2003), *Johnson Family Vacation* (Christopher Erskin, 2004), *Cheaper by the Dozen 2* (Adam Shankman, 2005), *Yours, Mine and Ours* (Raja Gosnell, 2005), *Are We There Yet?* (Brian Levant, 2005), *RV: Runaway Vacation* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 2006), *Are We Done Yet?* (Steve Carr, 2007) and *Daddy Day Camp* (Fred Savage, 2007). These films, unsurprisingly, achieve the majority of their success in the U.S. market, but in general, even the domestic critical consensus has been explicitly hostile.⁷⁴ *Variety*'s reviewer compared *Johnson Family Vacation* unfavourably to *National Lampoon*.⁷⁵ *Are We There Yet?* was described as 'a dismal kiddy slapstick saga'.⁷⁶ *RV* was criticised in *The New York Times* for its broadness, the reviewer noting ruefully that 'nowadays no family movies is complete without a values-oriented agenda'.⁷⁷ Like previous American family comedies, such films are admittedly didactic, but the recurrence of this didacticism pertains less to an

⁷⁴ *Cheaper by the Dozen* was a partial exception, drawing respectable international audiences, perhaps due to a Christmas opening and advance publicity comparing the film to *Home Alone* and *Parenthood* – two commercially-successful films now critically regarded as pinnacles of the genre. See Bill Higgins, "Cheaper' Flies Against 'Pan'", *Variety*, Monday December 15th, 2003.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117897198.html?categoryid=1237&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

⁷⁵ Brian Lowry, 'Johnson Family Vacation', *Variety*, Wednesday April 7th, 2004.

<<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117923532.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>> [accessed 27/10/2009].

⁷⁶ Scott Foundas, 'Are We There Yet?', *Variety*, Monday January 17th, 2005.

<<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117925904.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>> [accessed 27/10/2009].

⁷⁷ Jeannette Catsoulis, 'Robin Williams Hits the Road, Family in Tow, with 'RV'', *The New York Times*, Friday April 28th, 2006.

<<http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/04/28/movies/28rv.html>> [Accessed 28/10/2009].

inherited motif than the films' defiant insistence upon promoting conservative, avowedly 'American' values and traditions as a counterpoint to the international inflection of the most profitable Hollywood family entertainment.

Correspondingly, each of these films possess a quintessentially 'American' protagonist, generally male, and often the head of a large family. *Cheaper by the Dozen*, *Daddy Day Care* and *RV* star Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy and Robin Williams, respectively – three of the biggest Hollywood stars of the 1980s and 1990s, each now approaching late middle-age and settling down into less anarchic, more paternalistic personae. Steve Martin, particularly, has repeatedly returned to the same archetype, having largely divorced himself from the subversive stand-up which launched his career. Having been hand-picked to play the family patriarch and college baseball coach in *Parenthood* because of his 'everyman' qualities, and starring in the 1991 remake of *Father of the Bride*, Martin's role in *Cheaper by the Dozen* as a family patriarch and college football coach appears calculated. Robin Williams's return to family entertainment in *RV* is similarly noteworthy. Unlike Martin's role in *Cheaper by the Dozen*, *RV* offers Williams the opportunity to play against expectation, before finally reaffirming ideological and formal conventionality.

The opening sequence of *RV* sees Williams playing to type. We see a young girl, Cassie (Erika-Shaye Gair), sitting on her bed laughing and enjoying a puppet show performed by a familiar voice, just out of sight of the camera. The performer, of course, turns out to be Williams – or rather his character, Bob Munroe – ever the doting, seemingly asexual patriarch, comfortingly familiar to viewers because of his famous

performances in family films over the years. After Bob's wife, Jamie (Cheryl Hines) comes in to complain about him keeping Cassie awake, an exchange ensues:

Cassie: I'm never gonna get married.

Bob: Why not?

Cassie: Cause I always wanna stay with you.

Bob: Well, you know, one day you're gonna grow up, meet a wonderful guy and you're gonna get married. But you and I will always be best friends.

Immediately thereafter, the narrative jumps a decade into the future. We see Bob, driving his now-dysfunctional, argumentative family around town. Cassie is now a rebellious teenager (as played by JoJo Levesque) and Bob and Jamie now also have a teenage son, Carl (Josh Hutcherson). Bob and Cassie are no longer 'best friends'; far from it:

Jamie: You know, you used to know all her friends. You were funny and charming.

Bob: Well, she doesn't want me to be 'charming'. She's 15 – she finds it creepy.

Clearly, the opening scene's image of domestic harmony is ironically situated, lulling the audience into the mistaken belief that proceedings will be as warmly comforting and sentimental as Williams's 1990s family movies.

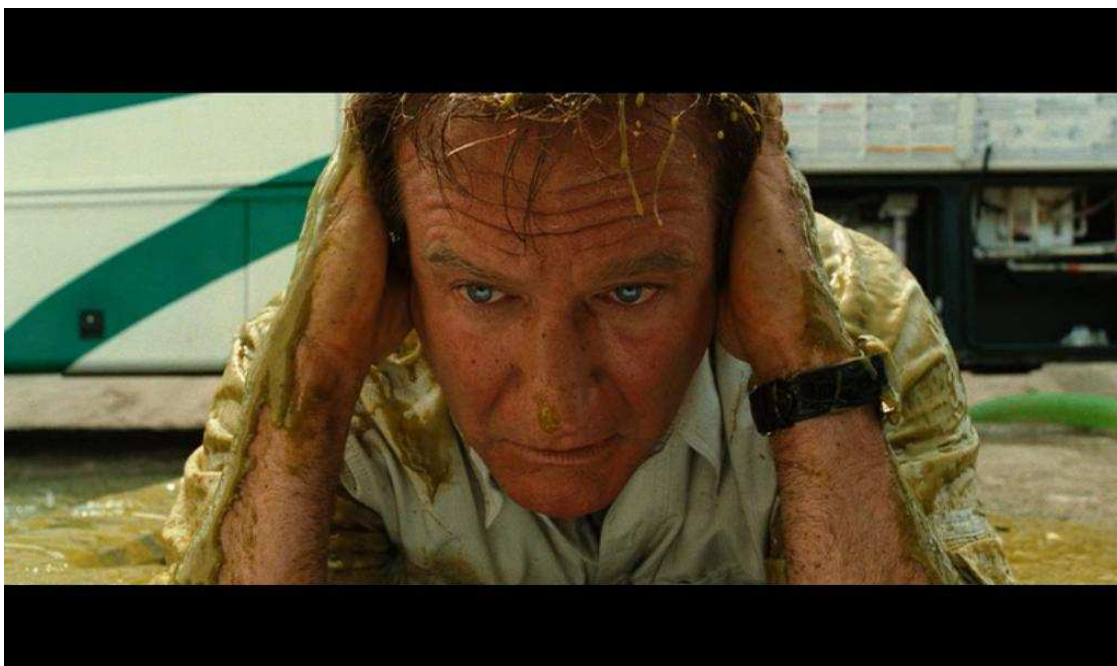


Figure 12: Robin Williams receives a dose of unpleasant reality in *RV* (2007).

