

- 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'

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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

contemporary family (as both a set of diverse and dynamic social units and as a discursive formation) through what we might call postmodern family entertainment. In *Junior*, the 1980s' most famous slayer and player of monstrous masculinity confronts a 1990s version of the monstrous other, an abandoned baby, who attacks the helpless Arnold before an audience of its peers for their pleasure. In *Home Alone*, Kevin's alienation from his extended family is signalled by his exclusion from the VCR audience for films made for an older generation of viewers. Kevin needs a film that the entire family, including eight-year-old boys like himself, can watch and enjoy – a film precisely like the one he is in! The family home as depicted in *Home Alone* is the site of frantic, uncoordinated activity – children and parents circulating in separate orbits, meeting only when they collide. Home is a place where parents are not and where, if adults are 'home,' they do not live. Family ties are so loose that a child can be abandoned without the parents realising it until they are thousands of miles away.

In this chapter I propose to examine one aspect of postmodern family entertainment: the reorientation of the movie industry toward both its audience and its markets in the last half of the 1980s. This reorientation resulted not only in the creation of a new movie type, the family film; as paradoxical and provocative as it might sound, it brought about nothing less than the death of Hollywood cinema, at least as it had been known and experienced from the 1910s up to that point. Although not 'determined' in any unidirectional sense by them, the emergence of Hollywood's version of postmodern family entertainment is a cultural response to separate – though interlaced – demographic, technological and social phenomena: the 'echo boom,' the VCR and the postmodern family.

Baby Boom, Bust and Echo Boom

Following a half-century of relatively constant birth rates in the US, the period between 1946 and 1964 saw an explosion in live births, which came to be known as the 'baby boom'. By the end of the boom, in 1965, some 76 million boomers had been added to the US population and four out of every ten Americans were under the age of twenty. Then, contrary to the expectations of virtually every demographic expert, the baby boom not only subsided but was immediately followed by an equally, if not more, remarkable implosion of birth rates. The fifteen-year baby 'bust' between 1965 and 1980 saw birth rates in the US fall below replacement level to their lowest levels in American history. As late as 1986, conservative commentators noted the implications of this with alarm: new home construction would plummet, computer sales would drop, industry would be rendered unable to innovate as the number of younger, more imaginative workers declined, and, most frightening of all, with fertility rates in the West below replacement levels but still high in Asia, Africa and Latin America, white American babies would be greatly outnumbered by a tidal wave of black, brown and yellow tots.¹

Birth rates began rising again in 1977, but it was not until 1989 that live births again topped the 4 million mark for the first time since 1964. Births remained at this level through 1993, and began falling in 1994. 'Echo-boomers' or 'Generation Y' (the 72 million new Americans born between 1977 and 1995 – most of them born in the last decade of that period) represent a demographic bulge almost as large and arguably as socially important as their baby boom parents' generation. By 1995, children eighteen

years of age or younger comprised 28 per cent of the overall US population, a cohort roughly equal to baby-boomers aged thirty-one to forty. Despite the fact that birth rates began levelling off in the mid-1990s, the overall size of what some are now calling the Millennium Generation in the US continues to grow, fuelled by immigration as well as birth rates. The total number of Americans under the age of eighteen in 1998 topped 70 million for the first time in US history, surpassing the previous generational record set by the baby boom in 1966.

The political agendas of both major political parties during the Clinton era have been shaped by 'echo boom' issues, including tobacco legislation, education reform and health insurance. Many social observers believe that, over the next twenty years, American culture and politics in large measure will be organised around the relationship between the 'baby boom' and the 'echo boom'. The conflicting economic and political interests of the two groups are already manifest in local debates over school funding and in national debates over the future of social security and Medicare. As *American Demographics* noted in 1995,

Like the baby boom before them, their huge numbers will profoundly influence markets, attitudes, and society. Their true power will become apparent in the next five years as the oldest members come of age. Their habits will shape America for most of the 21st century.

