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'The Best Disney Film Disney Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s'

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When it comes to research on American cinema, children's films are very low on the academic agenda, at least in film studies.² There is, for example, not a single index entry for the term 'children's films', nor for the related term 'family films', in Barry Keith Grant's 1986 collection *Film Genre Reader* (as compared, for example, to three entries for 'women's films').³ The recent fundamental revisions to genre studies proposed by Nick Browne, Rick Altman and Steve Neale also fail to mention children's or family films.⁴ Browne's collection, *Refiguring American Film Genres*, contains plenty of material on 'family melodrama' and 'women's films', as does Altman's *Film/Genre*, yet there is no generic label in the indices for films addressed primarily to children (and their parents). Altman's genre index moves from 'chick flick' to 'college comedy' and from 'exploitation' to 'fantastic'. Similarly, there is a blank spot in Neale's index between 'chase film' and 'chiller'. However, in his survey of *Variety* reviews from the mid-1980s, Neale did come across the labels 'family film' and 'family pic' (the latter being applied to *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984)).⁵ This begins to acknowledge the common-sense assumption that the labels 'children's film' and 'family film' are used both by the film industry and by film audiences, even if they do not feature in genre studies. Confirmation of this assumption, if such is needed, comes from the classification system of video stores, which tend to have a children's section, and from audience surveys. When, in 1982, 1000 Americans aged eighteen and over were asked about their cinemagoing habits and movie preferences, one of the nine types of film offered to them was 'children's': 19.2 per cent said they had recently seen a children's film, and 30.2 per cent said they were interested in viewing children's films in the coming year; not surprisingly, many of these respondents were women aged twenty-five to fifty-four, most likely mothers.⁶ Also, not surprisingly, in respondents' ranking of favourite movie types, children's films came last (only 2.6 per cent said it was their favourite), while comedy, drama and science fiction came first; these were also the types of films respondents had seen most often recently and most wanted to see in the future.

It seems, then, that children's and family films are viable categories in the marketing

and reception of contemporary Hollywood films, but at first sight they appear to be quite marginal for the majority of the non-child audience and for the film industry. A simple working definition would be that children's films are films made specifically for children. (Children are here understood as those aged twelve and younger; thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds are specifically targeted with teen films, a much more prominent category in film studies.) Similarly, family films can be defined as those films aimed at both children and their parents. Of course, there is considerable overlap between the two categories because the producers of children's films, just as those of children's literature, will often attempt also to appeal to parents who, after all, have to pay for their children's entertainment and often join them in it.⁷ An important practical reason for the neglect of children's and family films in film studies is their sheer diversity: they range from comedies to adventure stories, from fairy tales to science fiction, and, apart from the frequent presence of child or animal protagonists and slapstick humour as well as magical spectacle, they do not have much in common and therefore resist the systematic analysis of iconography, narrative patterns and thematic concerns underpinning much of genre studies.

However, it would appear that another reason for the academic neglect of children's and family films is a set of prejudices, namely that by and large they are cheaply made and simply not very good and not even very important commercially. But what if these assumptions are misleading with respect to contemporary Hollywood? What if many of the most cherished and most successful (and not always very cheap) American films in recent decades can be understood as children's or family films?

E.T., Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, 1977–84

Let us begin with another look at the September 1982 audience survey referred to above. Comedy was by far respondents' preferred type of film: 33.5 per cent declared it to be their favourite, whereas 17.8 per cent said drama and 12.4 per cent science fiction; 80.1 per cent of respondents expressed an interest in seeing comedies in the coming year, 59 per cent drama and 43.3 per cent science fiction. However, when it came to the types of film that they had recently seen, science fiction was well ahead of drama and almost tied with comedy (at around 50 per cent). The reason for this was the enormous popularity of a single film, namely Steven Spielberg's *E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial* (released in June 1982), which had been seen by about 50 per cent of all respondents.⁸ The impact of *E.T.* on the survey's respondents does not come as a big surprise when one considers the fact that, in September 1982, *E.T.* was about to surpass the box-office take of *Star Wars* (1977) and become the top-grossing film of all time in the US. By the end of the year, *E.T.* had a domestic gross of \$367.7 million, which was more than 10 per cent of the film industry's total American box-office revenues in 1982 of \$3452.7 million.⁹ Thus, more than ten out of every one hundred cinema tickets bought in the US in 1982 were purchased for *E.T.*

Respondents in the audience survey on the whole classified *E.T.* as science fiction, yet they could just as easily have classified it as a children's film, taking their lead from many of the film's enthusiastic reviewers. The *Christian Science Monitor*, for example,

declared that 'children are the natural audience for *E.T.*' because Spielberg 'understands what makes kids tick'.¹⁰ The *New York Times* predicted that it 'may become a children's classic of the space age' because it was 'full of the timeless longings expressed in children's literature of all eras'.¹¹ *Variety* wrote that *E.T.* 'may be the best film Disney never made' and 'is certain to capture the imagination of the world's youth in the manner of most of his (Spielberg's) earlier pics, as well as those of George Lucas'.¹² The Disney reference makes it clear that with 'youth' *Variety* was first and foremost thinking about children and that therefore many of Spielberg's and Lucas' earlier films could also be subsumed under the category of children's films. Indeed, *Variety's* reviews of *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) had compared these films to classic children's entertainment; according to *Variety*, *Star Wars* 'equals the genius of Walt Disney', watching the opening of the sequel is 'like walking through the front gate of Disneyland' and *Raiders* is 'the stuff that raucous Saturday matinees at the local Bijou once were made of'.¹³ It is important to note, however, that *Variety's* reviewer had been reluctant to use the label 'children's film' because of 'all the derogatory overtones that go with that description' – presumably the prejudice that children's films on the whole were cheap, badly made and only suitable for children.¹⁴