Over a decade on from *Hook*, *Mrs Doubtfire* and *Flubber*, *RV* positions itself as revealing what happens *after* the ‘happy ever after’, as experience replaces innocence and domestic sentiment gives way to contemporary realism. This is not to say that sentimentality does not reassert its dominance as the narrative unfolds, and like *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *Are We There Yet?*, the film offers a jarring juxtaposition of sentiment and gross-out humour. One sequence loaded with symbolism sees the hapless Bob/Williams sprayed with raw sewage as he tries to drain a septic tank, as the cosy idealism of the 1990s family comedies gets assaulted with a hefty dose of unpleasant reality. And yet, the film ultimately presents an ending as saccharine as any presented in Williams’s earlier films. Would it be overly cynical to suggest that the filmmakers position an illusion of down-and-dirty realism to deflect attention from the ideological conventionality? Consider the plot. Bob’s job as a soda company executive is under threat from a younger, hungrier employee backed by his odious boss. Bob decides that he will be on hand for an all-or-nothing business meeting out in the sticks to convince a small, independent soda company to merge with his larger organisation, where he will face-off against his professional rival in a battle for his boss’s affections. Bob, under pressure to reunite his increasingly-estranged family, decides that he will bring them along under the pretext of a road-trip holiday, keeping them in the dark about the nearby business meeting, intending to keep the two worlds separate. Ultimately, after a series of slapstick set pieces, the family manages to reconnect. Bob’s conscience finally gets the better of him and he quits the environmentally-questionable soda company. He is serendipitously offered an executive position in the more environmentally-friendly firm,

which is persuaded to remain independent – an obvious symbol of the widening dichotomy between domestic- and international-flavoured family entertainment.

Instrumental to his rehabilitation is a family of country hicks, the Gornickes, initially reviled by Bob and his family but finally accepted as decent, honest folk. The film ultimately serves as a parable, in which the materialistic suburban family see the error of their ways and reconnect with the values of honesty and spiritual wealth – the crucial ingredients for happiness and family unity. Although *Variety* applauded the introduction of the Gornickes as ‘steer[ing] “RV” into more mature, emotionally grounded territory’, their role as harbingers of the ‘true spirit’ of American social tradition and decency revives a long-standing U.S. preoccupation with the antagonistic relationship between the suburb and the small-town.⁷⁸ As I suggested in earlier chapters, this dichotomy was one of the defining characteristics of Hollywood family films of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In *RV*, despite most of the screen-time being devoted to the Munroes, it is the Gornickes that are the emotional heart of the movie. They show Bob and his family – and by extension the audience – how life ought to be lived. In a world of increasing globalisation, their life is defiantly rustic and basic. They do without their televisions and laptops and foreign holidays, and their lives are immeasurably rich as a result. Just as the Gornickes offer a radical representational alternative to current social domestic norms, *RV* offers the domestic audience an alternative to global family entertainment. Critics and audiences found neither offering especially palatable.

The Hollywood slapstick family comedy often pointedly rejects international media culture, invoking local and domestic cultural mores as a bulwark against

⁷⁸ Justin Chang, ‘RV’, *Variety*, Thursday April 27th, 2006.
<<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117930347.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>> [accessed 28/10/2009].

encroaching globalisation. This calculated parochialism manifests itself in a neatly symbolic scene in *Are We There Yet?* Protagonist Nick Persons (Ice Cube) runs a sports memorabilia store, immaculate and full of classic collectables from the sports of baseball, basketball and American football. His shop is a virtual tribute to twentieth-century U.S. recreational history. As if to deliberately disrupt Nick's reveries, a couple of kids walk in asking for Yu-Gi-Oh! (Japanese manga). Nick furiously retorts:

Look, you come in here every day asking the same questions. We ain't got no Pokémon, no Digimon, no Buffy, no SpongeBob, no Beanie Babies.

When Nick angrily chases the children from his shop, his co-worker, Marty (Jay Mohr), sarcastically notes, 'you know, you really got a way with kids'. He makes a good point. Nick's disdain for contemporary children's media culture apparently reflects that of the filmmakers, who have crafted an old-fashioned family movie driven by adult protagonists, sentimentality, a romantic subplot and a dose of slapstick comedy to keep the children entertained. There are two points to be made regarding this genre. The first is that family movies have moved on since the early-1990s international success of *Home Alone* and *Mrs Doubtfire*: international audiences accustomed to fantasies and blockbuster spectacles no longer appear satisfied with comedic representations of North American family life. The genre does not offer globally-marketable brands attractive to different cultures, and some such films are so flag-waving in their U.S. cultural inflection that they automatically discount a sizable international audience. The second point is that the genre is actively *intended* for the domestic market, and can still yield a significant profit if outlay is kept to a minimum. Such material has traditionally found a popular niche in the south, and in more rural areas where conservative politics exercise a firmer grasp. U.S. fundamentalist religious organisations like the Christian and Film Television

Commission and *Movieguide* also strongly petition for ‘wholesome’ and ‘traditional’ family fare. The problem faced by producers is largely negative critical reaction, which in turn triggers negative word-of-mouth. The box office failures of *Are We Done Yet?* and *RV* triggered the end of the domestic family comedy in this decade, but the rhetorical attraction of its core values endures.

Such socio-culturally-specific entertainment is becoming increasingly isolated in a media marketplace where family entertainment takes many different forms. The diversity of product attests to the strength and depth of the market, but also the range of platforms now available. The explosion in children’s television is a significant factor. Nickelodeon, a twenty-four-hour channel showing parent-approved programming, changed children’s entertainment.⁷⁹ Before Nickelodeon, the main provider of children’s entertainment was the Sesame Workshop, but Nickelodeon was distinguished by

the same bravura shot of energy that transformed MTV into a cultural force. Not coincidentally, liftoff for both was achieved after they were sold to Viacom, still their parent company, for \$700 million in 1985.⁸⁰

In 1996, Nickelodeon ranked number 1 in the U.S. daytime ratings for the first time, its strength increasing ‘as the networks have lost their grasp on the child audience’.⁸¹ In recent years, Disney has established itself as a serious competitor.⁸² The Disney Channel was launched in 1997, and in 1998 Showtime and HBO’s Family Channel announced

⁷⁹ Dade Hayes, *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom, or How Television Became My Baby’s Best Friend*, New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Free Press, 2008, p. 32.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33,

⁸¹ Heather Hendershot, ‘Introduction: Nickelodeon and the Business of Fun’, *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics and Economics of America’s only TV Channel for Kids*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2004 (pp. 1-12), p. 1.

⁸² Hayes, *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom, or How Television Became My Baby’s Best Friend*, p. 36.

greater investment in original programming.⁸³ By the turn of the decade, Disney was operating four platforms, each aimed at a different niche, allowing the company to reach ‘every conceivable demo’: ABC Family (est. 2001), the Disney Channel (est. 1997), Toon Disney (est. 1998; now Disney XD) and ABC Kids (est. 1997).⁸⁴

This increasing competition has led to greater product diversity but also intensified the need for precision in demographic targeting. Television networks have begun to focus more aggressively upon younger demographics, which led to the increasing prominence of the pre-school and ‘tween’ audiences from early-to-mid decade. As Dade Hayes points out:

In the kids-and-family racket, business has boomed of late, and yet the old label “fun for the whole family” is about as relevant as a G rating. Nielsen’s long-established, overlapping age ranges – 2 to 11 years old, 6 to 11 and 9 to 14 grow more archaic by the hour.⁸⁵

Preschool entertainment has seen the most dramatic boom in the children’s media marketplace. By 2007, ‘one in three DVDs bought in the United States (51 million units) was intended for the pacifier crowd’, whilst ‘dozens of companies [...] have collectively altered child-rearing by marketing to viewers from an age they chillingly call ‘zero’’.⁸⁶ The emergence of the ‘tween’ is almost as striking. Although definitions of this demographic vary, it is usually regarded as the audience ‘in-between’ childhood and adolescence. Nickelodeon executive Cyma Zarghami said in 2002, ‘I feel like this demo

⁸³ Richard Katz, ‘Focus on the Family: Showtime Ups Production of Kidvid Originals’, *Variety*, Wednesday June 8th, 1998. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117477832.html?categoryid=14&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

⁸⁴ Lily Oei, ‘ABC, Disney Net in Kiddie Synergy: Quartet to Announce P’gramming Skeds’, *Variety*, Wednesday March 17th, 2004. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117901865.html?categoryid=1238&cs=1>> [accessed 1/11/2009].