One immediate effect of the echo boom has been a cultural 'preoccupation with parenting' for the first time since the 1950s. Even GenXers, despite popular stereotypes, have demonstrated a proactive urge more strongly and earlier than their immediately preceding age cohort. Beginning in the 1980s, women in their thirties and forties began having first children at a far greater rate than had ever been the case, and these same women continue childbearing far longer than demographers have predicted.²

A New Technology for a New Generation

Just as the baby boom overlaps almost exactly with the diffusion of television technology and the maturation of broadcast television as an institution and cultural form, the echo boom also has its defining technology, the VCR. The diffusion of VCRs began within a few months of the beginning of the echo boom birth-rate rise and reached domestic saturation about the time the echo boom tailed off in the mid-1990s. Sony introduced the Betamax in 1975, but home use of video technology did not move out of the 'videophile' phase and into the mass market until 1984. From then on, the rate of diffusion of the VCR into American households was extraordinary – and perhaps unprecedented. It took seventy years for the telephone to reach 50 per cent penetration of US households, cable television thirty-nine years, and television fifteen years. It took the VCR just twelve years, with 80 per cent of that penetration occurring in less than forty-eight months. In 1983 only 8.3 million US households, less than 10 per cent of the total, owned a VCR; in 1987, 45.8 million households, slightly more than half of all US homes, had them. To put this remarkable rate of adoption into perspective, we should recall that another revolutionary piece of electronic technology, the personal computer,

was also introduced in the early 1980s. By the end of 1997, fewer than half of American households owned a computer, while nearly 90 per cent owned a VCR.

1984 is also the year in which the term 'media center' entered the vocabulary of domestic American architecture. The setting aside of space in house plans for a 'media center' in addition to – or instead of – a den, living room, family room or great room signals the reconfiguration of living space in the middle-class home around an expanding array of audio-visual technologies: the VCR, CD player, video-game console, personal computer, satellite receiver and television monitor – only one of which was the television set itself and only one use of which was the viewing of terrestrial broadcasting programmes.

The 4 million babies born at the high water mark of the echo boom in 1987 came home from the hospital to find the VCR already there, warmed up, and ready to use for different purposes than those for which it had initially been marketed. Several factors combined to spur the growth of the pre-recorded tape market in the early 1980s: Hollywood studios' decision to make more films available on video cassette; the establishment of VHS as the dominant video format; a reduction in the price of VCRs from over \$2000 to less than \$500; and the extension of recording time from two to four hours. In turn, the increase in sales of pre-recorded tapes further accelerated household VCR penetration. Total home video software revenue exceeded \$1 billion for the first time in 1983, by which time some 12,000 titles were available, with 200 new video titles being released each month. Rental transactions in 1983 amounted to a total of \$800 million.³

Once VCR penetration had reached the 50 per cent mark in 1987, the end-user technology base existed to move the principal basis for the VCR's utility beyond 'time-shifting,' and to make video rentals a nationally branded, mass-marketed retailing industry. Between 1987 and 1990 – in less time than it took the average undergraduate to accumulate enough hours to graduate with a film studies major – watching a feature film rented from the local video store at home supplanted going to a movie theatre as the most common mode of engagement with 'the movies' for a large portion of the population of North America. By the end of the 1980s, video rentals at more than 25,000 locations in the US reached a total of \$8.4 billion, nearly twice as much as was being taken in at movie theatres. A December 1991 poll of 1000 VCR-owning households revealed that watching a movie at home was the preferred leisure activity of nearly 70 per cent of the sample – an increase of 50 per cent in only two years. Going out to the movies was preferred by only 22 per cent, down 38 per cent over the same period. *The Ladies Home Journal* observed that watching movies on video was America's 'new family fix'.⁴

The explosive growth of video rental as a distribution channel for Hollywood films is well illustrated by the growing ascendancy of Blockbuster Video as a national force in the industry. Originally a local chain of nineteen rental outlets in Dallas, Texas, Blockbuster built or franchised 1300 locations nationwide between 1987 and 1991. By 1992, Blockbuster stores boasted an annual revenue of \$1.1 billion, and in 1994 Chief Executive Officer Wayne Huizenga sold the chain to Viacom for \$8.6 billion.⁵

By 1990, it was clear to marketing executives in Hollywood that selling videocassette copies of theatrical films to video rental outlets could produce up to \$30 million in

profit for a film which had exhausted its potential income from theatrical exhibition six to nine months earlier. Initially, the studios priced feature films on videocassette at roughly \$75 wholesale or \$100 retail. This was well above the amount most households were willing to pay to own a copy of a particular film, but still low enough for video rental stores to make a profit on thirty rentals per copy. This arrangement effectively placed an upper limit on the number of video copies sold, even of the biggest box office hits, of around 500,000 units – the number required to service video rental outlets in North America.