Instead of using this problematic label, *Variety* reviews of Spielberg's and Lucas's blockbusters had emphasised their 'all-age appeal' (*Star Wars*) and the fact that they were designed 'to reach a very broad blockbuster-type mass audience' (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)) or 'broad-based summer audiences' (*Raiders*), which emphatically included children, but which strongly signalled that teenagers and adults were by no means excluded.¹⁵ This rhetorical strategy is also in evidence with the two megahits that followed *E.T.*: *Variety's* review of *Return of the Jedi* (1983) highlighted the Ewoks, 'a tribe of fuzzy, sweet little creatures that continually cause ahhs among the audience (and will doubtlessly sell thousands of dolls)';¹⁶ and its review of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), while never using the label children's film, contained a whole paragraph about child audiences: 'Kids 10–12 upwards will eat it all up, of course', but the film 'might prove extraordinarily frightening to younger children, who, indeed, are being catered to ... by the presence of the adorable 12-year-old Ke Huy Quan'.¹⁷ Thus *Variety* indicated, albeit somewhat indirectly, that an important audience segment for Spielberg's and Lucas's megahits from *Star Wars* onwards were children aged twelve and younger. The fact that by 1983 *E.T.*, the *Star Wars* trilogy and the first Indiana Jones film occupied five of the six top places on the list of all-time American Top Grossers (the other film was *Jaws* (1975)), and that in 1984 the second Indiana Jones film also made it into the all-time top ten,¹⁸ clearly establishes the central importance of the child audience and of films addressed, at least partially, to children during the years 1977–84. Is this an exceptional period or is it representative of American cinema since the 1960s? In order to answer this question, let us first of all take a look at the 1960s and 1970s and, in particular, at the operations of the Disney company, which, as we have seen, was one of the main reference points for critics commenting on the special appeal of Lucas's and Spielberg's films.

Disney after Walt and the changing status of family entertainment, 1966–84

From the 1920s onwards, the Disney label was associated with children's and family entertainment to such an extent that the company managed the rare feat of having its brand name become largely synonymous with the product categories to which its output belonged. Just as 'Kleenex' could be used as a synonym for paper handkerchiefs, 'Disney' stood in for all manner of children's and family fare. By the 1950s, the Disney brand was prominent, if not dominant, in each of the following arenas: animated features, theme parks, nature films, cartoon shorts, children's television and children's merchandise. It is often assumed that Walt Disney's death in 1966 brought an end to the company's glory days, initiating an eighteen-year period – until the arrival of Michael Eisner as chief executive in 1984 – of corporate instability and commercial crisis, especially with respect to Disney's animated and live-action features. However a look at Disney's financial statistics and at box-office hit lists reveals a more complicated picture.

The late 1960s and 1970s were a period of explosive growth for the Disney company. Profits rose from \$12.4 million in 1965, the year before Walt Disney's death, to \$21.8 million in 1970 and \$61.7 million in 1975, climaxing with \$135.1 million in 1980 (more than ten times the figure for 1965), before they declined again.¹⁹ The value of the company's assets almost doubled between 1970 and 1971 (from \$275.2 million to \$505.2 million), mainly due to the opening of Walt Disney World in October 1971, and, unlike the profits, asset value never stopped rising: between 1965 and 1980, it increased almost fifteenfold (from \$90.8 million to \$1347.4 million), and between 1980 and 1983 it almost doubled again (to \$2381.1 million).²⁰ Revenues also grew healthily in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, from \$109.9 million in 1965 to \$167.1 million in 1970, \$520 million in 1975 and \$914.5 million in 1980. After virtually zero growth between 1980 and 1981, revenues rose again dramatically in subsequent years.²¹ This overview suggests that Disney's much talked about crisis came in the early 1980s and not in the years immediately following Walt Disney's death.

What about the performance of Disney's feature films (as distinct from its theme parks and merchandising)? Even Janet Wasko, Disney's most knowledgeable analyst, describes the 1970s as a period of crisis for Disney's feature film division.²² Yet the evidence is ambiguous. It is certainly the case that the theme parks and the consumer products division easily outperformed the division concerned with the release of theatrical features. In 1975, for example, Disneyland generated revenues of \$109.1 million and Walt Disney World \$225.3 million. Together the two parks made up the Entertainment and Recreational Activities division, which had an operating income of \$64.1 million.²³ For consumer products (including merchandising, educational media, records and publications), revenues were \$70.4 million and operating income was \$21.7 million.²⁴ With \$112.5 million, the Motion Picture and Television Distribution division generated far less revenue than the theme parks, yet more than the Consumer Products division. Its operating income of \$56.6 million was much higher than the figure for Consumer Products and came close to the figure for the theme parks. Thus, while the theme parks clearly dominated Disney's operations in 1975 (and, indeed, in the 1970s as a

whole), the Motion Picture and Television Distribution division performed reasonably well, though its relative importance was clearly in decline. Domestic film rentals rose from \$35.5 million in 1971 to \$61.2 million in 1975 and to \$65 million in 1978.²⁵ Foreign rentals grew more rapidly, from \$21.6 million in 1971 to \$37.6 million in 1975 and \$58 million in 1978. The overall revenues of the Motion Picture and Television Distribution division (including a relatively small amount for TV) increased from \$65.1 million in 1971 to \$161.4 million in 1980.²⁶ But the increase was less than threefold, compared to the sixfold increase in company revenues as a whole across the decade. Furthermore, the division's operating income (and thus its profitability) was shrinking; the figure for 1980 was \$48.7 million, which was less than the 1975 figure and also less than the 1980 operating income for Consumer Products (\$55.1 million).²⁷ In 1981, the operating income for film and television had further shrunk by more than a third. Thus, by the early 1980s, Disney's film and television division was indeed in definite crisis.

