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5 A Powerful Cinema-going Force? Hollywood and Female Audiences since the 1960s

Peter Krämer

According to received wisdom shared by much of the film industry trade press, magazine and newspaper journalists, and academic critics, Hollywood, an industry dominated by men, has been catering primarily to a young male audience since the 1960s. Yet in its 1995 'Box Office Review' of the American market, the British trade journal *Screen International* observed: 'After children, women are the second most powerful cinema-going force. The all-female ensemble picture and the revamped romantic comedy/melodrama were probably the year's steadiest performers.'¹ The article also pointed out that 'action pictures' performed best when they 'attracted equal numbers of female and male viewers, thanks to female-friendly stars' such as Pierce Brosnan and Brad Pitt. A similar emphasis on female audiences characterised statements made by leading Hollywood executives in 1995. During a Directors' Guild workshop, for example, Laura Ziskin, president of Fox 2000 (News Corp's adult-oriented film production subsidiary) and formerly a producer whose filmography includes *Pretty Woman* (1990), stated that she intended to make films for mature women, for both economic and personal reasons (it was the audience segment she felt closest to).² As a consequence of demographic trends, she pointed out, women over twenty-five currently make up an increasing share of Hollywood's potential audience, and they are also presumed to be the ones who pick the film when going to the movies with their male partners. Quoting Ziskin, a later article in the *New York Times*, suggestively entitled 'What do women want? – Movies', noted a fundamental change of direction in mid-1990s Hollywood: 'After years of making action and adventure films for boys of all ages studio executives are concluding that a new audience has emerged that is changing all the rules. Women.'³ The article noted that Hollywood's increased output of films appealing specifically to women resulted partly from 'the growing number of female studio executives with the power to give the green light to a movie'.⁴

There are obvious problems with such claims concerning the feminisation of American cinema in the mid-1990s. Firstly, Hollywood's decision-makers continue to be predominantly male. In *Premiere* magazine's 1996 list of 'The 100 Most Powerful People in Hollywood' the first woman (Viacom/Paramount executive Sherry Lansing) appeared at number 15, the next (Julia Roberts) at 45, and there were only twelve

women on the entire list.⁵ Secondly, the major Hollywood studios continue to spend much more money on the production and marketing of what are traditionally perceived as male genre films (such as action-adventure and science fiction) than on what may be called 'female' genres (romantic comedy, musicals, melodrama/weepies, costume drama). In 1995, for example, female-oriented films made on comparatively low budgets of \$15–25 million, were often substantial hits, grossing \$50–80 million at the North American box office (*Clueless*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *While You Were Sleeping*, for example), yet Hollywood's overall output during that year was dominated by big budget action-adventure and Science Fiction films, costing anywhere between \$60 million and an astonishing \$180 million (*Waterworld*).⁶ Thirdly, while it is true that several of these big-budget films performed poorly in the United States, they often redeemed themselves at foreign box offices. Moreover, in *Die Hard With a Vengeance*, this group of male-oriented big budget movies gave rise to the biggest international hit of the year, grossing \$354 million worldwide, or about twice the international gross of the most successful female-oriented film of that year, *While You Were Sleeping*.⁷ The situation was similar in 1996, with modestly budgeted female-oriented hits being completely overshadowed by expensive male-oriented blockbusters such as *Independence Day* (international gross \$780 million) and *The Rock* (\$330 million).⁸

Thus, on closer examination, mid-1990s Hollywood was far from undergoing a reorientation driven by female executives and audiences. Only rarely were women directly and specifically addressed as an audience. When they did go to the cinema on their own behalf – rather than accompanying their partners or children – they were responsible for a few modest hits in a steady stream of modestly budgeted films. Such films were unable to compete with the success of male- or family-oriented movies. This state of affairs prompts a number of questions: What is actually known about the female audience and its cinema-going habits and preferences in recent decades? Why have female movie-goers and female-oriented movies become marginal in Hollywood since the 1960s? And are there any reliable indications that this marginalisation could be prevented?

What Do Women Want?

An audience survey conducted in 1982 found that comedy was by far the most popular genre with both sexes, irrespective of age.⁹ When asked about the types of films they intended to see in the coming year or about their favourite genre, in addition to comedy, women (especially older ones) most often listed drama and musicals, whereas men were more likely to tick the categories SF, adventure/war and Western. Thus, women were more likely to be primarily interested in characters and emotions, whereas men appeared to be primarily interested in characters and emotions, whereas men demanded violent action and excitement. Rather than catering for all of its potential audience, Hollywood's output has clearly been biased towards men. The favourite genres of Hollywood's potential audience (male and female) were (in this order): comedy (favoured by 33.5 per cent of all respondents), drama (17.8 per cent), SF (12.4 per cent), musical (10.1 per cent), and only then adventure/war (6.8 per cent). The levels of interest in viewing certain types of films in the coming year were: 80 per cent for comedy, 59 per cent for drama, 44 per cent for musical, with SF and adventure/war further down the list. Potential movie-goers, then, preferred medium-budget comedies

and dramas, often oriented toward female viewers, to those male-oriented genres for which contemporary Hollywood reserves its biggest budgets (SF, adventure).

Furthermore, when asked which types of films respondents had actually seen during the preceding year, comedy and SF came out on top (seen by about 50 per cent of respondents), followed by drama (with 43.8 per cent). Adventure/war was far behind with 24 per cent and the musical category was hardly mentioned at all. Firstly, these figures show that the audience for comedy and drama was spread fairly widely across the spectrum of respondents, whereas adventure films had only been seen by about a quarter of respondents, most of them young men. The high figure for SF was largely the result of one universally popular movie, *E.T.* If this film is taken out of the equation, the reach of the SF genre was as limited as that of adventure films. Hollywood's big releases are indeed servicing a minority audience. Secondly, it is clear from the above figures that the film industry's output of musicals, and to a lesser extent of comedies and dramas, was insufficient to meet the great demand, especially on the part of female cinema-goers. Women definitely did not get what they wanted in cinemas. Yet they still went almost as frequently as men – mostly, it seems, to accompany their male partners or children. In fact, children's films, which few adults declared to be their favourites, had nevertheless been seen by about a fifth of all respondents (mostly women over twenty-five, who had probably gone with their children). The survey also showed that, as a consequence of the film industry's failure to cater to their specific needs in movie theatres, women, who were generally more avid film-viewers than men, preferred to watch films, both old and new, on the small screen at home. This applied especially to older women.