Between 1985 and 1989, some studios experimented with an even more lucrative way of marketing some films on video: selling copies directly to consumers at a price low enough (less than \$30) to tap a mass market. *E.T.*, for example, was priced for 'sell-through' at Christmas 1988, selling 12.5 million copies and giving Steven Spielberg and Universal Studios a \$200 million Christmas present. Between 1983 and 1992, the number of feature films priced for sell-through increased at an average annual rate of 52 per cent, from 5.9 million copies to 264 million. In 1992, the retail value of video sell-through exceeded the total US theatrical box office for the first time. In that year, Disney's Buena Vista Home Video division became the largest and most profitable 'film' studio in Hollywood, contributing three-quarters of Disney's 1992 operating profits of \$508 million. As the video rental business reached a plateau in the early 1990s (sales of pre-recorded videos to rental dealers actually fell 5 per cent between 1991 and 1994), retail sales of feature films on video continued to grow at an average rate of 20 per cent a year.⁶

The explosive growth of the video sell-through market was remarkable not only because so many people were buying so many films on video, but also because of where they were buying them. Although video rental stores like Blockbuster sold new and 'pre-viewed' copies of videos as a sideline to their core rental business, by 1990 fully one half of the volume of sell-through business was occurring at discount mass retail stores, such as WalMart, Target, and K-Mart. When a rival accused Disney's home video unit of thinking more like a soap company than a film studio, its president Bill Merchant replied, 'We're competing with Rubbermaid.'⁷ By 1994, more than half of all 136,000 US grocery stores were stocking videos for sale, adding another 77,500 video retail locations which together accounted for 18 per cent of the \$14.7 billion video retail business.⁸

Hollywood and the 'Family Film'

What was referred to in the trade as the 'family film' emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as Hollywood's attempt to exploit the profit potential of the video markets, particularly sell-through, as fully as possible. The most frequently cited example of the family film is undoubtedly *Home Alone*, which grossed \$285 million at the box office in 1990, and sold 10 million video copies in the following year. 'What *Home Alone* has done,' said Tom Sherak, marketing vice president for Fox, 'is [to] show that there is a broad audience out there and you don't have to be afraid of using young people – kids are not taboo.'⁹ *Home Alone* inaugurated contemporary Hollywood's full embrace of the cross-generational family film, particularly films that 'can be made cheap and can reap deep[ly]'. At a time of ballooning budgets for R-rated action pictures, *Home Alone* cost only \$18.5 million to make.¹⁰

But what exactly is the 'family film', and what is the 'family' in relation to which it is made? Film industry discourse reveals that the family film has not been constituted as a genre in traditional sense, since it has included realistic comedies (*Three Men and a Baby*, *Home Alone*), adventure fantasies (*Hook*, *Honey, I Shrunk/Blew Up the Kid(s)*), animated films (*Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Anastasia*, *Toy Story*, etc.), as well as live action/animation hybrids (*Jurassic Park*, *Babe*, *Flubber*, *Jumanji*). Nor does the term 'family film' necessarily indicate films manifestly about the family (although in a number of notable cases, this was certainly the case). Nor, as the term had suggested in the 1960s and 1970s, does it signify films addressed exclusively at children (although children have constituted an important market segment addressed by these films). Rather, the family film became the discursive marker for a set of narrative, representational and institutional practices designed to maximise marketability and profitability across theatrical, video, licencing and merchandising markets by means of what we might call cross-generational appeal.

At the same time as Hollywood was rediscovering the family audience, the question of what constituted the family was becoming a matter of obsessive speculation in the United States, and the subject of 'family values' a central concern in American politics and public policy. Concluding his 1975 history of the American family, Edward Shorter proclaimed that the era of the modern family had ended, but that it was as yet impossible to predict what reconfigurations of family would supplant the model of the nuclear family. The American family, Shorter noted, was on a historical trajectory so unpredictable that it was as if it had set course for the sun. The adjective he applied to this unprecedented and unstable re-figuration of the contemporary family was 'postmodern'.¹¹

Shorter made a useful distinction between 'the families we live with and the families we live by'. In constructing this dichotomy, he acknowledged the differences between the conjugal and kinship relations we experience in our personal histories and the social and cultural ideals against which we measure the success or normality of them. In every age, individuals have been enmeshed in parental, sexual, filial, domestic and kinship relations. These relations are always imperfect, complex and frequently fraught with ambivalence, contradiction, uncertainty and instability. Yet, at every turn, we encounter representations of the family in relation to which we are asked to gauge our own experience. Every day we hear 'the family' invoked as if it were a unitary social 'fact' or a constant element in everyone's life – everyone's, that is, except our own.