What about the box-office performance of individual Disney releases in the 1970s? It is often assumed that after *The Jungle Book* (1967) Disney failed to produce big hits and instead generated its theatrical income from cheaply produced and only moderately successful films (and of course from highly profitable re-releases). A look at *Variety's* annual hit lists for the US market shows that the situation was in fact by no means clear cut.²⁸ It is true that, compared to some of the high points in the company's past (three of the top four hits of 1961 were Disney releases; when it was first released in 1964, *Mary Poppins* became one of the top-grossing films of all time), Disney's feature films of the late 1960s and 1970s underperformed. However, it should also be noted that *Variety* listed the live-action film *The Love Bug* as the top hit of 1969.²⁹ *The Love Bug* was followed by two successful sequels, *Herbie Rides Again* (released in 1974, and ranked number 5 in *Variety's* hit list for the year) and *Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo* (1977, number twenty). Other top hits included *The Happiest Millionaire* (1967, number twenty in 1968), *The Island at the Top of the World* and *Escape to Witch Mountain* (both released in 1974, yet listed as numbers fourteen and twenty, respectively, for 1975), as well as *The Apple Dumpling Gang* (1975, number eleven), the animated *The Aristocats* (1970, number six in 1971), *Robin Hood* (1973, number eighteen in 1974) and *The Rescuers* (1977, number fifteen); and the animation/live-action hybrids *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971, number eleven in 1972) and *Pete's Dragon* (1977, number sixteen in 1978). With rentals of \$10–20 million, Disney's hits performed well below the blockbuster business of *The Godfather* (1972, \$86.3 million), *The Exorcist* (1973, \$82.2 million) and *Jaws* (\$121.3 million). Yet it is important to note that the studio consistently managed to produce new hits.

Thus the movie charts of the 1970s were by no means devoid of Disney films (one or, more often, two top twenty hits per year up to 1978). Furthermore, as noted earlier on, Disney was a rapidly growing multimedia corporation with even greater strengths in the equally child and family-oriented theme park business and in the selling or licensing of a wide range of children's products. It is understandable, then, that Disney was a common reference point for reviewers when they tried to make sense of Lucas's and Spielberg's child-friendly blockbusters. However, in the light of the lacklustre

performance of Disney's film division in the 1970s (when compared to the performance of Disney's other divisions and to the blockbusters released by other studios), it is also understandable that film-makers such as Lucas and Spielberg did not want to be associated too closely either with Disney's films or with children's films in general.

The early publicity for the production of *Star Wars* described it as a science-fiction adventure for teenagers, rather than children. Privately, Lucas came to realise, however, that he was in fact making a children's film, and he himself invoked the name of Disney: '[T]hat's what we're going for, eight- and nine-year-olds. This is a Disney movie.'³⁰ He was uncertain about the value of this comparison. After a disastrous screening of *Star Wars* for friends and colleagues early in 1977, Lucas felt the film would reach '[o]nly kids – I've made a Walt Disney movie ... It's gonna do maybe eight, ten million.'³¹ Similarly, Spielberg developed *Close Encounters* in the 1970s with reference to two key cinematic childhood memories, the 'Night on Bald Mountain' sequence in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and the performance of the song 'When You Wish upon a Star' in Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940): 'I pretty much hung my story on the mood the song created, the way it affected me emotionally.'³² At the same time, Spielberg did not want *Close Encounters* to be associated too closely with Disney, and after a test screening he removed 'When You Wish upon a Star' from the end of the movie: '[T]his song seemed to belie some of the authenticity and to bespeak fantasy and fairy tale. And I didn't want *Close Encounters* to end just as a dream.'³³ For film-makers as well as reviewers, then, references to Disney and to children's films were double-edged. They linked new releases to one of the undisputed masters of American cinema and signalled their address of basic human desires and emotions, yet they also indicated that the films in question might be unsuitable for teenagers and adults, and therefore of only limited commercial appeal. What Lucas and Spielberg tried to achieve from 1977 onwards – and what the largely positive reviews of their films duly noted – was a return to old-fashioned family entertainment which was suitable for children not because it exclusively or even primarily was addressed to them, but because it was accessible to everyone.

Not coincidentally, the Disney company was aiming to do the same thing from the mid-1970s. As early as 1973, after *The Godfather* (1972) had raised the stakes in the blockbuster game, the cultural and commercial limitations of Disney's film output, and of children's films in general, became a topic of public debate. Richard Schickel argued in *Time* magazine that Disney's recent successes were a result of the fact that the company:

carefully – and exclusively – addresses itself to the most common problem of the entertainment consumer: 'Where can we take the kids?' In order to do so, the corporation has sacrificed creative vitality, cultural relevance and its former, justifiable pretensions to genuine, if inevitably industrialized, artistry.³⁴

Schickel explained this development with reference to the lack of competition in, and critical attention to, the field of family entertainment, and to the narrowing definition of acceptable 'family fare' among 'the general audience': 'cuddly animals, bland costume pictures enlivened by painfully obvious song-and-dance numbers and not much else'.