⁸⁵ Dade Hayes, ‘Kids Play in Fractured Media Playground: ‘Fun for All Ages’ Label Doesn’t Apply Anymore’, *Variety*, Thursday October 2nd, 2008. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117993360.html?categoryid=3262&cs=1>> [accessed 28/8/2009].

⁸⁶ Hayes, *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom, or How Television Became My Baby’s Best Friend*, pp. 5-6.

has been around for a long time, but attention on it hasn't been as focused as it is now'.⁸⁷

Although the 'tween' demographic arose from network and cable television, it made a successful transference to theatres with *Hairspray* (Adam Shankman, 2007), *Hannah Montana: the Movie* (Peter Chelsom, 2009), and the *High School Musical* franchise.

The influence of children's television on theatrical family entertainment is plainly apparent. It should be noted, however, that the demographic fragmentation characterising children's television has not extended to Hollywood cinema, which continues to favour productions aimed at the mass audience to maximise potential return. Where the influence of children's television *has* been apparent is in the greater stylistic range now employed in contemporary family films. Several formally-unconventional children's TV shows have been adapted into successful features, such as *The Rugrats Movie* (Igor Kovalyov and Norton Virgien, 1998), *The Wild Thornberrys Movie* (Cathy Maskasian and Jeff McGrath, 2002), *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (Rob Hillenberg, 2004) and *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (Tim Hill, 2007). Other playfully eccentric family movies include *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Tim Burton, 2005), *Night at the Museum* (Shawn Levy, 2006), *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) and *The Fantastic Mr Fox* (Wes Anderson, 2009), while many DreamWorks and Pixar animations rely on offbeat humour for their appeal. The 'unusual' family blockbuster perhaps began with the wilfully weird films of directors such as Tim Burton, whose *Batman* legitimised the genre, but a more obvious reference point would be Nickelodeon's crossover-appeal programs, such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-). A show centring on the under-water adventures of an intelligent sea sponge, Heather Hendershot notes that *SpongeBob* is 'equally loved by

⁸⁷ David Bloom, 'Targeting Those Tricky Teenagers: 20-Million Strong "Tweens" an In-Demand Demo', *Variety*, Sunday April 28th, 2002.
<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117866102.html?categoryid=14&cs=1>> [accessed 19/10/2009].

both adults and kids', and praises its charm and ingenuity.⁸⁸ Producers now realise that family entertainment need not be uniform and formally-conventional to achieve big success, but also that playful eccentricity can draw audiences resistant to family entertainment pitched at the lowest common denominator.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory clearly demonstrates this trend. The film bears interesting comparison with the 1971 original, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Mel Stuart). Burton's version, however, adds several new plot elements, as well as reconfiguring the central figure of Wonka (here played by Johnny Depp). Although Gene Wilder's portrayal in the original is certainly eccentric, Depp is uncomfortably, almost distastefully weird. Made-up to look like Michael Jackson, Depp makes Wonka camp and childlike, almost sinister. There is a palpable sense of ironic detachment from the weird-and-wonderful action: in contrast to the deliberately immersive experience provided by blockbuster franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* invites the viewer to take a step backwards, exercise their analytical skills and look beyond the surface gloss, just as the visitors to the chocolate factory are forced to interrogate the authenticity of the sights with which they are presented. When Wonka introduces the bizarre, almost alien Oompa-Loompas and reveals that they originate in 'Loompaland', one of the visitors immediately denies the existence of such a place. Later, when the Oompa-Loompas finish their first song and Wonka praises their performance, the guests remain incredulous:

Wonka: Bravo! Well done! Aren't they delightful? Aren't they charming?

Mr Salt [James Fox]: I say, that all seemed rather rehearsed.

Mike: [Jordan Fry]: Like they know it was gonna happen.

Wonka: Oh, poppycock.

⁸⁸ Hendershot, 'Introduction: Nickelodeon and the Business of Fun', pp. 2-3.

These days, of course, consumers are assuredly media-savvy, and the fact that the visitors feel compelled to air their cynicism in this manner reflects common awareness of the technological possibilities of, say, computer graphics, to create such fantastic environments. In a later scene, viewers are shown a flashback of Wonka's unhappy childhood, in which he was prevented by his authoritarian father (Christopher Lee) from eating sweets. Afterwards, the camera cuts to Wonka's distracted face, whereupon he explains, 'I'm sorry, I was having a flashback', a tongue-in-cheek reference to the clichéd Hollywood 'flashback scene'. In the 1970s film, Wonka was a ruthless moraliser, who for all his bizarre eccentricity, was clearly a grown-up figure of authority. As played by Depp, Wonka is more of a child than Charlie (Freddie Highmore). He is impulsive and amoral; perhaps even dangerous. One of the most influential auteurs currently working in Hollywood, Burton can rarely allow the sweeter, more narratively-conventional sequences to pass without ambiguity, even at the film's conclusion, where the childlike Wonka is adopted by the Bucket family. In this sense, Burton plays with double-voiced discourse, providing the conventional happy ending, whilst offering a coded implication that all is not as it seems. In this way, the film plays to mass family audiences and to fans of fantasy and genre filmmaking alike, as well as those who regard Johnny Depp and Tim Burton as cult heroes of left-field Hollywood.

Indeed, the success of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and Burton's/Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), indicate that there is a sizable market for mainstream family entertainment which appears to eschew the obviousness and vulgarity of the lowest common denominator by offering pleasing spectacle and an emotional hit, while simultaneously appealing to more sophisticated, cine/media-literate audiences raised on a

richer, more varied entertainment diet than previous generations. While Burton's films have always walked the line between artistic innovation and populism, and his more recent, family-orientated films reveal a preoccupation with mainstream blockbuster success, the attraction of stylistic and thematic oddness is surely not confined to the intelligentsia or the artistically-aware, but is likely to appeal to anyone who does not like to think of themselves as an unsophisticated consumer of lowest common denominator entertainment. That said, the relative commercial obscurity of *Coraline* and *The Fantastic Mr Fox* – two relatively-recent Hollywood family films productions that are *genuinely* unusual – illustrates that eccentricity is only really a marketable commodity when it is little more than a veneer, in films which remain overwhelmingly conventional.

Cross-media synergy

The nature of some of Hollywood's recent synergistic deal-making suggests that style and spectacle will continue to be the central focus of Hollywood's family films for the foreseeable future. Aside from books and television, Hollywood has recently targeted three areas for cross-media synergy in the family entertainment market: comic books, toys and video games. The comic book adaptation has been one of the most profitable genres of the decade, emerging as a sub-genre of the wider superhero movie boom which began with *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000). Since then, the *Spider-Man* (2002-) and *Batman* (2005-) series, *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) and *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) have, alongside fantasies, dominated the global box office. Although some superhero movies are original properties, most derive from Marvel's and DC Comics' archives. Because of the large, hitherto-unexploited range of

licensable characters they own, these companies were desirable targets for acquisition.

Disney's announcement in August 2009 that it had bought Marvel for \$4 billion created such a furore in the media and general public that it overshadowed Warner Bros.'

purchase of DC Comics the following month.⁸⁹ Announcing that the publisher will now be known as DC Entertainment, Warner Bros. CEO Alan Horn explained:

It's no secret that DC has a myriad of rich and untapped possibilities from its deep library of iconic and lesser-known characters. The formation of DC Entertainment will help us bring more DC properties across additional platforms to fans around the world.⁹⁰

Although comic book fans responded to the news of Marvel's sale to Disney with general disgust, these mergers are continuations of general industry trends, rather than dramatic breaks with tradition.⁹¹ Paramount, Sony and Fox already have long-term distribution deals based on superhero characters, with Sony holding the rights to *Spider-Man* and Fox to *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*. Irrespective of the longevity of the superhero cycle, the durability of these properties across different media – books, comics, action figures, computer games, theme park rides – makes them reliable and enduring sources of capital. Instant box office success is scarcely the sole motivation for these acquisitions.