In pointing in the direction of the postmodern family, Shorter suggested that the gap between the bewildering variety of family relations we live with and the much more circumscribed idealisations of family life we live by was assuming chasmic proportions. Those relations – sexual, parental, filial, domestic, biological – that fall under the sign of 'family' have in every age and every culture been subject to cultural idealisation and social regulation, so central are they to the very notion of human society itself. The radical collapse of those structures of social authority and sanction in the US and elsewhere in the West that once regulated the formation, organisation, reproduction and dissolution of the family is, however, unprecedented, as is the concomitant extension of the notion of radical individualism to all areas of life choice. With what Zygmunt Bauman calls the 'universal dismantling of power-supported structures' in the postmodern era,

the constitution of families is *ad hoc* rather than prescribed; relations among family members are contingent rather than enduring; and the very distinctions – biological, ethical, affective – that mark out the family from other forms of social relations are increasingly blurred. More than ever before in western history, families are products of human choice, and yet these choices are made in the absence of socially authorised sources of approval or arbitration. Instead, both the self and the family are the result of unending processes of self-assembly, and the guidelines for both have been radically privatised. As Bauman expresses it: 'ethics has become a matter of individual discretion, risk-taking, chronic uncertainty and never-placated qualms'.¹²

It is little wonder, then, that politicians of every stripe desperately grasp for some purchase on 'family values', while their constituents turn to the popular media for models of family life, validation for the family life choices they have made, or merely reassurance that everyone's family is dysfunctional in some way. As the New World Order replaced the Cold War in the 1980s, 'the crisis of the family' replaced communism at the centre of political and policy agendas for both major political parties, even if no one seemed quite sure what 'the family' was any more. Relying on the same statistics, feminists and neo-traditionalists alike declared the death of the nuclear family into which the baby-boomers had been born, differing mainly over whether this was an occasion for sack-cloth or party frocks.¹³ In short, since the 1980s, family has become the 'black hole' of contemporary American social discourse and popular culture: impossible to identify in its exact characteristics yet exerting inescapable gravitational force.

By the end of the 1980s, Hollywood had come under attack from a number of groups (including, but not limited to, political conservatives and the religious right) for making films that were not suitable for the family, whatever 'the family' was. This criticism grew louder as R-rated films made for adult theatrical audiences were made available for viewing at home on video. A study conducted by the Junior League of New York in the late 1980s found the average 10–11-year-old watched four R-rated videos each month, the equivalent, according to one commentator, 'of fifteen days per year of schooling in sadistic and harmful ways of thinking'.¹⁴

Conveniently for Hollywood, the very films that were most consistently profitable across the widest range of markets in the late 1980s and early 1990s – films such as *Three Men and a Baby*, *Look Who's Talking*, *Home Alone*, *E.T.*, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, and, of course, Disney animated features – also allowed the film industry to claim that it was family-friendly. Although some critics would continue to rail at Hollywood's continuing embrace of the R-rated feature (most conspicuously Bob Dole during the 1996 presidential campaign),¹⁵ others would see the increasing numbers of G, PG and PG-13 releases as evidence that Hollywood had 'grown up', and was, like its adult baby-boomer audience, returning to traditional 'family values'. In 1993, the editor of the Christian Television and Film Commission's guide to films and video applauded Hollywood for realising that it was in the industry's best interest to make films that 'appeal to the broad segment of American society that upholds traditional Judeo-Christian ideals and values'.¹⁶