Whether one agrees with Schickel's condemnation of Disney's output in the early 1970s or not, he pinpoints a number of crucial developments in American cinema during this period. Until its modification in 1966, the film industry's Production Code had been designed to make Hollywood's films suitable for audiences of all ages; most importantly, the removal of bad language, explicit sex and graphic violence was meant to ensure that parents would not have to worry about taking their children to the movies. Thus, notwithstanding age-related taste differences at a basic level, all of Hollywood's releases were intended for the whole family. By the early 1960s, however, various commentators noted that the increasingly 'adult' subject matter of many Hollywood films had undermined this ideal. They called for an increase in the production of 'family movies', which they began to see as a separate category, rather than as the underlying ideal of Hollywood's overall output.³⁵ Predictably, the Disney company was identified as the most important producer of family films, and, while these commentators upheld the ideal of family entertainment and celebrated Disney's output, they also pointed out the negative connotations that were beginning to accrue to them: 'Too often we tend to classify as family film that which is harmless, flavourless, empty and insipid.'³⁶

The modification of the Production Code in 1966 and its replacement by a ratings system in 1968 consolidated the identification of family films as a separate and, in many ways, rather negative category within Hollywood's output. The original ratings were G ('Suggested for general audiences'), M ('Suggested for mature audiences'), R ('Restricted – Persons under 16 not admitted, unless accompanied by parent or adult guardian') and X ('Persons under 16 not admitted').³⁷ They were intended to ensure that children and young teenagers would not be allowed to see certain (X-rated) films, films which went beyond mainstream taste and morality in their 'treatment of sex, violence, crime or profanity'. As far as all other films were concerned, they were intended to enable parents to make an informed decision about which films they wanted their children to see.

Early reports in November 1968 seemed to indicate that G would be the most frequently used rating (44 per cent of all films) and therefore that Hollywood's traditional conception of its audience would survive the abandonment of the Production Code: Hollywood's G-rated pictures 'will serve the motion picture wants of youngsters of 6 to 12, their parents and those in-between'.³⁸ However, in November 1969, it became clear that G-rated films were a clear minority (32 per cent).³⁹ Furthermore, there were indications that the G rating would take on a more specific meaning than originally envisioned: rather than indicating a film's suitability for children as part of a general audience, it began to be understood as a label for films 'that are unfit for adults'.⁴⁰ Specific reference was made to Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964) and to what was at this point the highest-grossing film in Hollywood history, *The Sound of Music* (1965).⁴¹ Thus the very films that had represented Hollywood's ideal and defined its mainstream were increasingly considered as a separate, indeed marginal, category. Not surprisingly, apart from the Disney films discussed above, very few G-rated movies made it into *Variety's* annual top twenty in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and, of these, most were big-budget musicals such as *Oliver!* (1968, number eight in 1969), *Hello Dolly!* (1969, number six in 1970) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971, number two in 1972). These were probably the

films Schickel had in mind when referring to 'bland costume pictures enlivened by painfully obvious song-and-dance numbers'. Within a couple of years, the big-budget family-oriented musicals had disappeared from the annual charts, and the only non-Disney hits with G ratings were now lower-budget films, mostly slapstick comedies such as the Pink Panther films, animal films such as *Benji* (1974) and nature films such as *The Wilderness Family* (1975).⁴² By 1978, the G-rating had not only become associated with comparatively cheap children's films, it had also become virtually synonymous with Disney, and Disney, in turn, with blandness: 'Makers of non-Disney family films ... have lamented the tendency of audiences to prejudice G pictures as scrubbed and bland'.⁴³

At this point, Disney was well into the production of its most expensive film ever, *The Black Hole* (1979), its first non-G-rated film. *The Black Hole* (then entitled *Space Station*), had been announced in 1975 as Disney's 'most ambitious live-action feature to date'.⁴⁴ It was thus initially not so much a response to *Star Wars* (and *Close Encounters*) as a parallel development. Like Lucas and Spielberg, Disney in the mid-1970s sought to overcome the commercial limitations of children's films by returning to an older conception of family entertainment, one which embraced all age groups and in particular the cinema's core audience of teenagers and young adults. Disney's decision to make a science-fiction film was perhaps influenced by the success the company had had with its special-effects-driven big-budget production of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1954, number three in *Variety's* hit list for 1955). (*The Black Hole* would feature another 'mad scientist' automatically ruling his little empire until disturbed and eventually destroyed by a group of unwelcome visitors.) But in any case, the success of *Star Wars* had raised the stakes. The budget for *The Black Hole* shot up from around \$10 million to \$18 million, and Disney's initial resistance to the PG rating gave way to the company's wholehearted embrace of this rating as a sign of new-found (or rediscovered) maturity. When the film was finally released at Christmas in 1979, studio president Ron Miller was quoted as saying:

When a studio gets a reputation for making a certain kind of movie and that movie is considered kiddie stuff, you lose your entire audience when it turns 15. Those people don't come back until they have kiddies of their own.