The second major synergistic development in recent years is between motion picture franchises and toys. The biggest U.S. toy companies, Hasbro and Mattel, have developed high-profile film adaptations of some of their biggest toy properties. For many years, toy manufacturers have held a tight grip on children's television. Early children's television shows of the 1950s and 1960s exploited the lack of regulation by presenting obvious padding between the advertisements and blatantly advertising commercial

⁸⁹ Mark Graser, 'Warner Bros. Creates DC Entertainment: Studio Taps Premiere Exec Diane Nelson as Chief', *Variety*, Wednesday September 9th, 2009. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118008299.html?categoryid=1236&cs=1>> [accessed 29/9/2009].

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ 'Readers' Comments', Barnes and Ciepley, 'Disney Swoops into Action, Buying Marvel for \$4 Billion'.

products within the fabric of the shows. In 1969, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) increased regulation in U.S. children's television after finding that ABC's *Hot Wheels* was nothing more than a 'program length commercial'.⁹² Under Reagan's administration in the 1980s, though, the FCC deregulated children's television, and toy-driven shows like *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* flourished.⁹³ Today, marketing consultant Gary Pope argues that 'children's television shows are just giant toy ads'.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, early attempts by toy and game manufacturers to exploit the synergistic potential of motion pictures, such as *Clue* (Jonathan Lynn, 1985) and *Masters of the Universe* (Gary Goddard, 1987) proved unsuccessful, and the toy and filmmaking industries did not successfully collaborate on a broad scale until recently.⁹⁵ A word has been invented to describe motion pictures that provide easily-transferable properties for the toy market – 'toyetic'. The most famous and successful 'toyetic' franchise, to date, is *Transformers*, which started life as a successful toy range produced by Hasbro. The company licensed the toys to a Japanese animation company, which produced a successful, syndicated TV show based on the property.⁹⁶ Hasbro then struck a distribution deal with DreamWorks for a motion picture based on the toy line.⁹⁷ Steven Spielberg served as co-executive producer with Hasbro CEO Brian Goldner, ensuring a high-profile incubation period, and blockbuster specialist Michael Bay was signed to

⁹² Hendershot, 'Introduction: Nickelodeon and the Business of Fun', p. 9.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hayes, *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom, or How Television Became My Baby's Best Friend*, p. 127.

⁹⁵ Marc Graser, 'Hollywood's Toy Plot: He-Man, Voltron, Bratz Slated for Adaptation', *Variety*, Friday June 8th, 2007. <<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117966576.html?categoryid=2520&cs=1>> [accessed 30/9/2009].

⁹⁶ Hayes, *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom, or How Television Became My Baby's Best Friend*, p. 123.

⁹⁷ Graser, 'Hollywood's Toy Plot: He-Man, Voltron, Bratz Slated for Adaptation'.

direct.⁹⁸ The film was finally released in 2007 to box office success and predictably mixed critical reaction, and Goldner, evidently satisfied, congratulated Bay for making an ‘extremely toyetic picture’.⁹⁹

Although such synergies may appear to be orientated predominantly towards children, in actuality they are carefully designed to cut across demographics. I have already discussed how high-profile family blockbusters possess an almost universal appeal to the senses, but these synergies are also carefully demographically targeted, exploiting not only nostalgia for the original toy lines and television shows (Hasbro’s *Transformers* and Mattel’s *He-Man* franchises began in the 1980s) but also the large number of adults who still buy toys themselves. Many viewers of *Transformers* and the forthcoming *He-Man* adaptation were raised on these products and as *Variety* notes, ‘adult toybuyers don’t just drive toy sales, they drive enthusiasm that can be turned into films’.¹⁰⁰ There was an 8 per cent increase in action figure revenue in 2008 from the previous year, which was attributed partly to

a growing – and increasingly lucrative – trend: toy manufacturers and their showbiz partners are rolling out toys for people who, one might gently suggest, are too old for toys. Some of the product is breathtakingly expensive, or based on R-rated movies or painfully obscure characters – and they’re selling bigtime.¹⁰¹

Modern synergistic expansion is based on the philosophy that very few demographics are a closed market for any given product. Animated features, children’s TV shows and even toy lines are demonstrating that demographic groups once considered inaccessible are in fact eminently viable, given the correct promotion, marketing and stimulation.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Hayes, *Anytime Playdate: Inside the Preschool Entertainment Boom, or How Television Became My Baby’s Best Friend*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁰ Sam Thelman, ‘High-End Toys are Aimed at Adults: Sales of Action Figures are Up 8% This Year’, *Variety*, Friday February 22nd, 2008.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117981311.html?categoryid=1019&cs=1>> [accessed 30/9/2009].

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

This disintegration of demographic boundaries also applies to another traditionally child-identified format targeted for feature film synergies – videogames. As technologies have advanced, videogame producers have become able to render lifelike virtual environments, and this has led to an increase in narrative-driven games which play like movies. As Kristin Thompson has observed, ‘games are becoming more like films, and at least some films more like games. Technology strongly links the two media’.¹⁰² As the stylistic mechanisms behind movies and games further align, perhaps the formats will eventually enter direct competition. At present, however, the media are sufficiently differentiated, and their interests complementary. Considering the eventual fate of earlier ‘rivals’ to the major film studios, like television and home video, independent videogame companies may simply be absorbed into these powerful global media conglomerates as their market share increases.¹⁰³ Revenues from videogame movie tie-ins are an increasingly lucrative part of a franchise’s ancillary income. As Thompson notes:

In 1995 a game firm might have paid a few hundred thousand dollars for a minor title and \$2 or \$3 million for a major one. By early in the new century, the game rights for big franchises like “James Bond” and “Harry Potter” were reportedly going for more than \$10 million [...] By 2005, a hit title’s licence and royalties could generate around \$40 million for a studio.¹⁰⁴

Although Thompson rightly points out that even \$40 million would not be a major proportion of overall revenue for a top franchise like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, this sector clearly possesses considerable potential for growth.

¹⁰² Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, p. 227.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

One of the most interesting recent cross-media synergies occurred in 2007, when videogame producer Electronic Arts signed a multi-year partnership with Hasbro.¹⁰⁵ EA announced their intention to adapt almost all of Hasbro's properties, including Nerf, Scrabble, Monopoly, Yahtzee and Trivial Pursuit.¹⁰⁶ What is most significant about such deals are not the nature of the collaborations, or even the quality of the finished products, but the strength of the brands. When EA suggests that through these products it hopes to engage 'non-traditional gamers such as young children and women', its weapons are not the artistic merits of the adaptation, but the power of a trusted, decades-old brand.¹⁰⁷ In 2009, *LA Times* writer Ben Fritz argued that multimedia brands possess the same pulling-power of movie stars from the studio era:

In exchange for what's essentially a well-known brand name with a setting or theme and nothing more, studios are typically paying millions of dollars upfront and, should a movie get made, several percentage points of the movie's gross receipts. That's the kind of money that used to be offered only to A-listers.¹⁰⁸

'Brands are the new stars', according to Universal Pictures Chairman Marc Shmuger.¹⁰⁹ Occasionally, these brands possess such a paucity of back-story that 'the decisionmakers have a hard time wrapping their heads around it' – a problem with toy and board game adaptations.¹¹⁰ However, since it is the brand *name* that consumers are buying into with such films, stories can often be woven around them without alienating the core consumers. A good example is Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-), a massively successful franchise built upon nothing more substantial than a Disneyland

¹⁰⁵ Ben Fritz, 'EA Develops Hasbro Properties: Upcoming Games Will Include "G.I. Joe" Tie-In', *Variety*, Monday February 11th, 2008.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117980627.html?categoryid=1079&cs=1>> [accessed 30/9/2009].