These results confirmed research carried out in previous decades. A 1973 survey, for example, found that women were just as likely as men to go to the movies at least once a year (59 per cent of respondents did), yet they tended to go less frequently.¹⁰ This perhaps suggests that women were basically willing cinema-goers, yet were much less likely than men to find films attractive enough to justify a trip to the movie theatre. While single people went to the cinema much more often than married ones, married people with children were much more likely to go to the cinema than couples without children, which again suggests that many women went to the cinema to accompany their children.¹¹ The list of preferred genres of all respondents in this 1973 survey was again headed by comedy, followed for female respondents by love stories, drama and musicals, and for men by Westerns, drama and suspense. When asked about their least preferred type of movie, X-rated films came out on top for both sexes, followed by horror films. Yet many more women than men objected to these genres and, for women, the list continued with war films, SF and Westerns, whereas for men it continued with musicals, love stories and animated features. What men objected to most, it seems, were sentimentality and the blatant display of emotions, whereas women objected most strongly to sex and violence. Such insights into gender-specific movie-going habits and preferences in fact go back at least to the 1940s, when the film industry first conducted systematic audience research.¹² It is quite surprising, therefore, that Hollywood would choose to ignore the well-known and apparently stable likes and dislikes of its female audience.

Who Cares What Women Want?

Already in 1972, *Variety* observed that the 'Recent box-office boom in violent pix has underscored the lessening commercial impact of femme-slanted features.' In the past, the article went on, Hollywood had considered women as one of the 'most steadfast and reliable markets' and the strong presence of female characters, able to appeal to this audience, had been deemed crucial for a film's commercial success. However, more recently, television had serviced this 'heretofore captive audience' and movie outings 'became increasingly dominated by the male breadwinner's choice of screen fare. Result is that most b[ox] o[ffice] hits of recent times barely feature women in supporting roles.'¹³ The article reflected the assumptions informing Hollywood's operations at the time: women prefer television to the cinema; men pick the film when going to the cinema with women; men are interested primarily in stories about men. These assumptions were in sharp contrast to the beliefs which had underpinned Hollywood's output and marketing strategies in earlier decades, when the major companies saw women, especially mature women in charge of regular cinema-outings with their husbands and children, as the key audience for movie theatres.¹⁴ As recently as the mid-1960s, Hollywood had catered to this traditionally conceived audience with big budget female-centred superhits such as the costume drama *Cleopatra* (1963), and the musicals *Mary Poppins* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965), which were amongst the highest-grossing films of all time up to this point and had turned Elizabeth Taylor and Julie Andrews into the highest-paid and most popular of all Hollywood stars.¹⁵

By 1972, however, there were numerous indications that Hollywood had re-oriented itself towards a new target audience of men, especially young men. *The Godfather* (1972), an epic gangster movie concerned primarily with the familial relationships and violent interaction of groups of men, was well on its way to replacing *The Sound of Music* as the highest-grossing film of all time. In Hollywood's production schedules and in the annual box-office charts of the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a predominance of genres which women were known to dislike, and which were now given a particularly violent inflection as well as a particularly strong focus on male relationships. Amongst the top hits of the period were successful cycles of war films, including *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *M*A*S*H* (1970), science-fiction films, including *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and the *Planet of the Apes* series starting in 1968, and Westerns, including *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Little Big Man* (1971). There was also a successful run of extremely violent crime and police films from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) to *Dirty Harry* (1971), as well as adventure films such as the James Bond series, a top box-office attraction from 1964 onwards, and the beginning of the hugely expensive cycle of top-grossing disaster movies with *Airport* (1970) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972). The male-centredness of these films and of the industry as a whole was reflected in the stars whom American film exhibitors considered to be box-office attractions. After many years in which women were consistently featured in the top three positions in the annual polls, they disappeared from these places in 1969 and from then on had a hard time making it into the top ten. At the same time, in sharp contrast to the previous run of female-oriented multiple-Oscar winners such as *West Side Story* (1961), *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Sound of Music*, the Academy Awards went

primarily to male-oriented films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Patton* (1970), *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Godfather* (1972).¹⁶

Apart from the fact that women were notably absent from many critically and commercially successful films, female audiences were also affected by the replacement of the Production Code with a ratings system in 1968. Through the Production Code, the major studios had regulated the content of their films in such a way as to ensure that they were unlikely to cause offence to any segment of the audience. In particular, Hollywood had tried to avoid offending women. The introduction of a ratings system regulating access to individual films according to the age of the movie-goer signalled the industry's willingness to abandon the notion of inoffensive entertainment for everybody, and instead to appeal strongly and specifically to some audience segments, especially young males, even if that meant excluding other segments such as women and children.¹⁷ The X-rated *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and the horror film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) indicated to women that perhaps it was not safe for them to go to the movie theatre anymore.¹⁸ This impression was certainly enhanced by the dilapidated, insanitary state of many mainstream movie houses and, in big urban centres, their frequent proximity to porn cinemas.¹⁹

During this period, the production of musicals, romantic comedies and melodramas continued, with major box-office hits such as *Oliver!* and *Funny Girl* (both 1968), *Love Story* and *Hello, Dolly!* (both 1970), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and *What's Up, Doc?* (1972). However, at this point budgets for major musicals had become so inflated that, despite high box-office grosses, films such as *Hello, Dolly!* were reported to have lost millions of dollars. These losses, together with the ruinous performance of films such as *Dr. Dolittle* (1967) and *Star!* (1968) encouraged the studios to invest more heavily in other, male-oriented genres, especially disaster movies.²⁰ Yet the enormous success of re-releases of classic, female-oriented films such as *Gone With the Wind* (in 1967/68), *The Sound of Music*, and *Mary Poppins* (both in 1973) indicates that the studios gave up too quickly on their traditional core audience of women, who had a continuing predilection for big-budget spectacles dealing with the trials and tribulations of female characters.