He was confident that with *The Black Hole* Disney would:

win back that slightly older crowd – the audience we used to have back in the 1950s with films like *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* ... Ideally, this is the film that will take Disney to that all-important 15- to 30 year old group. The people who have seen *Star Wars* or *Close Encounters* two or three times.⁴⁵

As it turned out, with rentals of \$25.4 million, *The Black Hole* became Disney's biggest hit since *Mary Poppins*, though it fell well short of the blockbuster business of Lucas's and Spielberg's megahits and, because of the size of its budget, was less profitable than Disney's other hits in the 1970s.⁴⁶ Disney's big-budget productions of the early 1980s – *Popeye* (1980) and *Dragonslayer* (1981), both co-produced with Paramount, and *Tron*

(1981) – at best achieved the level of success of *The Black Hole* (*Popeye's* rentals were \$24.6 million) and at worst were commercial disasters.⁴⁷ Thus the Disney company failed to break out of the children's ghetto, despite its clearly stated objective that 'we must attract more teenagers and young adults' and its claims that the 'elements synonymous with our company's reputation' were 'fantasy, escape, adventure and the potential for innovative special effects'.⁴⁸ In fact, instead of moving Disney back into the highly profitable cinematic mainstream, increased production costs meant, as we have seen, that the profits of the film and TV division were in decline in the early 1980s. It is somewhat ironic that, at the very same time, Lucas and Spielberg were breaking box-office records with their Disney-influenced family films, that most of their megahits generated huge income through what had previously been almost exclusively a Disney speciality – namely, movie-related merchandising – and that family entertainment moved back to the centre of Hollywood's operations between 1977 and 1984. What has happened to children's films and family entertainment since then?

Kids rule: children's films and family entertainment since 1984

The most successful films in contemporary Hollywood are what I have elsewhere called 'family-adventure movies', films which depict the spectacular adventures of familial groups and which are addressed to children and their parents as well as to the cinema's core audience of teenagers and young adults.⁴⁹ These films derive, on the one hand, from Lucas's and Spielberg's hugely successful attempt between 1977 and 1984 to broaden the appeal of big-budget action-adventure and science-fiction films to reach children and their parents, and, on the other hand, from Disney's initially unsuccessful attempt to upgrade traditional children's fare with bigger budgets, more spectacle and more mature themes so as to reach teenagers and young adults. Since 1984, almost every year has seen one or two films of this kind become megahits, leaving the competition far behind by achieving a market share of around 5 per cent of total US box-office revenues, as well as doing exceptionally well in foreign markets, video sales and rentals, on TV and in terms of merchandising, sequels and spin-offs. Examples include *Ghostbusters* (1984) and *Back to the Future* (1985), as well as the more recent *The Phantom Menace* (1999) and *Toy Story 2* (1999). As a look at the Internet Movie Database's list of all-time top-grossing movies at the US box office reveals, the main producers of such megahits are Spielberg, Lucas and Disney.⁵⁰ With the exception of Disney's animated features, none of these megahits is G-rated; indeed, their PG or PG-13 rating signals their dual address to both children and parents.

What can we say about the status of films primarily, and sometime exclusively, addressed to children? Here we need to look at G-rated films and animation. The relative decline in the number of G-rated films has continued into the 1990s: whereas in 1968–69 about a third of all films were rated G, between 1993 and 1997 it was only 4.4 per cent.⁵¹ With their declining share of Hollywood's output, G-rated films have become ever more closely identified with children's entertainment. Interestingly, their share of box-office revenues was much higher (6.1 per cent) than their share of films on the market⁵² because, on average, they performed better than films with other ratings,

earning \$45.3 million per film in the domestic market as compared to \$32 million for PG-rated films, \$42.1 million for those rated PG-13 and \$29.2 million for those rated R.⁵³ As G-rated films also tended to be cheaper than films in other categories, they were more profitable – costing less and earning more.

The most successful G-rated films were animated features, most importantly those released by Disney. While animated features are generally understood first and foremost as children's films, they can do blockbuster business by reaching other age groups. To increase their chances with teenage and adult audiences and to differentiate themselves from Disney products, most other producers of animated features (in particular DreamWorks with, for example, *The Prince of Egypt* [1998], *Antz* [1998], and *The Road to El Dorado* [2000]) have gone for PG ratings, mostly without success.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, overall output and market share have increased in recent years.⁵⁵ Between 1994 and 1997, the number of major animated releases was steady with around five films a year, but since 1997 the number has doubled.⁵⁶ Disney has the bulk of the animation market share (over 50 per cent), but Warner Bros., Sony, Paramount and especially DreamWorks are also significant players. From 1994–7, total American box-office revenues for animated features were mostly between \$300 million and \$400 million, yet since 1998 there has been a dramatic increase (in line with the increased output), with 1999 marking an all-time high with almost \$750 million, which was 10 per cent of total domestic box-office revenues in that year.⁵⁷ When it comes to calculating children's share of total cinema admissions, there are, unfortunately, no reliable statistics, as the industry's audience surveys only include persons aged twelve and older. Estimates for ticket sales to children aged twelve and younger (attending children's films as well as others) range from an unrealistic low of 6 per cent to up to 20 per cent of total ticket sales.⁵⁸

However, the real importance of children and children's films for contemporary Hollywood only becomes really apparent when we examine video sales, which are the single most important source of income for the major studios.⁵⁹ The list of all-time top-selling videos in the US as of June 1998 (that is, before the video release of *Titanic* (1974) and Disney hits such as *Toy Story 2*, which have no doubt made it into the top ten by now) was headed by Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), which sold 28.8 million wholesale units (that is, videos sold to retailers and video stores for sell-through or rental purposes), generating \$427 million in wholesale revenues (that is, money paid by retailers and rental stores to Disney; the money paid by customers buying or renting the videos is, of course, much more).⁶⁰ To put wholesale video revenues in perspective, let us compare them to the film's box-office rentals, that is, the money paid by cinemas to Disney (usually about half of the overall box-office gross paid by audiences to cinemas). By the end of 1998, *The Lion King* was number eight in *Variety's* list of all-time rental champions in the US with \$173.1 million, that is less than half the wholesale video revenues.⁶¹ The video sales list continues as follows:

- *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937, Disney), 25.1 million units generating \$372 million in wholesale video revenues (as compared to \$81 million in box-office rentals)



Shrek (2001): another non-Disney blockbuster

- *Aladdin* (1992, Disney), 22.4 million units/\$352.7 million (\$112 million box-office rentals)
- *Beauty and the Beast* (1991, Disney), 20.2 million units/\$318 million (\$69 million box-office rentals)
- *Toy Story* (1995, Disney), 19.5 million units/\$290 million (\$103 million box-office rentals)
- *Jurassic Park* (1993, Universal), 20 million units/\$275 million (\$213 million box-office rentals)
- *Independence Day* (1996, Fox), 20.4 million units/\$258 million (\$177 million box-office rentals)
- *Men in Black* (1997, Columbia), 16.9 million units/\$232 million (\$118 million box-office rentals)
- *Pocahontas* (1995, Disney), 17.1 million units/\$216 million (\$68 million box-office rentals)
- *Fantasia* (1940, Disney), 13.3 million units/\$209 million (\$42 million box-office rentals)

The fact that seven of the top ten films are Disney animated features, and that the other three belong into the category of family-adventure movies, is, as common-sense and industry analysts tell us, 'thanks to the voracious repeat-viewing demands of children'.⁶² It is also the demands of children which drive the huge market in movie merchandising (most of it tied in with children's or family films), from which the major studios earn

licensing fees of around 6–7 per cent of the wholesale price, and the growing theme park market, in which several of the major studios have a stake.⁶³

Conclusion

Children's and family films are at the very heart of today's media conglomerates and indeed today's popular culture, because the majority of the most popular and most profitable films and multimedia franchises are primarily (but not exclusively) 'kids' stuff'.⁶⁴ After Hollywood's marginalisation of family entertainment in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was the combined efforts of Disney on the one hand and Spielberg and Lucas on the other that moved children (and their parents) back to the centre of the cinema and related media markets. This trend is not abating. Quite the contrary, DreamWorks' *Sbrek* (2001) proved that blockbuster success in the animation field is no longer limited to Disney.⁶⁵ *Dr Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (the top grossing movie in the US in 2000) showed that there is a lot of classic children's fiction just waiting to be adapted for the big screen. And the excitement about Chris Columbus's Harry Potter adaptation sent all of Hollywood into what *Variety* called 'Pottermania'.⁶⁶ It is time, then, for the study of film genres to take note of children's films.

Notes

1. Research for this essay in American archives was made possible by a Small Grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board.
2. The situation is different in folklore studies and the study of children's fiction (within the disciplines of literary or educational studies). Here, there is a steady output of publications on fairy-tale and children's films.
3. Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). This situation has not changed in the book's updated second edition *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
4. Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999); Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: BFI, 2000).
5. Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, pp. 245–6.
6. 'Movie Omnibus – September 1982', report contained in the 'Audiences' clippings file, Film Study Centre, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Similar findings are reported in Jim Robbins, 'Survey Says Public Likes Sci-Fi But Really Loves Comedy', *Variety*, 22 September 1982, p. 22.
7. See Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples, 'Unshrinking the Kids: Children's Cinema and the Family Film', in Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (eds), *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences* (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 92, 95; and Heather Addison, 'Children's Films in the 1990s', in Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed.), *Film Genre 2000: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 177. For other work on children's and family films, see Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Peter Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child To See

- This Film?': The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie', in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 294–311.
8. 'Movie Omnibus – September 1982' and Robbins, Survey Says 'Public Likes Sci-Fi But Really Loves Comedy'.
 9. 'The 1980s: A Reference Guide to Motion Pictures, Television, VCR, and Cable', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 27 (Spring 1991), pp. 78, 82.
 10. David Sterritt, review, *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 June 1982, p. 18.
 11. Vincent Canby, review, *New York Times*, 11 June 1982, p. C14.
 12. Review, *Variety*, 26 May 1982, reprinted in George Perry, *Steven Spielberg: The Making of His Movies* (London: Orion, 1998), pp. 114–16.
 13. *Variety's* reviews of these films are reprinted in Chris Salewicz, *George Lucas: The Making of His Movies* (London: Orion, 1998), pp. 123–5, 128–32.
 14. A. D. Murphy, *Star Wars* review, *Variety*, 25 May 1977, reprinted in Salewicz, *George Lucas*, p. 124.
 15. The reviews of *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* are reprinted in Salewicz, *George Lucas*, pp. 123–5, 130–2, and of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in Perry, *Steven Spielberg*, pp. 108–9.
 16. *Variety*, 18 May 1983, reprinted in Salewicz, *George Lucas*, p. 133.
 17. *Variety*, 16 May 1984, reprinted in Salewicz, *George Lucas*, p. 136.
 18. Other child-friendly hits of 1984 were *Ghostbusters*, *Gremlins* and *The Karate Kid*, all joining *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in the top five for the year.
 19. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975, contained in 'Walt Disney Productions' clippings file, Performing Arts Research Center (PARC), New York Public Library; Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (London: Polity Press, 2001), p. 31.
 20. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975; Wasko, *Understanding Disney*, p. 31.
 21. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975; Wasko, *Understanding Disney*, p. 31.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 23. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975.
 24. Operating income is calculated by subtracting the costs generated by the division in question from its revenues. It is only after the further deduction of general corporate expenses and income tax that the figure for net income, or profits, is arrived at.
 25. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975; 'New Disney World High', *Variety*, 18 October 1978, p. 4.
 26. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975; 'New Disney World High', p. 4; Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1981, contained in file MFL+n.c.2,331 No. 20, PARC.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. For hit lists and rental figures, see Cobbett Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), pp. 3–8, 24–8.
 29. Of all films released in 1969, only *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* would eventually earn more.
 30. Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 328.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