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ben Fritz, 'Hollywood Sees Star Qualities in Classic Games and Toys', *The LA Times*, September 28th, 2009. <<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-ct-brands28-2009sep28,0,1264698.story>> [accessed 1/10/2009].

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Graser, 'Hollywood's Toy Plot: He-Man, Voltron, Bratz Slated for Adaptation'.

theme park ride. With virtually no back-story, the studio manufactured a narrative around little more than the brand property. Produced by action-adventure specialist Jerry Bruckheimer, the films fulfil most of the usual criteria for 'summer blockbuster' success. They are crowd-pleasers, featuring plenty of action set-pieces, CGI, some supernatural thrills 'n spills, rousing musical scores, romance and a charismatic, wilfully eccentric performance from Johnny Depp as the roguish Captain Jack Sparrow. These adaptations do their best to replicate the breathless exhilaration of a rollercoaster ride. The comparison between action movies and rollercoaster rides has been made many times before, but *Pirates of the Caribbean* takes it to another level by creating a financial interdependency between these two apparently-irreconcilable forms of entertainment. This growing practice of working a narrative around a brand constitutes a sharp reversal of prior industry practice, where viable brands would be extracted from narrative cinema.

As the multimedia corporations producing global blockbusters continue to embrace synergistic expansion and brand licensing, we come to assess the present condition of the family film. It will be fairly clear that the 'family film' in its traditional sense is long dead. Despite the best efforts of civic leaders, community organisations and religious pressure groups between the 1930s and 1960s to portray family entertainment as the province of white, middle-class nuclear families attending movies as a unit, the studios have always worked upon a broader, more inclusive conceptualisation. For the film industry, the family audience denotes the broadest possible demographic cross-section; the largely fictional 'great audience' valorised by Gilbert Seldes. For the Hollywood studios, the huge global success enjoyed by its contemporary blockbuster franchises represents the culmination of a strategy which began in the early-1930s. I

have suggested that many of the major battles in the war to exploit the potential of the 'family audience' to its fullest – many of which took place in the first decade of the new millennium – have been won. The Hollywood studios have integrated themselves firmly within a global entertainment industry framework, and they have learned, with the help of technology and media synergies, how to tailor their products to satisfy international mass audiences, finally exploiting fully the global distribution avenues which have been available since the early part of the twentieth century.

Whilst we must acknowledge the dominance and significance of twenty-first century family entertainment, we must also concede that the products positioned within this over-arching category are disparate. For some observers, the formal diversity which has always existed within Hollywood family entertainment may render it difficult to characterise. For others, the attempt to unify these films under a central banner might be seen as misguided or fallacious. Throughout this thesis, though, I have maintained that the family film is not a genre, and we should not look for formal connections between films when frequently none exist. Rather, such films are connected by the idea of the family audience, a vast, cross-demographic, cross-cultural audience which can be united and exploited through a specialised form of mass entertainment. It is likely that the future will see a continuation and perhaps deepening of the present dichotomy between the big international blockbusters – of which family films constitute a large proportion – and smaller-scale films more affiliated with local and national cultural traditions, eschewing the universalised tone of the internationally-pitched productions. Low-budget films and 'indies' remain potentially good business. We have seen indications that the indie movement, which hitherto has seen its biggest successes in comedies, horrors and

left-field thrillers, will develop their own forms of family-orientated product. Numerous national film industries have, over the past decade, attempted to develop their own forms of family entertainment. Such small scale operations cannot, at present, realistically compete with the resources of Hollywood, and will succeed only by differentiating their product to appeal to smaller niches within the 'family' market (the most notable example of which has been the European *Asterix and Obelix* [1999-] franchise, which has proven highly popular in Western Europe), or with funding and distribution from Hollywood. It remains to be seen whether the indie strategy will prove successful with audiences accustomed to the most mainstream fare. Hollywood has shown that there is a viable 'middle way', with the largely-domestic success of films like *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *Johnson Family Vacation*. Although respectable, however, the returns of such films are distinctly small-fry compared with the global family blockbuster.

Some audience sections, of course, remain immune to the perceived pleasures of family entertainment. Other consumers of family-orientated product continue to simultaneously enjoy entertainment forms like the noir, the art house, the erotic, the perverse; genres and styles existing outside of this most mainstream facet of media culture. Moreover, the nature of family entertainment and the styles utilised in its construction are subject to flux, as cultural mores and technological advances impose their own changes. Throughout these changes, however, spectacle remains constant, as does the philosophy behind it. This philosophy, and the commercial products it shapes, is now the dominant motivating force in global cinema.

Conclusion

In Hollywood family entertainment, styles are constantly changing, but the mission – selling entertainment to the masses – remains the same. It is useful, at this juncture, to return to the points made in the Introduction regarding the importance of historical analysis. Only by examining their entire history is it possible to recognise the overall patterns to Hollywood family film strategy and production. Certain aesthetic styles and social values have changed over this historical period, of course, and the films reflect these changes, but when the surface gloss is peeled away, the ideological and narrative continuities between family films across this broad historical period are striking. As such, it is important to evaluate the relationship between change and continuity, and examine how this dialectic functions in contemporary family films, looking towards a future in which their dominance is likely to further extend.

Unquestionably, the most important historical variable in family films has been the shift from an adult-orientated to a youth-orientated model of popular culture. Family films from the 1930s to the 1960s were made for a predominantly adult-centred, U.S.-based middlebrow public, and this was reflected by the adult emphasis of the dual address. Since the late-1970s, family films – and U.S. popular culture in general – have been made to satisfy a youth-orientated market, dominated by undifferentiated address. This shift underscores the importance of the socio-cultural environment in shaping film content. It is tempting to conclude that 1930s Hollywood filmmakers made a major strategic error when they failed to develop broadly-appealing movies – such as prestige fantasies and animated features – into general production policy. To an extent, this is true, but we cannot apply contemporary standards so easily; family films in the modern

style would not have been possible during the studio era because of technological limitations and the absence of a cultural consensus in the way youth culture now dominates Western societies. Crossover hits, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, were very much exceptions to the rule. In general, metropolitan, small-town, middle-class and working-class audiences all wanted different things, and Hollywood lacked the technological resources to bring these audiences together through sensorial appeal. The 'family audience' in its broader extension remained inaccessible until North American society abandoned the self-consciousness of the middlebrow movement and embraced a less stratified taste consensus. The emergence of the youth audience as a powerful consumer group is certainly pivotal in this regard, although the suburbanisation of the United States (which brought greater uniformity in lifestyle) and the popularisation of television (a more democratic format which enabled greater cultural interaction) were similarly important in effacing these cultural pretensions, and finally elevating the entertainment requirements of the many above those of the few. The universality of television prepared U.S. audiences for the undifferentiated address of post-1970s family films in a way which would not have been possible in a period of cultural class-consciousness.