So why was Hollywood so eager to focus on the young male audience? According to Thomas Doherty, this re-orientation was the industry's belated response to audience research conducted in the 1940s, which showed that teenagers and young adults were the most frequent movie-goers.²¹ This research was confirmed in subsequent decades: a 1968 survey, for example, found that 16–24-year-olds bought almost half of all cinema tickets, with 16–20-year-olds being the most frequent movie-goers.²² Doherty argues that rather than continuing its attempts to win back or at least maintain its mature audience over twenty-five (the majority of the population, which rarely went to the cinema), Hollywood focused ever more exclusively on teenagers and young adults under twenty-five, a minority which constituted the group of regular movie-goers. In so doing, it adopted the doctrine known as 'The Peter Pan Syndrome', which had underpinned the successful marketing strategy developed by American International Pictures for exploitation cinema in the 1950s: since younger children will watch what an older child is interested in, and girls will watch what boys are interested in, 'to catch your greatest audience you zero in on the 19-year-old male.'²³

In the mid-1970s, *Variety* criticised Hollywood for its fixation on youth, examining

the impact of the post-war baby boom.²⁴ The baby-boomers, most of whom had entered their prime movie-going age (16–24) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, constituted the bulk of the cinema audience in this period, but by about 1980 most of them would be about to move into the 25–34 age group. *Variety* argued that this age group should, therefore, become a key target audience for Hollywood. Since the ageing baby-boomers were 'bearing fewer children, and often at more advanced ages than their parents', it appropriate measures were taken by the industry, 'the traditional drop off in filmgoing [after the age of twenty-five] ... may become less drastic'. *Variety* also urged Hollywood to drop its conception of cinema and television as separate markets for young people and older people. With the rapid spread of pay-TV services, in particular movie channels such as HBO, in future there would be considerable overlap between the theatrical audience and the home audience. *Variety* itself expressed the hope that 'films may again be made for a truly mass audience – a paying audience both in theatres and in homes.'²⁵

This new mass movie audience did come into existence in subsequent years, but only for special occasions. Beginning with the extraordinary success of *Star Wars* (1977) and its first sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Hollywood has consistently managed to bring a cross-section of the American population, including the majority of infrequent movie-goers who may never see any other films at the cinema, back into the movie theatre for one or two family-oriented adventure movies a year, released in time for a long run during the summer holidays or the Christmas season, and destined for an equally successful performance in the video and pay-TV markets.²⁶ Apart from these exceptional hits, however, the film industry largely continued its previous practice of investing most heavily in films addressed primarily, and often exclusively, to young movie-goers, especially young males. The wide release of *Jaws* in June 1975 (with an unprecedented 500 prints), for example, provided the model for future action-adventure movies. Released mostly during the summer, these films focus on the violent actions of their male heroes and are driven by stunts and special effects, drawing a lot of attention to their record-breaking opening weekend box-office figures and to their ever-escalating budgets, including multi-million-dollar salaries and profit-participation deals for their male stars.²⁷ This production trend has given rise to many of the top-grossing movies of the last two decades, including Sylvester Stallone's string of hits with the *Rocky* and *Rambo* series from 1976 onwards; Burt Reynolds's action comedies, starting with *Smokey and the Bandit* (1976); the continuing series of James Bond movies (for example, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, 1977); rogue cop movies featuring Clint Eastwood (*The Enforcer*, 1976), Eddie Murphy (starting with *48 HRS*, 1982), Mel Gibson (most notably the *Lethal Weapon* series, starting in 1987), or Bruce Willis (starting with *Die Hard* in 1988); combat movies (most notably *Platoon* and *Top Gun*, both in 1986); and Arnold Schwarzenegger's 'serious' action films such as *Total Recall* (1990). Also included are more family-oriented films, most notably Schwarzenegger's comedies (starting with *Twins*, 1988), the *Superman* (first instalment, 1979) and *Batman* (1989) series, the *Star Wars* (1977), *Indiana Jones* (1981) and *Back to the Future* (1985) trilogies, as well as the *Karate Kid* (1984) series and horror comedies (starting with *Gremlins* in 1984).²⁸ These and other action-oriented films made up about half of all films in the annual lists of the ten biggest box-office hits from 1976 onwards, often holding the top positions.

During the same period, women made a moderate comeback in American cinema,

in comparison to the rather disastrous decade for female genres and stars from 1966 to 1976. In 1977, the romantic comedy *Annie Hall* was a considerable hit which established Diane Keaton as a top box-office attraction, the Jane Fonda vehicle *Julia* won most of the major Academy Awards, and the release of *Saturday Night Fever* led to a revival of the musical genre.²⁹ Melodramas/weepies also made a comeback, albeit often with a focus on the social and emotional trials and tribulations of male rather than female characters, generating a string of multiple Academy Award winners. Many of these films were also massive box-office hits, starting with *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979) and *Ordinary People* (1980).³⁰ Throughout the 1980s, the annual lists of top ten box-office hits usually included three to five female-oriented (yet quite regularly male-centred) films: musicals such as *Flashdance* and *Staying Alive* (both 1983); romantic comedies such as *Tootsie* (1982) and *Moonstruck* (1987); melodramas such as *Terms of Endearment* (1983) and *Rainman* (1988); female ensemble comedies such as *9 to 5* (1980) and female ensemble dramas such as *The Color Purple* (1985).³¹ With few exceptions, these films could normally be found in the bottom half of the top ten lists and, even at their best, they tended to gross only about half as much as their male- or family-oriented competitors.