The audience for the family film had dissolved into a set of overlapping markets. These were grounded principally in whatever social units were produced by the

interpenetration of two expanding demographic groupings: those over the age of thirty and those under the age of eighteen. Furthermore, because the marketing life of a given film now extended over a year or more – from before its actual theatrical release through its release on video for sale and/or rental and in other ancillary venues (cable, pay-per-view, broadcast TV, syndication, etc.) – and because millions of households now owned their own copies of feature films and controlled when they were viewed, there were no fixed temporal boundaries within which the ‘audience’ for a given film could be contained. As the production and marketing logic behind a substantial fraction of Hollywood films shifted from reaching audiences in movie theatres to exploiting as many markets as possible for as long as possible, and as the nuclear family fractured into increasingly diverse social groupings, it became less and less in Hollywood’s interest to align itself with any particular figuration of the family or any unequivocal set of ‘family values’. ‘Family’ for Hollywood basically meant those markets more effectively exploited by films that were not rated R. With boomers taking their kids (or being dragged by them) to the movies, and with kids more likely than any other group to go to the theatre to see a film more than once, by 1991 PG and PG-13-rated films were twice as likely as R-rated ones to earn \$60 million and three times more likely to earn \$100 million at the box office.¹⁷

But while there was still a movie audience and a strong video rental market for R-rated films, most R-rated films missed out on the chance to cash in on the video sell-through bonanza. Since 1990, one of the most important marketing decisions a studio makes is whether to price the video version of a given film for rental or sell-through. The rule of thumb is that a film needs to sell at least two million copies priced at less than \$30 to net the studio a greater return than would be achieved by pricing that film on video at \$75 wholesale. Routinely, viewers at film previews today are asked whether they would purchase a video copy of the film in question. Although some R-rated films have sold well as videos, market dynamics favour family films. In households with children, kids influence or determine 75 per cent of household purchasing decisions. The single largest category of video purchases is parents buying videos for their children. Videos aimed specifically at kids (whether feature films or direct-to-video speciality titles) represent 37 per cent of all video sales. Although it is becoming less so, the video sell-through market is still highly seasonal, with the weeks prior to Christmas representing the most important period of the year for video retailers. Also, regardless of time of year, 30–40 per cent of videos are purchased as gifts. R-rated films are much less likely to be bought as gifts than more ‘family-rated’ fare. Furthermore, some of the largest mass retail chains like WalMart and Target and many grocery stores, on whom Hollywood now depends for 40–50 per cent of video sales, either refuse to stock R-rated titles or refuse to give them prominent shelf placement. No grocer, said *Supermarket News*, ‘wants to antagonise a \$100–200 per week customer over a \$3 video rental’. Thus, *Lethal Weapon II*, the third highest-grossing box-office hit of 1989 sold only 2.5 million video copies when it was released on video the following year – far fewer than its theatrical box-office appeal might have suggested. By contrast, the family film *Beethoven*, which had taken only \$50 million at the box office, sold 3 million video copies. Almost every week’s list of top-selling videos since the start of the 1990s has been led by family films or explicitly children’s titles. *Beauty and the Beast* has sold more than 20 million video copies to date, producing more than \$500 million in revenue for Disney.¹⁸

Hollywood’s Demographic Earthquake

In the 1980s, Hollywood had to reposition itself in relation not so much to its audience (or audiences) as to a shifting, decentred constellation of markets for its products. *Junior* illustrates the strategy that Arnold Schwarzenegger deliberately employed in the early 1990s to reconstruct himself not only for a changing theatrical audience but also for different markets for his films. *Junior*, *Twins*, *Kindergarten Cop*, *Jingle All the Way*, and the appropriately titled *Last Action Hero* were all PG or PG-13 rated family films, and all were priced for video sell-through.

The box office market itself felt the demographic tremors mentioned at the start of this chapter as a kind of audience sinkhole, as the core movie-going audience of the 1970s and early 1980s diminished. Since the late 1960s, if not before, films had been marketed at what Hollywood with empirical reason regarded as its ‘primary’ box-office audience: young people between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five (particularly white males within that age group). Whereas the ‘average’ movie-goer in the 1980s went approximately six times a year, this youth audience went to the movies twelve times a year. As long as the baby boom lasted, this age cohort replenished itself every year. The extraordinary popularity of *Star Wars* in 1977 was due, in part at least, to the demographic fact that the audience segment at which the film was pitched – viewers aged between thirteen and twenty-five – had increased 17 per cent since 1967.