The most significant changes which have elevated family films above other entertainment formats, therefore, have been social and industrial, rather than textual. Changes in lifestyle, particularly in the U.S., have led to greater conformity of cultural taste, and developments in mass communication have enabled increased cultural interaction on a global scale. As a result, although cultural diversity still remains on many levels, a globally-active mass audience now exists, motivated by increasingly

uniform entertainment impulses. As technologies have improved, mainstream films are now able to engage global audiences on a fundamental, cognitive level. Bypassing more sophisticated thought processes, contemporary family films are capable of temporarily suspending many – though not all – of the differences in age, race, religion, culture and class separating potential consumers across the world. Family blockbusters are tailor-made for this role. Although movies have always provided some quantity of immersion, modern family blockbusters actively bombard the senses with CGI special effects, even projecting outwards into the theatre via 3-D. Some CGI-heavy fantasies, in fact, delight in the spectacle of huge, fearsome monsters leaping towards the camera, mouth open, as if to consume the screen and in so doing eradicate this physical barrier between film and audience.

It is well to keep in mind that spectacle has always been important in family movies, dating back to the feature animations and fantasies of the 1930s (the tornado that swept up Dorothy Gale's house in *The Wizard of Oz* was remarkably sophisticated in its day). In doing so, we can resist the temptation to regard the spectacular spectacle in contemporary family movies as epochal, and instead view it as logical technological and aesthetic progression, in which techniques that allow deeper forms of audience immersion have grown progressively more sophisticated. However, the increasing prominence of spectacle certainly does not *efface* narrative, nor the expectation for good stories well told, well paced, and excitingly plotted. Geoff King is correct when he argues that we must resist a superficial analysis stating that 'narrative is in some way absent or displaced by spectacle' – this is a common critical confusion which, when

interrogated, has little basis in reality.¹ With such films as *Avatar*, spectacle may be what people *remember* from the viewing experience, but it remains largely cosmetic. In fact, technological sophistication notwithstanding, there is an enduring desire for a good story, and this is one of the most important continuities not only between films past and present, but the broader cultural histories of literature and narrative.

Instead of concentrating solely on content, it is useful to comment upon the continued importance of family films to Hollywood and to Western culture. Almost from its very beginnings as mass medium, Hollywood's size and resources, and the strength of its international distribution, suggested its potential as a mass medium capable of uniting audiences from all walks of life through a form of appeal that – unlike other dominant arts such as literature and the theatre – was truly universal in scope. Hollywood's agenda of mass audiences united by mass-appeal movies has rarely been fully appreciated in academia, partly because until the 1970s it was often invisible. Critics have instead lauded classical-era Hollywood genres such as crime films, sex films and screwball comedies for their creative diversity, lamenting the absence of such sophisticated maturity in the 'New Hollywood'. In doing so, they fail to appreciate sufficiently the commercial side of Hollywood's operations. Hollywood exists to make money, not to win the hearts and minds of film critics. To survive and prosper, it needs to address as large an audience as possible. The only reason it produces left-field or niche movies is because no film is capable of appealing to everyone, and there will always be a demand for the unusual and the sophisticated. To suggest otherwise risks misconceiving the industry's true identity, for although strong artistic principles patently continue to flourish

¹ Geoff King, 'Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster', *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer, London: Routledge, 2003 (pp. 114-127), p. 119.

in Hollywood, they reside not with the accountants and executives who wager vast sums of money in the hope of reaching the largest possible audiences. The prospect of family films ultimately eradicating minority-appeal films is remote, but this has not prevented them from banishing 'niche' filmmaking to the periphery of mainstream consumption. With the emergence of the 'global village' and a tangible taste consensus, the market for such products has declined commensurately.

However, family films are equally defined by the socio-cultural values they represent. These U.S.-inflected values are both a considerable asset and an insurmountable obstacle in terms of attracting global audiences. For much of their history, their potency and appeal were at the very heart of Hollywood family films. Since the shift towards globally-orientated modes of appeal, these values – many of them explicitly deriving from the U.S. national consciousness – have proven to be awkwardly incongruous with the supposed universality of the format. Family films have always tried to give mainstream audiences what they want and expect. Their conservatism tends to reflect an ideological populism which adheres to the most important tenets of the United States' national identity – freedom, individualism, political and racial superiority, the importance of family and community, and the 'American Dream' of meritocratic self-advancement. Family films usually reflect the perceived requirements of their dominant consumers: social and economic recovery during the 1930s Depression; the nostalgic 'return to the soil' during the 1930s and 1940s; the rejection of youth culture during the 1960s implicit in the renewed production of traditional entertainment; the surge in escapist fantasy in the late-1970s period of national malaise; the preoccupation with baby boomer anxieties in the late-1980s and early-1990s; and the conservative rejection of

globalised popular culture in 2000s domestic comedies. For most of their history, family films have been made for a largely North American audience, and only relatively recently have their modes of appeal been reconfigured to accommodate international audiences. Although it is true that many foreign audiences willingly buy-in to a branded representation of 'America' when they consume Hollywood movies, and producers want to preserve this aggressively confident self-image, equally they wish to avoid both the mundane qualities of day-to-day life in their family blockbusters, and elements of the national character that may detract from the propaganda of 'pure entertainment'. There has also been a clear trend towards a more liberal inclusivity with regards to race and gender – though not, as yet, sexuality. Whether or not these concessions have gone far enough to fully satisfy international audiences – as well as critics of the format – is debatable.

Much of this thesis has addressed family films in terms of the consensus they seem to represent, and their ability to reflect majority tastes and values. Increasingly, though, as Hollywood reconfigures its family-orientated products for global tastes, there are points of opposition. Firstly, we must consider the North American marketplace. In Chapter 5, I talked at length about recent Hollywood family films that reject fantasy and universality in favour of traditional studies of U.S. domestic life, such as *Are We There Yet?* and *R.V.* These narratives are almost *anti*-blockbuster in spirit, both in terms of filmmaking style and the cultural values they articulate. Whereas family blockbusters disavow associations of strong, flag-waving Americanism, these domestic comedies reaffirm 'traditional' U.S. ideologies of the strong nuclear family. Many low-budget, low-key independent productions are similarly defined by their opposition to blockbuster

production values and mainstream tastes. For reasons of artistry as well as commerce, such films are rarely family-orientated, but seek to mobilise audiences whose interests lie outside mainstream action/adventure material. Although contemporary domestic-orientated family comedies usually embody conservative political ideals, and independent films are often liberal, these politically-opposed factions are – to some extent – unified by their shared disdain for the family blockbuster. It is no coincidence that indie films exploded on to the market in the 1990s at almost precisely the same time as the major Hollywood studios embraced media conglomeration and family entertainment as in-built principles.

However, cultural resistance to family entertainment is most strongly marked in overseas territories. Although Western Europe is Hollywood's most lucrative foreign theatrical market, and has, in general, assisted in its dominance by actively encouraging Hollywood co-productions, a big-budget, pan-European family-orientated venture – *Asterix and Obelix vs. Caesar* (Claude Zidi, 1999) – curbed the trend by achieving substantial box office success without U.S. funding or distribution, or, indeed, a wide release in U.S. theatres. A French, German and Italian co-production based on the long-running French comic strip, the film returned over \$100 million, less than \$1 million of which stemmed from U.S. theatres.² It has since spawned a successful movie franchise, although it is very much the exception to the rule, both in terms of its extraordinary success and its populist approach (which appropriates, rather than counterpoints, the style of Hollywood family movies). Furthermore, because the *Asterix* franchise is seemingly a one-off which is neither threatening Hollywood's dominance nor damaging its revenues, it is debatable whether it can truly be regarded as a form of 'resistance'.

² Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, London: BFI Publishing, 2005, pp. 190-191.