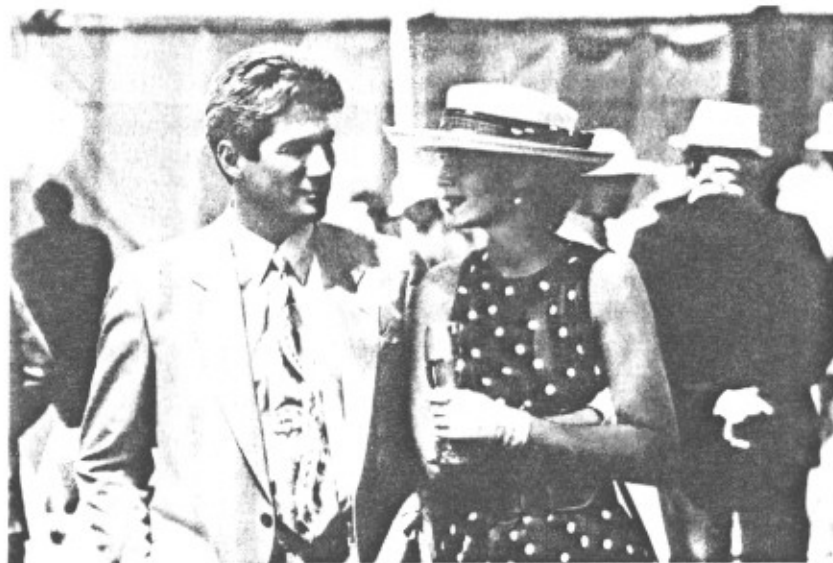
In 1989, for example, the top three positions in the end-of-year box-office chart were held by male- or family-oriented action films: *Batman*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and *Lethal Weapon 2* – with *Ghostbusters II* and *Back to the Future II* featured further down the list.³² All but the last of these films had been released between the end of May and the beginning of July. Budgeted in a range between \$25 million and \$42 million, each film played in 1800 to 2400 movie theatres, earning opening weekend grosses of between \$20 million and \$37 million, and total grosses going as high as \$250 million.³³ In sharp contrast, female-oriented films such as the romantic comedies *When Harry Met Sally* and *Look Who's Talking*, the comedy drama *Parenthood*, and the melodrama *Dead Poets Society* all hit an earnings ceiling around \$100 million.³⁴ Budgeted at under \$20 million (on average \$10 million less than the action-oriented top grossers) and opening in fewer than 800 cinemas (less than half the number of theatres as action films), they had opening weekend grosses of around \$10 million (again less than half of the figure for action films).³⁵

In the 1980s, then, films specifically targeted at women had regained a secure place in Hollywood's overall scheme of things, yet in comparison with male- or family-oriented films, Hollywood's output of female-oriented films remained marginal and failed to satisfy the considerable demand for comedies, dramas and musicals that audience surveys had identified. At the same time, earlier predictions of an ageing movie audience became a reality. By 1989, the share of 16–24-year-olds had dropped to 33 per cent (from about 50 per cent in 1968) and that of 16–20-year-olds to 19 per cent (from 30 per cent in 1972), and the 25–49 age group had gained a larger share of overall paid admissions (46 per cent) than the 12–24 age group (44 per cent).³⁶ The commercial implications of these changes in audience composition were highlighted by the unexpected performance of two women's films in 1990.

Sometimes Women Do Get What They Want!

When *Pretty Woman* was released on 23 March 1990, the surrounding publicity highlighted those aspects of the film which were expected to appeal specifically to women.

1991-20%
2003-28%
2005-76%



Pretty Woman (Garry Marshall, 1990).

For example, Buena Vista's press book quoted the film's leading lady Julia Roberts saying the film 'is about finding love in unexpected places', and director Garry Marshall asserting that it was 'a unique love story'.³⁷ In an interview with the *New York Times*, Marshall declared his rather 'unmanly' intentions with this film: 'I like to do very romantic, sentimental type of work. . . . It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it.'³⁸ In order to put this 'dirty' work into a respectable tradition, he pointed out that the film had 'elements of *Pygmalion*, *My Fair Lady* and *Holly Golightly*', thus alluding both to myth and theatre as well as the great romances and female stars (especially Audrey Hepburn) of the Hollywood of an earlier era.³⁹

Reviewers were sharply divided in their evaluation of the film, many objecting vociferously to its unrealistic portrayal of prostitution, its emphasis on money and shopping, its unconvincing characterisations, and the dubious sexual politics of the central couple's relationship.⁴⁰ Yet even detractors of this kind rarely failed to mention the venerated tradition within which the publicity had situated the film. Similarly, for the film's supporters, *Pretty Woman* appeared first and foremost as a welcome return to the themes and style of the Hollywood of the past. John Simon, for example, wrote in *New York* that the film 'takes us back to Hollywood's softly beguiling entertainments of the fifties', pointing out that it is not an 'erotic fantasy' but a 'straight romantic comedy'.⁴¹ Vincent Canby declared in the *New York Times* that *Pretty Woman* was 'the most satisfying romantic comedy in years'.⁴² Like other critics, he highlighted the film's female lead, linking her to a glamorous and, by now, near-mythical tradition of female Hollywood stars, declaring that Julia Roberts had produced 'the most invigorating debut performance since Audrey Hepburn's in *Roman Holiday*'. Andrew Sarris published 'a professional love letter' to Roberts in the *New York Observer*, while Janet Maslin

wrote in the *New York Times* that 'Ms Roberts . . . is a complete knockout, and this performance will make her a major star'.⁴³ Most reviewers, then, related *Pretty Woman* to older traditions of storytelling and popular entertainment, comparing it to classic works. *Pretty Woman* was seen both by detractors and by supporters as standing out from contemporary Hollywood's regular output in an attempt to revive the lost art of romantic story-telling focused on a captivating leading lady.