32. Sarah McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 262.
33. Lester D. Friedman and Brent Notbohm (eds), *Steven Spielberg: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. 97.
34. Richard Schickel, 'The Films: No Longer for the Jung at Heart', *Time*, 30 July 1973, p. 65.
35. 'A Family Movie', *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 1962, unpaginated clipping, 'Cinema-Audiences' clippings file, PARC; Rose Pelswick, 'Needed: Family Films', *New York Journal-American*, 13 July 1964, 'Children as Audiences - Cinema' clippings file, PARC.
36. 'A Family Movie'.
37. 'The Revised MPAA Code of Self-Regulation', *Variety*, 8 October 1968, pp. 6-7. In the following years, the ratings were changed: the age limit was raised from sixteen to seventeen, and M became first GP and then PG ('Parental guidance suggested'). See Jack Valenti, 'The Voluntary Movie Rating System', in Jason E. Squire (ed.), *The Movie Business Book, Second Edition* (New York: Fireside, 1992), pp. 396-406.
38. Ben Shlyen, 'A Hopeful Sign', *Boxoffice*, 18 November 1968, unpaginated clipping, 'Ratings, Jan-Sep 68' clippings file, Academy Center for Motion Picture Study, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), Beverly Hills.
39. Joe Broady, 'In 1st Year of MPAA Ratings Only 6 Per Cent of Films Branded X', *Daily Variety*, 5 November 1969, unpaginated clipping, 'Ratings 1969' clippings file, AMPAS. In this survey of 441 films, 39 per cent were rated M and 23 per cent R. By the end of the following year, the R rating was dominant with 37 per cent and its share continued to grow throughout the early 1970s, stabilising around 50 per cent in the mid-1970s. See Justin Wyatt, 'The Stigma of X: Adult Cinema and Institution of the MPAA Ratings System', in Matthew Bernstein (ed.), *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era* (London: Athlone, 2000), p. 244.
40. William Zinsser, 'Let's Have a Symbol To Protect Pop', *Life*, 7 February 1969, unpaginated clipping, 'Ratings 1969' clippings file, AMPAS.
41. When these films were re-released in the 1970s they received G ratings. This also applies to most of the other superhits of the 1950s and 1960s such as *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Ben-Hur* (1959). Information on ratings can be obtained from <http://www.mpa.org/movieratingsearch/content.asp>.
42. In addition to these big hits listed in *Variety's* annual list of top-grossing movies, there also was, as Brian Rose has pointed out, a substantial market in the first half of the 1970s for the limited distribution of 'family-oriented wilderness films, particularly in small towns and rural regions'. Small companies such as American National employed 'four-walling' (a practice wherein the distributor rented movie theatres, rather than movie theatres renting films) specifically to service the needs of those audiences largely neglected by the major studios - small-town or rural folk, working-class people, families. In the mid-1970s, the majors picked up on this strategy by re-releasing films such as *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972, rated GP) in this fashion and turning them into major hits. In newly promoting these films, the studios organised 'enormous advertising strategies emphasizing the family/adventure elements of their product'. See Brian Rose, 'From the Outdoors to Outer Space: The Motion Picture Industry in the 1970s', in Michael T. Marsden, John G. Nachbar and Sam L. Grogg Jr (eds),

- Movies as Artifacts: Cultural Criticism of Popular Film* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), pp. 53-5.
43. David Sterritt, 'Disney aims to attract adults, too', *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 November 1978, p. 2.
44. Walt Disney Productions Annual Report 1975.
45. Ed Naha, 'Disney: On the brink of the PG void', *New York Daily News*, 16 December 1979, Leisure section, pp. 7, 14. See also, Charles Schreger, 'Production at Disney', *Variety*, 7 December 1977, p. 7.
46. Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London: Octopus, 1988), p. 278.
47. One problem appeared to be that cinemagoers attached very specific expectations to the Disney label and were easily disappointed when Disney tried something new. This problem was later solved through the Disney company's creation of separate labels for non-children's films - Touchstone in 1984 and Hollywood Pictures in 1989. Touchstone's first release - a major hit - was *Splash* (1984), an adult romantic comedy version of the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*.
48. Disney chief executive Card Walker and Ron Miller writing in the company's 1981 annual report (contained in file MFL+n.c.2,331, No. 20, PARC) and quoted in Andrew Neff, 'Disney Takes Plunge in Co-Production', *Variety*, 5 December 1979, p. 7.
49. Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child To See This Film?' For another account of the centrality of family-oriented films in contemporary Hollywood, see Robert Allen, 'Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the "Family Film"', in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds), *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 109-31.
50. The close links between Spielberg and Lucas on the one hand and Disney on the other are again in evidence when we look at the fate of Disney's animation division. In the wake of the disappointing box-office performance of *The Black Cauldron* (1985), there were rumours that the new management might close down the animated feature division. However, despite another box-office disappointment the following year with *The Great Mouse Detective*, Disney continued and even increased its commitment to feature animation. This decision was encouraged by the impressive box-office performance of the Steven Spielberg production *An American Tail* (1986), which Spielberg followed with the equally successful *The Land before Time* (1988, co-produced by George Lucas) and the blockbuster success of the animation/live-action hybrid *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988, co-produced by Touchstone and Amblin). See Kim Masters, *The Keys to the Kingdom: How Michael Eisner Lost His Grip* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), pp. 212-27; and Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films, Third Edition* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), pp. 286-9.
51. 'EDI Box Office News', *Variety*, 20 October 1997, p. 18. These statistics relate only to wide releases (in at least 600 cinemas). Across the period 1968-2000, 7 per cent of all films submitted to the MPAA were rated G. MPAA, '2000 US Economic Review', p. 13, <http://www.mpa.org/useconomicreview/2000Economic>.
52. For the period 1995-9, the figures were: 4 per cent of film supply and 6 per cent of box-office for G-rated films. 'Box Office News', *Variety*, 21 June 1999, p. 20.
53. 'EDI Box Office News', *Variety*, 20 October 1997, p. 18. It has to be noted, however, that the figures for G-rated movies are somewhat inflated by the exceptional box-office