Far more important to Hollywood's future in the global arena are China and India. Both are enormous markets, but despite repeated overtures, they have proven frustratingly difficult to crack. U.S. commentators have been anticipating China's imminent arrival as a massive foreign market for years.³ It was felt that the internet would force China's development towards democracy, which would, in turn, lead to a loosening of existing trade restrictions, but this has not yet materialised (partly because of the local dominance of the state-operated Internet search engine, which censors a great deal of politically- and culturally-sensitive content). Furthermore, the Chinese state only allows domestic distribution of 20 foreign films per year, and piracy is rife.⁴ Although *Avatar* broke the all-time Chinese box office record in early 2010 with grosses of approximately \$70 million, this only equated to around half its U.K.'s theatrical grosses, which, in turn, amounted to a fraction of its U.S. performance.⁵ India seems more politically and commercially open, but imported films have struggled to overcome the domestic hegemony of Bollywood productions. In response, Hollywood has resorted to manufacturing Bollywood-style films for the Indian market, hoping to compete with local producers, but this initiative has achieved only limited success.⁶ Ironically, the real challenge Hollywood studios now face in extending their global market share is producing films capable of *local* – rather than *global* – appeal. Hollywood family films are doing their job very well; they are dominating global box office charts and keeping

³ Edward A. Gargan, 'Waiting for China: Anxious Artists – Flowering in the Face of a Giant Unknown', *The New York Times*, February 16th, 1997, p. 31.

⁴ Ben Child, 'Avatar Smashes Chinese All-Time Box-Office Record', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 19th January, 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/jan/19/avatar-smashes-chinese-record>> [accessed 21/3/2010].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tim Arango, 'U.S. Media See a Path to India in China's Snub', *The New York Times*, May 3rd, 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/04/business/media/04media.html>> [accessed 23/3/2010]; Anupama Chopra, 'Stumbling toward Bollywood', *The New York Times*, March 20th, 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/movies/22chop.html>> [accessed 23/3/2010].

the U.S. film industry firmly on top (with a greater than 60 per cent stake in the global box office).⁷ What family films *cannot* accomplish is serving minority needs for localised, culturally-specific entertainment in foreign territories, and in this area Hollywood has proven less than successful. In India, for example – a territory dominated by domestic productions – Hollywood’s market share is a mere 5 per cent.⁸

To a large extent, successful foreign distribution of Hollywood movies depends on politics and ideology at the local level. Hitherto, family films have been too capitalistically ‘American’ to fully succeed in China for reasons of state ideology, and in India for reasons of national culture. Many other international territories are economically underdeveloped and therefore negligible markets.⁹ Historically, as poorer countries have expanded their economies within capitalist frameworks and foreign trading has increased, Hollywood has simply assumed control of the film market. Advanced global capitalism, no respecter of cultural democracy and diversity, generally allows the largest and most powerful corporations to expand their reach, either through absorption or eradication of competitors. A notable example of this process is post-communist Russia. After the fall of the Soviet Union, long-standing restrictions on Hollywood films were dropped. Hollywood rapidly overcame local competition: by 2003, its market share in Russia had reached 75 per cent (as compared with 82 per cent in Britain, 70 per cent in Spain, 65 per cent in Italy and 52 per cent in France), and by 2006

⁷ Carrie Rickey, ‘Americans Are Seeing Fewer and Few Foreign Films’, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday May 9th, 2010.
<http://www.philly.com/inquirer/entertainment/20100509_Americans_are_seeing_fewer_and_fewer_foreign_films.html#axzz0r7gJ2McM> [accessed 17/6/2010].

⁸ Derek Bose, *Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order*, New Delhi: Sage India, 2006, pp. 207-208.

⁹ Peter J Dekom, ‘The Global Market’, *The Movie Business Book*, ed. Jason E. Squire, New York: Fireside, 1992, pp. 418-430.

the country was, according to *Variety*, ‘the hottest theatrical [film] market in Europe’.¹⁰ For the same reasons, Western capitalist enterprise is eagerly awaiting the end of communist China, not for ideological reasons, but because a democratic government could conceivably pave the way for unlimited commercial access to the world’s most populous nation. Of course, is equally possible, as Michael Curtin argues, that emerging economies – most notably China and India – will, at some point, be able to launch serious challenges to Hollywood’s dominance.¹¹ Currently, it seems that any legitimate challenge is still a distant possibility, contingent on overcoming considerable obstacles such as language, filmic style, the lack of budgetary, technical and creative resources, the lack of worldwide distribution, and Hollywood’s established hold over the world market. Between 1990 and 2005, Hollywood’s proportion of the world market actually doubled.¹² That this is the case is unsurprising, given that the U.S. possesses what has been called ‘the most protectionist culture in world history’.¹³ For the moment, then, the key question in contemporary cinema, looking to the future, is whether other countries will to resist Hollywood’s global expansion, or – as has so often been the case – ultimately acquiesce, and incorporate U.S. media products into their cultural identities.¹⁴

The fact that China and India – the two most populous countries in the world – continue to resist Hollywood entertainment is telling. It reveals an irresolvable paradox,

¹⁰ Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, p. 11; Celestine Bohlen, ‘Reality Conspires to Undo Russian Films’, *The New York Times*, February 28th, 1994. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/02/28/movies/reality-conspires-to-undo-russian-films.html>> [accessed 12/4/2010]; Elizabeth Guider and Tom Birchenough, ‘H’w’d Heat Hits Russia’, *Variety*, Thursday February 2nd, 2006.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117937325.html?categoryid=1236&cs=1>> [accessed 12/4/2010].

¹¹ Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: The Globalisation of Chinese Film and TV*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 284-285.

¹² Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, pp. 10, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The word ‘acquiesce’ implies, of course, that U.S.-based cultural imperialism is undesirable, a view by no means universally held.

namely that no matter how internationally-flavoured Hollywood family films become, they will always respond to U.S. values, customs and tastes. At this point, it is well to remember that around 35 per cent of the global box office still derives from the U.S. domestic market; for home-grown films, this figure is much higher still.¹⁵ This necessitates a certain pandering to local cultural tradition in order to satisfy the desires of an enormously powerful domestic audience which overwhelmingly rejects imported entertainment (foreign movies now constitute less than 1 per cent of the American film box office, down from around 10 per cent in the 1960s).¹⁶ When asked for his predictions regarding the future trajectory of family films, Disney executive Andy Bird replied:

‘Family films’/entertainment/brands are going to become even more important/relevant in the future. As the world becomes more fragmented, ‘family time’ will become more precious. In my house, some nights all four members of the family (I have two boys aged 12 and 14) are on their individual computers. We’ve instilled family time to watch films together or play ‘Scrabble’...It’s the only time we get together and I think this will become even more of a premium going forward.¹⁷

His response tells us two things. It seems that Hollywood executives perceive traditionally-flavoured family entertainment as a palliative for economically-developed, Western societies in which social fragmentation and family togetherness is a concern – an image which, not entirely coincidentally, evokes the beleaguered nuclear families depicted in movies such as *Hook* and *Mrs Doubtfire*. Equally significantly, Bird’s description strongly evokes traditional, conservative family fare (e.g. Disney animation, American domestic comedies) rather than family-branded ‘total entertainment’, with its

¹⁵ ‘Theatrical Market Statistics 2009’, *The Motion Picture Association of America*, <<http://www.mpa.org/>> [accessed 17/6/2010].

¹⁶ Rickey, ‘Americans Are Seeing Fewer and Fewer Foreign Films’; Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*, p. 94.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Andy Bird, Chairman of Disney International, Thursday 26th March, 2009; see appendix.

undifferentiated address, acceptance of moderate violence and swearing and generously distributed PG-13 ratings.