A few months after the initial flurry of reviews and articles, the film's extraordinary success gave rise to further reflections in the press. In July, the *New York Times* noted with astonishment that *Pretty Woman* was still performing strongly at the box-office. Indeed, very unusually, even in its 17th week, the film still played in 1,200 theatres, as compared to 1,300 in the first week and 1,800 at the point of the film's widest release in the 9th week.⁴⁴ The film was now competing directly with the big summer releases which, the article reminded the reader, 'tend to be either action movies or films for young audiences'. As 'an adult Cinderella story', 'a traditional tale updated with modern psyches and settings', *Pretty Woman* had succeeded in finding an audience rarely catered for in the summer: 'Magazine and newspaper articles indicate that the movie has proved particularly appealing to women.' Thus, the film was seen to provide a welcome alternative for all those who were dissatisfied with Hollywood's usual summer fare.⁴⁵

When this article appeared, *Ghost* had just been released. Unlike *Pretty Woman*, *Ghost* was not marketed exclusively as a female-oriented 'love story', but was described by Paramount's press book as both a 'suspense thriller' and 'a startling love story'.⁴⁶ However, the nod towards the male following of thrillers was overshadowed by the marketing campaign's heavy emphasis on love, passion and spirituality. The poster showed Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in a passionate naked embrace with Swayze kissing her neck. In the press book, Swayze described his character, Sam, as someone who fails to declare his love while he can, and then desperately tries to make up for this failure. Moore said about her character: 'Molly Jensen is given the opportunity to experience a last goodbye from Sam and be reassured that where he's going is a place of love.' And scriptwriter Scott Rudin emphasised the film's spirituality: 'I was intrigued by the idea of capturing the sensations and emotions of a person who suddenly realises they have passed from life into an immaterial world – a new universe.'

The film's review in *Variety* was reasonably optimistic about its box-office prospects, describing it as a 'lightweight romantic fantasy . . . purely for escapists', along the lines of Patrick Swayze's previous surprise hit, *Dirty Dancing*.⁴⁷ The reviewer expressed a definite sense of unease, though, about this 'odd creation', with its 'unlikely grab bag of styles' and compendium of constantly shifting moods and emotions, barely held together by the film's 'thriller elements' and its 'romantic momentum'. Most reviewers shared this perception and found much to criticise in the film's peculiar mix of incompatible elements, most notably the special effects sequences depicting the demons of the underworld, Whoopi Goldberg's performance and the film's unimaginative view of an afterlife.⁴⁸ At the same time, the majority of reviews described it as a highly unusual summer release. *The West Side Spirit*, for example, wrote that '[a]s far as simple summer movies go, *Ghost* is truly a breakthrough movie' because, by subtly mixing genres, it demonstrated that 'in this season of stick-em-up and blow-em-up flicks, a little tender-

ness can be a wonderful thing'.⁴⁹ A generally very critical article in the *Christian Science Monitor* conceded that *Ghost* offered 'a touch of sentiment that isn't present (or is swamped by special effects) in its high-tech cousins'.⁵⁰ Ultimately, it was the film's ability to provoke strong emotions in its audience which clearly set it apart. In *Time*, Richard Corliss declared *Ghost* to be 'a bad movie that a lot of people will like' because it 'will touch movie-goers with its heavenly message that love can raise the dead'.⁵¹ Jami Bernard predicted in the *New York Post* that the 'ending can provoke a *Wuthering Heights*-scale cry, depending perhaps on how many unresolved attachments you have'.⁵² This reference to a classic women's film and the legitimacy of its ability to make viewers cry indicates that, much like *Pretty Woman*, *Ghost* could best be understood as a return to an older, half-forgotten tradition of powerful storytelling, which combined a strong emotional impact with a clear moral message. Indeed, in *Film Journal*, David Bartholomew explicitly linked *Ghost* to Hollywood's self-regulated film production after the implementation of the Production Code in the early 1930s: 'The movie is as moral as a post-Hays Office woman's picture'.⁵³

Ghost's extraordinary success at the box-office led to further reflections on its significance. In November, the *New York Times*, for example, declared *Ghost* to be 'one of the biggest sleeper hits in Hollywood history', and a most unlikely one at that: 'A romantic suspense comedy, shot on a modest budget and without a major box-office star, that flirts with the supernatural'.⁵⁴ Sixteen weeks after its release on 13 July, the film was still popular enough to play in 1,750 movie theatres and take in more than \$3 million per week.⁵⁵ Market research conducted by Paramount indicated that the movie's staying power was partly due to the fact that 'many women, who were the main target audience for both *Ghost* and *Pretty Woman*, have returned to see both movies several times, a rare occurrence in female genres. The article loosely grouped the two films together under



Ghost (Jerry Zucker, 1990).

the label 'romantic comedy' – 'a genre that in recent years had become less appealing to Hollywood studios intent on making blockbuster action-adventure films'. However, now that *Ghost* and *Pretty Woman* had outperformed 'a host of costly action-adventure films that had been expected to dominate the market this year', the major studios were 'planning to increase their production and support for romantic comedies'.