- performance of *The Lion King* (1994); without this film, the average box-office gross for G-rated films is \$36.4 million for this period.
54. Other PG-rated animated features include Fox's *Titan A.E.* (2000) and Warner's *The Iron Giant* (1999). For *Small Soldiers* (1998), DreamWorks went for a PG-13, and even more adult-oriented animation – which was quite prominent in the 1970s with, for example, *Fritz the Cat* (1972) – making a comeback, most notably with *South Park: Bigger, Louder, Uncut* (1999), which is rated R and has a story-line revolving precisely around child audiences and movie ratings.
 55. For discussions of the recent trends in animation, see Denis Seguin, 'Quest for gold', *Screen International*, 26 May 1995, pp. 14–15; Dade Hayes, 'H'w'd sings new toon tune', *Variety*, 31 January 2000, pp. 1, 49; Dade Hayes, 'Cel-mates suffer toon traumas', *Variety*, 7 August 2000, pp. 1, 41.
 56. 'Box Office News', *Variety*, 7 August 2000, p. 37.
 57. A somewhat double-edged recognition of the importance of animated features is the introduction of a new category for Best Animated Feature at the Academy Awards for the year 2001. While highlighting the achievements of animators, the new Oscar also marginalises them insofar as the Academy assumes that animated features cannot compete in the Best Picture category. Indeed, only one animated feature (Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*) has ever been nominated for best picture. See Richard Natale, 'New animation category raises the ante for creators and studios', *Variety*, 11 December 2000, pp. 1, 12.
 58. 'ShoWesters play the numbers', *Variety*, 10 March 1997, p. 15; Leonard Klady, 'Studios flog family values', *Variety*, 1 July 1996, p. 10.
 59. See Allen, 'Home Alone Together', pp. 111–13, 116.
 60. Nik Jamgocyan, 'Big boat, small screen', *Screen International*, 26 June 1998, p. 9; Adam Sandler, 'Biz Ponders Oscar's Effect on Gump Vid', *Variety*, 24 April 1995, p. 7.
 61. The editors of *Variety*, *The Variety Insider* (New York: Perigee, 1999), p. 52.
 62. Jamgocyan, 'Big boat, small screen', p. 9.
 63. Allen, 'Home Alone Together', pp. 118–21. See also Janet Wasko, *Hollywood in the Information Age* (London: Polity Press, 1994).
 64. For a study of the centrality of a single film to the operations of a major media company, see Peter Krämer, 'Entering the Magic Kingdom: The Walt Disney Company, *The Lion King* and the Limitations of Criticism', *Film Studies*, no. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 44–50.
 65. At the beginning of August 2001, *Shrek* was at number fifteen in the Internet Movie Database's list of All-Time American Top Grossers, with revenues of \$255 million, <http://us.imdb.com/Charts/usatopmovies>.
 66. Jonathan Bing, 'Harry-ed Hollywood hunting kid fodder', *Variety*, 29 January 2001, pp. 1, 10.

14

Movie Ratings as Genre: The Incontestable R

Kevin S. Sandler

What we call genre is in fact something quite different from what has always been supposed.
Rick Altman¹

In his ground-breaking approach to thinking about Hollywood cinema, Rick Altman in *Film/Genre* suggests that genre theorists have shared a litany of unexamined assumptions in their work. One assumption, contends Altman, is that 'genre theorists have generally sought to describe and define what they believe to be already existing genres rather than create their own interpretive categories'.² The Western, the musical and the horror film have often received the most attention by theorists because they have pre-existing patterns clearly identified by the industry and recognised by the public as genre. The semantic and syntactical consistency of each genre have thus led theorists and speculators to primarily think of genre in terms of a 'corpus of films'.³ And it is the textual determinacy of these films that have constituted the nature of genre study.

Altman himself reinforced this 'corpus of films' tradition in his earlier work *The American Film Musical*. However, in *Film/Genre*, he extends his definition of genre to address the phenomenon as a site of perpetual struggle among different users, rather than a unified and transparent entity.

Far from simply replicating industry categorization, pre-viewing notions of a film's generic identity depend on multiple (often contradictory) sources: studio discourse (which, because it targets multiple audiences, usually offers conflicting genre cues), claims made by critics (who do not necessarily deploy generic discourse for the same reasons or in the same manner as other sectors of the film industry), and several networks of genre viewers (with no guarantee of alignment among home, office, church, and bar evaluations).⁴

In proposing a discursive dimension to all textual configuration and generic claims, Altman locates the nature of genre in language. Genres are thus by-products of discursive activity by real speakers, deployed within and between various interpretative communities, all with diverse interests, desires and goals.⁵ Instead of focusing solely on the question of how texts are organised or what films belong to which genre, Altman