The divergence between these two manifestations reveals an internal conflict regarding the uses of the family brand. The growth of ‘total entertainment’ may ultimately become problematic for its survival; already, there are intimations that the industry is having difficulty reconciling the brand’s easy familiarity with the blatant corporatism of the product. Disney head of production Oren Aviv, speaking of the next instalment in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (scheduled for release in Summer 2011), spoke of the need to ‘get the story right’ because

you can’t get bigger [...] The movies got bigger and bigger and very complicated [...] I want to kinda reboot the whole thing and bring it down to its core and to its essence which is the characters.¹⁸

Aviv’s response indicates that Hollywood is concerned about brands becoming *solely* defined by spectacle, recognising the harm such perceptions might entail. There is a desire to preserve the ‘integrity’ of such multimedia franchises by establishing an opposition between family films still supposedly governed by principles of co-viewing (‘for all the family’) and social usefulness, against those which are lamentably brand-based, purely escapist and socially worthless (‘for everyone’). Given that all the major studios continue to release both family-adventure movies and more child-orientated, wholesome fare under the ‘family’ banner, the dichotomy is entirely artificial, but the distinction surely appeals to the many fans and critics who still believe – as did the moral and educational reformers of the 1920s and 1930s – that popular culture ought to project authenticity, solidarity and demonstrate social conscience. Such is the current value of

¹⁸ ‘SDCC Redux: Disney’s Head of Production, Oren Aviv’, *Comingsoon.net*, August 3rd, 2009. <<http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=57634>> [accessed 26/10/2010].

the 'family' brand that – in contrast to its contaminating associations before its rejuvenation in the 1980s – marketers are eager to apply it to their products as often as possible, sometimes inappropriately. As Jennifer Geer notes, the American DVD release of the adult-orientated period melodrama *Finding Neverland* (Marc Forster, 2004) overtly – and erroneously – positions it as a family film.¹⁹ This practice is now commonplace and is perturbing for consumers, who may be misled by such cynical marketing, but also potentially for the Hollywood studios, which must ensure that the brand is not misused, and retains its credibility and potency.

Ultimately, these questions boil down to a battle for brand ownership. As I suggested in Chapter 5, the brands and intellectual properties are owned by producers, but as artefacts of American popular culture and reflectors of social mores since the 1930s, family films also belong to their consumers. Because awareness of these movies is almost universal in the Western world, ownership is extremely valuable. Both the North American media – ostensibly on behalf of the public – and political/religious bodies regard the family movie as a cultural, rather than commercial format. The concept of the 'family' has enduring political appeal, and religious organisations, particularly the Christian right, have always supported 'traditional' family films because they represent society freed from perceived threats, such as divorce and family breakdown, career-minded women, gays, racial and ethnic minorities, and foreigners. Certainly, it is hard to imagine a form of popular culture more attractive to such bodies than family films, so explicitly 'American', pro-'family', pro-tradition, hostile to change and, through conspicuous absence, implicitly hostile to outsiders – all filtered through a façade of

¹⁹ Jennifer Geer, 'J. M. Barrie Gets the Miramax Treatment: Finding (and Marketing) Neverland', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Volume 32, Number 3, Fall 2007 (pp. 193-212).

amiability. As family films have become less identifiably driven by socio-political agendas, organisations such as Walden Media have stepped in to plug the gap. The battle for ownership of the family brand, the desire to exploit its potential for ideological uses, and the ongoing need to extend the scope of its signification for commercial uses, may be defining characteristics in family entertainment in the years to come.

For popular and academic criticism, now is the ideal time to take notice of family films, not only because of their enormous historical significance (which is more than reason enough), but their increasingly important role in popular entertainment. A very pertinent question is which critical and theoretical frameworks are best suited to such investigation. Genre criticism has shown little or no interest, and excessively formalist interpretations of its scope serve to impede the study of such a pluralistic format. In contrast, socio-cultural approaches seems fertile, as does cognitivism, which is invaluable when applied to contemporary family films which overtly stimulate physical and emotional audience responses. ‘Children’s films’, as theorist Torben Grodal argues, ‘are shaped both by innate emotional needs and cognitive constraints and by specific cultural norms’.²⁰ Grodal therefore rejects ‘both the blank slate theory of the human mind – the strong version of culturalism – and the arguments for strong biologism’.²¹ If, as I would suggest, the appeal of family films derives from their exploitation of innate needs, coupled with their reflection of society and culture, an approach which fuses elements of culturalism and cognitivism would best suit future academic study into internationally-orientated family films.

²⁰ Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Leaving aside the current and probable future dominance of the Hollywood family film, its position in U.S. culture and film history since the 1930s has been enormous. Any history of Hollywood cinema that overlooks the family audience and the family film is, to my mind, inadequate, for they have played a huge part in film industry policy. On a social level, family films have, alongside books, been one of the most important cultural formats for children, and unrivalled as the dominant medium for a dual audience of adults and children, while their socio-cultural function in U.S. culture, to say nothing of their impact on international audiences, has always been far more than simply escapist. Family films have functioned on pedagogical, escapist, reflective, aspirational, regressive, demagogic, conservative and utopian levels. This does not mean we should lose sight of their basic function as products of advanced capitalism. Family movies exist to make money; cultural significance is a fortunate by-product which keeps the bandwagon rolling, and their appeal to children should not risk obfuscating this fact. However, their continued success, throughout their many incarnations, points to a cultural need for basically affirmative, happy stories which evoke pleasure in many forms, emotional and aesthetic. Their cultural and commercial limitations may only be fully appreciated with the benefit of further historical perspective, but for the moment, their grasp over popular culture is immense and shows no sign of loosening. While family movies remain primarily North American in origin, they respond to basic, innate human needs, which is why they exert such a powerful attraction to global audiences.

Appendix: Interview between Noel Brown (NB) and Andy Bird (AB; Chairman of Disney International), Thursday, March 26, 2009.

(NB) Would you be able to briefly define 'the family film'?

(AB) I think 'The Family Film' is a film that can be enjoyed by the whole family together, as well as a film that can be enjoyed by a broad audience demographic. The true test, in my mind, is if a child and his/her grandparent could go together and equally enjoy a film.

(NB) It seems from observation that the 'family film' is a term favoured by the Hollywood studios for marketing purposes, whilst the 'children's film' term tends to be critically imposed from the outside by critics, etc. Do you think this is true, and if not, do you think that there is a difference between the 'family film' and 'children's film'?

(AB) I think that your observation is largely correct and, as you can see from my response above, I think there is a difference between the two genres. Using our own films as examples, clearly 'Pirates of the Caribbean' or 'WALL-E' can be enjoyed on different levels by a broad audience... A 'Thomas the Tank Engine' film is clearly targeted primarily at children. I'm not sure the term 'family film' is favoured by studios for marketing purposes per se...I think sometimes critics assume that, say, an animated movie is a kids movie, which is not strictly true if you look at Pixar movies or indeed some DreamWorks movies...Critics tend to try and compartmentalize things into their boxes.

(NB) Walt Disney used to comment that the studio audience-tested all of its films with adults, rather than children. Does audience testing still occur, and if so, in what form?

(AB) We test every film with a variety of different audiences before release. We test with a wide range of demographics, not just adults. In today's world the instant response of the movie-goer is as important as marketing. If a blog on a Friday night says your movie is good/bad, that has an impact on weekend attendance...In many respects the viewer is becoming the ultimate reviewer!

(NB) Should the idea of the 'family audience' be taken literally, or should it be understood as essentially meaning 'suitable for all'?

(AB) I think the latter, as I described above.

(NB) How important is the 'family film' in contemporary Hollywood, and how do you see it developing over the next few years?

(AB) I think that 'family films'/entertainments/brands are going to become even more important/relevant in the future. As the world becomes more fragmented, 'family time' will become more precious. In my house, some nights all four members of the family (I have two boys aged 12 and 14) are on their individual computers. We've instilled family time to watch films together or play 'Scrabble'...It's the only time we get together and I think this will become even more of a premium going forward.

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