These predictions about a general re-orientation of the film industry were supported by Amy Taubin's article on *Ghost* and *Pretty Woman* in the *Village Voice* a few weeks later: '[T]he big news is that after a decade in which sci-fi, horror and action movies dominated the box-office, romance is back'.⁵⁶ Taubin emphasised the low status that films such as *Ghost* and *Pretty Woman* had within the industry and outlined one of their primary cultural functions as 'archetypal dating movies': 'They affirm for couples of all stages that romantic involvement is not some kind of temporary insanity but a state of bliss that can endure longer than six days (*Pretty Woman*) and even transcend the death-do-us-part cutoff point specified in the marriage vow (*Ghost*)'. By defining movie-going as an important dating and relationship ritual, Taubin pointed out that romantic films, with their particular appeal to women, who would bring their male partners along, could become the cornerstone of a reconfigured film industry. Box-office statistics supported such speculation. *Ghost* and *Pretty Woman* topped the chart of top grossing movies for 1990.⁵⁷ Furthermore, *Pretty Woman* was at number 15 in *Variety's* list of all-time domestic box-office hits, and *Ghost* was at number 10.⁵⁸ By the time they had completed their world-wide release, *Pretty Woman* would be in 5th place on *Variety's* list of all-time international top grossers, and *Ghost* would be second (behind *E.T.* and ahead of *Star Wars*).⁵⁹ The enormity of the films' success did indeed call into question many of the basic assumptions which had guided Hollywood's operations since the late 1960s. Yet, as we have already seen, Hollywood went back to business as usual in the 1990s.

Conclusion

When, at the beginning of 1991, Anne Thompson looked back on the long runs and steady box-office performance of 'films appealing to women' and the rapid drop-off at the box-office of 'male-oriented actioners' in the previous year, she posed a crucial question in *Variety*: 'So why does Hollywood continue to resist movies with strong female appeal that are cheaper to make and more profitable when they are successful?'⁶⁰ She received a range of answers from studio executives. Firstly, executives rejected the idea that films appealing primarily to women through strong female protagonists and high-profile female stars were viable, although, as one executive admitted, they once had been viable in 'decades past, when women flocked to films carried almost solely by screen queens like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford'. Now, however, it was understood that female stars 'can't carry a movie', because young men were mainly looking for male identification figures and young women were unlikely to drag their boyfriends along to films without a 'big male star'. It was, therefore, also understood that female-oriented movies were dependent on 'reaching adult audiences and garnering good reviews'. Since executives claimed that the overall number of mature women who actually went to the cinema was simply too small, their conclusion was that 'You can't make movies just for a women's audience anymore.' Secondly, executives still considered the under-25s as

Hollywood's most important audience, since films appealing to this audience segment were seen to have a guaranteed young male audience on the first weekend and in foreign markets. Most significantly, it was believed that young women were more willing to watch boys' movies than young men were to watch women's films, and thus young men were perceived to 'drive the purchase decision' when couples went to the cinema.

Obviously, there are some omissions from these arguments (such as the demographic shift towards older audiences and the influence of women on the film choices of mature couples) and there is also a basic circularity. The industry appeals primarily to the youth audience because older people are reluctant to go to the cinema; yet older people are reluctant to go to the cinema precisely because the films appeal primarily to youth. Similarly, Hollywood films are primarily addressed to young men, because boys' movies can be enjoyed by young women as well; yet young women have accommodated themselves to boys' movies, precisely because there are comparatively few alternatives offered to them and their male partners by Hollywood.

In the end, then, the basic question remains: what lies behind these self-fulfilling prophecies and feedback loops and this avoidance of basic demographic facts? In response to this question, at least one executive pointed the finger at Hollywood's basic sexism: 'Most studio executives are male ... They are more comfortable with male-oriented product.'¹ This answer, however, raises yet further questions: how did the equally male-dominated and much more conservative film industry of the past manage to cater primarily to women? Are there other reasons, apart from demographic shifts, for Hollywood's reorientation towards a young male audience in the late 1960s? Is it conceivable that the film industry will one day take demographic trends and the demand of female audiences into account again and return to its previous conception of a female-led mass audience, and is *Titanic* the film which can make this happen?²

Notes

- 1 Ana Maria Bahiana, '1995 box-office review: nuclear family business', *Screen International*, 26 January 1996, p. 60.
- 2 Discussion with Laura Ziskin, 9 August 1995, 15th Annual Directors Guild of America Educators Workshop, Los Angeles. See also Ziskin's statements in Bernard Weinraub, 'What do women want? - Movies', *New York Times*, 10 February 1997, pp. C11, 14.
- 3 Weinraub, 'What do women want?', p. C11.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. C14.
- 5 'The 1996 *Premiere* power list: the 100 most powerful people in Hollywood', *Premiere*, May 1996, pp. 76-90. 'Masters of the universe: the power 100', *Screen International*, 15 December 1995, pp. 12-28.
- 6 Production costs are given in the annual review of the US theatrical market in the German magazine *steadycam*, which uses figures provided by the American trade press. For the 1995 survey, see 'In Zahlen', *steadycam* no. 31, Spring 1996, pp. 11-12.
- 7 *Ibid.*, and Leonard Klady, 'B.O. with a vengeance: \$9.1 billion worldwide', *Variety*, 19 February 1996, pp. 1, 26.
- 8 'In Zahlen', *steadycam* no. 33, Spring 1997, pp. 19-21.
- 9 'Movie Omnibus - Sept. 1982', a survey of the film viewing habits of 1,000 people aged

- 18 and over, contained in the Audiences Clippings File, Museum of Modern Art, New York. See also Jim Robbins, 'Survey says public likes sci-fi but really loves comedy', *Variety*, 22 September 1982, p. 22.
- 10 'Movie going and leisure time', *Newspaper Advertising Bureau*, January 1974; results of 769 interviews with people aged eighteen and over conducted in July 1973, contained in file MFL x n.c.2, 101 no.4, Billy Rose Theatre Collection (BRTC), New York Public Library at Lincoln Centre, New York. See also results of 1972 MPAA survey reproduced in Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 486.
- 11 A 1974 survey of 3,835 female heads of households in metropolitan areas suggested that only 28 per cent of all respondents went to the movies at least once a month; for those living on their own or with another adult, the figures were 16 per cent and 24 per cent respectively, whereas for women with children it was more than 30 per cent. See 'Shoppers on the move: movie-going and movie-goers', *Newspaper Advertising Bureau*, November 1975; contained in file MWEZ + n.c.26.510, BRTC. See also results of MPAA surveys conducted in 1988-90, which are reproduced in 'Industry economic review and audience profile', Jason E. Squire, (ed.), *The Movie Business Book* (New York: Fireside, 2nd ed., 1992), p. 390.
- 12 See Leo A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks At Its Audience: A Report of Film Audience Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), pp. 118-27.
- 13 'Old 4-hanky "women's market" pix, far, far from 1972 "Year of Woman"', *Variety*, 30 August 1972, p. 5.
- 14 Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1-12, 179-312; Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 10-11.
- 15 For information on the box-office performance in the United States of Hollywood's hit movies, see Cobbett S. Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 1980), pp. 17-28, and Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London: Octopus, 1988), pp. 276-8. For the results of the annual polls amongst film exhibitors about the top box-office stars, see Steinberg, pp. 55-61. For information on star salaries see Steinberg, pp. 66-9.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 233-47.
- 17 Maltby, *Hollywood*, pp. 10-1, 340-1.
- 18 The astonishing success of *The Exorcist* (1973), which eventually grossed even more than *The Godfather* and initiated a cycle of successful horror films, would confirm this perception of the movie theatre as an unsafe space. Furthermore, Academy Awards continued to go to male-oriented films - *The Sting* (1973), *The Godfather Part II* (1974), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Rocky* (1976), and the lists of top ten box-office stars featured only one woman per year from 1973 to 1976 (Barbra Streisand in 1973-5, Tatum O'Neal in 1976). See Steinberg, *Film Facts*, pp. 27-8, 61, 248-52.
- 19 Jerry Lewis, 'Children too have film rights', *Variety*, 5 January 1972, p. 32; James Harwood, 'Films gotta cater to "aging" audience', *Variety*, 23 February 1977, p. 7; Judy Klemesrud, 'Family movies making a comeback', *New York Times*, 17 February 1978, p. C10; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (London: BFI, 1992), pp. 93-102.
- 20 Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ana Peacock

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- Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 14; Nick Roddick, 'Only the stars survive: disaster movies in the seventies', in David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt (eds), *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 243–69.
- 21 Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 62–3, 230–4.
- 22 'Pix must "broaden market"', *Variety*, 20 March 1968, pp. 1, 78, quoted in Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 231. Garth Jowett cites a 1972 study, according to which 73 per cent of the audience were between 12 and 29, and 43 per cent were between 12 and 20; 16–24-year-olds had a share of 46 per cent. The most frequent movie-goers were 16–20-year-olds, accounting for 30 per cent of paid admissions. Jowett, *Film*, p. 485.
- 23 Robin Bean and David Austen, 'U.S.A. confidential', *Films and Filming* no.215, November 1968, pp. 21–2, quoted in Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 157.
- 24 A. D. Murphy, 'Audience demographics, film future', *Variety*, 20 August 1975, p. 3. Cf. John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 74; Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), pp. 179, 198; Ben J. Wattenberg (ed.), *The Statistical History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 10. See also Robert Allen's discussion of baby boomers in his essay in this volume.
- 25 See similar comments on the emerging video market in Frank Segers, 'Gallup check re-likes: theatre, and/or, homes', *Variety*, 25 May 1977, p. 13.
- 26 Peter Krämer, 'Would you take your child to see this film? The cultural and social work of the family-adventure movie', Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 294–311.
- 27 Schatz, 'The new Hollywood', pp. 17–19.
- 28 These films are taken from the top ten of the annual box-office charts, as listed in Steinberg, *Film Facts*, pp. 27–8; 'The 1980s: a reference guide to motion pictures, television, VCR, and cable', *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 27, Spring 1991, pp. 81–3; and the annual 'In Zahlen' column in *steadycam*.
- 29 Steinberg, *Film Facts*, pp. 28, 61, 253–4.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 256–7; 'The 1980s', pp. 81–5.
- 31 'The 1980s', pp. 81–2.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 33 'In Zahlen', *steadycam* no. 13 (1989), p. 19; no. 14 (1989), p. 9; no. 15 (1990), p. 10.
- 34 'The 1980s', p. 81. With its extended run into 1990, *Look Who's Talking*, a November 1989 release, eventually earned about \$140 million. Due to its magically talking baby and the childish perspective associated with it, this romantic comedy can also be considered as a family movie, which helps to explain its greater success.
- 35 'In Zahlen', *steadycam* no. 14 (1989), p. 9; no. 15 (1990), p. 10.
- 36 'Industry economic review and audience profile', p. 389. Cf. Leonard Klady, 'Numbers game at showst', *Variety*, 10 March 1997, pp. 7, 15.
- 37 Press book contained in file MFL x n.c.3.106 no. 19, BRTC.
- 38 Lawrence van Gelder, 'At the movies', *New York Times*, 23 March 1990, p. C8.
- 39 Holly Golightly is the character played by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). Hepburn also played Eliza Dolittle in the 1964 film version of the musical *My*

Fair Lady, key scenes of which are restaged in *Pretty Woman*. Hepburn makes an appearance in *Pretty Woman* in a clip from *Charade* (1963), which Vivian watches on television.

- 40 Dave Kehr, 'Pretty ugly: a crass movie desecrates a classic song title', *Chicago Tribune*, 23 March 1990, Section 2, p. 6; Gary Giddins, review, *Village Voice*, 27 March 1990, p. 61; Julie Salamon, 'Film: get rich, get happy?', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1990, p. A12; Richard Corliss, 'Sinderella', *Time*, 2 April 1990; Linda Winer, 'Pretty Woman, ugly message', *Newsday*, 27 April 1990, Part II, p. 2; David Sterritt, 'Pretty Woman's ugly message', *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 April 1990, p. 10; Paul Baumann, 'What's left of desire?', *Commonweal*, 4 May 1990, p. 296.
- 41 John Simon, review, *New York*, 31 April 1990, p. 61; Lewis Archibald, 'Fun – if you don't make many demands', *Downtown*, 28 March 1990, p. 12A.
- 42 Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, 3 June 1990, Section 2, p. 19. Cf. Roger Ebert, 'Pretty good', *New York Daily News*, 23 March 1990, p. 39.
- 43 Andrew Sarris, 'Star Roberts: the stuff dreams are made of', *New York Observer*, 16 April 1990, p. 30; Janet Maslin, 'High-rolling boy meets streetwalking girl', *New York Times*, 23 March 1990, p. C20.
- 44 Geraldine Fabrikant, 'Pretty Woman finds best friend in profit', *New York Times*, 21 July 1990, p. 29.
- 45 Cf. Joseph Gelmis, 'A sexy Cinderella, or "My Fair Hooker"', *Newsday*, 19 October 1990, Part II, p. 41.
- 46 Press book contained in file MFL x n.c.3 108 no. 21, BRTC.
- 47 *Variety*, 11 July 1990, p. 30.
- 48 Julie Salamon, review, *Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 1990, p. A8; Terry Kelleher, review, *Newsday*, 13 July 1990, Part II, p. 13; Georgie Brown, review, *Village Voice*, 17 July 1990, p. 63; Terrence Rafferty, review, *New Yorker*, 30 July 1990, p. 80. For a mixed review see, for example, Roger Ebert, *New York Daily News*, 13 July 1990, p. 43.
- 49 Susan Kittenplan, review, *The West Side Spirit*, 31 July 1990, p. 22.
- 50 David Sterritt, 'Ghost provides a second-rate showcase for a first-rate talent: Whoopi Goldberg', *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 August 1990, p. 11.
- 51 Richard Corliss, review, *Time*, 16 July 1990, pp. 86–7.
- 52 Jami Bernard, review, *New York Post*, 13 July 1990, p. 27.
- 53 David Bartholomew, review, *Film Journal*, August 1990, p. 22.
- 54 Larry Rohter, 'Top movie of the year a sleeper: it's *Ghost*', *New York Times*, 3 November 1990, p. 13. Cf. Joseph McBride, 'Ghost to top domestic b.o. at year's end', *Variety*, 12 November 1990, p. 3.
- 55 *Ghost* opened in 1,101 movie theatres, taking in \$12.2 million. By contrast, the most expensive summer release, *Total Recall* (reputedly the most expensive film of all time up to this point, with a budget of over \$60 million, as opposed to *Ghost's* \$18 million), opened in 2,060 theatres and took in \$25.5 million during the first weekend, yet had dropped down to 1,787 theatres and \$4.2 million by the 6th weekend, when *Ghost* was still performing very strongly with \$8.3 million on 1,766 theatres: 'In Zahlen', *steadycam* no.17, 1990, p. 11. There was enormous demand for *Ghost* from video rental shops, and even at the high price of \$100 it performed well in the sell-through market. 'Believers in *Ghost*', *Newsday*, 26 April 1991, p. 78.

- 56 Amy Taubin, 'Stocks and the bonds that tie', *Village Voice*, 4 December 1990, p. 11.
 57 'In Zahlen', *steadycam* no. 18, 1991, p. 11.
 58 Leonard Klady, 'Apollo' launched on all-time b.o. list', *Variety*, 26 February 1996, p. 46.
 59 *Variety*, 3 June 1996, p. 70.
 60 Anne Thompson, 'Studios stick to their guns over sex appeal of pics', *Variety*, 7 January 1991, pp. 109, 111.
 61 Quoted in Thompson, 'Studios stick to their guns', p. 111.
 62 See Peter Krämer, 'Women First: *Titanic* (1997), action-adventure films and Hollywood's female audience', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 18 no. 4, October 1998, pp. 599-618.

6 Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'family film'

Robert C. Allen

The first shot of *Junior* opens on the back of a donnishly dressed Arnold Schwarzenegger, as he walks through the stacks of what appears to be a research library. He and we hear the wails of an infant, which Arnold locates lying alone atop the circulation desk. 'There's a baby here,' he notes with surprise to himself and the audience. 'There must be a mother. Hell, there's a baby.' Seeing no-one else around, Arnold reluctantly picks the baby up, holding it in front of him at arm's length as it were a bomb about to go off. Which it does: relieving itself all over Arnold's jacket and pants. 'Help,' he cries, carrying the baby toward the camera. We switch to a reverse shot which reveals an 'audience' of other babies, sitting in armchairs arrayed theatre-style watching him. We cut to a close-up of Arnold's horrified expression, but as the shot pulls back we see him in pyjamas in his bed. His encounter with babies has been a nightmare.

Behind the opening credits of *Home Alone*, a policeman (Joe Pesci) approaches the front door of a large, upper-middle-class, suburban home, and tries unsuccessfully to gain the attention of a succession of children as they scurry through the foyer, intent on the completion of individual missions. We cut to a bedroom in the house, where Catherine O'Hara's character is simultaneously talking on the phone and packing things into suitcases spread out on the bed. Kevin (Macaulay Culkin), a pre-adolescent boy, enters the room to complain that his Uncle Frank will not allow him to join the big kids watching a feature film on video. 'And it is not even rated "R"; he protests. Meanwhile, back at the front door, the policeman (who turns out to be a burglar posing as a policeman) asks one of the hurrying children, 'Are your parents home?'

'Yes', she says, 'but they don't live here.' She darts past him.

He asks another the same question.

'My parents live in Paris - sorry,' is her reply.

'Are your parents home?' he asks a third.

'Yes.'

'Do they live here?'

'No.'

'All kids, no parents,' Pesci's character concludes to himself and the audience. 'Probably a fancy orphanage.'

These two scenes speak in different ways to the conjunction of social, demographic, technological and economic forces that link contemporary popular media to the