The effect of the baby ‘bust’ that began in 1964 was that, by 1980, the number of young movie-goers was in decline while at the same time the preceding age cohort, the boomers, was ageing out of the prime movie-going group. Between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of the total US population under the age of eighteen fell from 28 per cent to 25 per cent, while the percentage between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four rose from 31 per cent to 34 per cent, from 70 million to 105 million people. By the early 1990s, these overlapping demographic shifts produced a dilemma for Hollywood: the age cohort of core ‘heavy-goers’ was shrinking both as a percentage of the total population and of the movie audience, while the age cohort of fringe ‘infrequent’ movie-goers (four times a year on average) was growing. In 1983, tickets sold to 13–25-year-olds represented 55 per cent of all admissions. By 1992, teenagers and young adults constituted only 38 per cent of the US movie audience, and the percentage of the teen movie audience (aged between sixteen and twenty) had dropped from 24 per cent of the total audience in 1981 to only 15 per cent in 1992. Over the same period, the proportion of the movie audience made up by boomers in their forties rose from 6 per cent to 16 per cent. In 1993, Disney executive Joe Roth complained that Hollywood could not rely upon its young audience any more. Young people, he claimed, had lost the ‘tribal rite’ of going to the movies every week. Instead they watched videos and played video games at home. The almost century-old American tradition of one generation of young moviegoers being replaced by another of equal or greater size was, he feared, over.¹⁹

Of course, this is not to say that Hollywood simply ignored what it referred to as the ‘adult’ audience after *Easy Rider* in 1968: the 1970s and 1980s saw a number of successful films, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *On Golden Pond*, which were clearly not aimed at a teenage and young adult audience. But these ‘story-driven’ or ‘character-driven’ films, as they were typically referred to in industry discourse, were developed and marketed as

alternatives to *Animal House* and *Carrie*, and the audience for 'adult appeal' titles was assumed to be distinct from, and not overlapping with, young men under twenty-five.

During the 1980s, the domestic theatrical market was itself shrinking both as a proportion of overall revenue and, more importantly, as a proportion of overall profitability for the studios. The problem that Hollywood confronted in the 1980s was how to reposition itself in relation to a domestic box-office market that was markedly different from what it had been a decade earlier. At the same time, the home video rental and sales industries, having emerged in the mid-1980s, positioned themselves in relation not to the baby-bust generation, as to some extent Hollywood continued to do, but to the two generations on either demographic side: the post-twenties baby-boomers and their 'echo boom' children. These two age cohorts, joined together in the industry's imagination around the glowing (video) hearth of the middle-class home, would emerge as 'the family' audience that would drive the video industry and transform the film business in the early 1990s.

It is important to understand the magnitude and direction of the shift in film-viewing behaviour that has been generated by the conjunction of technological innovation and demographic change. In 1996, the total US domestic film theatrical box office produced takings of approximately \$5.9 billion. In the same year, US consumers spent \$8.7 billion renting videos and another \$7.6 billion buying pre-recorded video tapes. Theatrical distribution of movies accounted for only 23 per cent of domestic studio revenue that year, while video sales represented more than 55 per cent. Each month, between 44 and 53 per cent of all US consumers – some 100 million people in around 45 million households – rent a video at least once. More than 60 per cent of all US households own feature films on video, with the average number of titles in family collections currently standing at forty-one. The core markets for both video rentals and sales are families with children under the age of seventeen. Households with children are more than twice as likely to be frequent renters and heavy buyers of films on video.²⁰

The Movie on the Lunchbox

In the early 1990s, the 'family film' was increasingly defined in relation to another huge set of complexly interconnected markets which mined the film for the 'exchange value' it could add to other commodities through product placements, merchandising, licencing and promotional tie-ins with fast-food restaurants, soft drinks and other non-filmic products.²¹ *Star Wars* first demonstrated the extraordinary profitability of licencing the use of a film's title, logo, character likenesses, storyline, props and other features in conjunction with the manufacture and marketing of other products. Between its initial release in 1977 and 1992, some \$2.6 billion worth of *Star Wars* paraphernalia had been sold. As one studio executive expressed it, for the right film pitched at the right audience, licencing could result in 'almost infinite amounts of cash.'²²

In 1977 the total retail value of the licenced product market was only \$7 billion a year. By 1983, the licenced merchandise industry had doubled in value. Over the last twenty years, it has increased ten-fold and, with a retail value now in excess of \$70 billion, it dwarfs the theatrical film business, video rental and sales, and the cable television industry combined. With children's products constituting 65-75 per cent of the licenced product market, the most licenceable film projects are cross-generational 'family films',

especially those specifically targeted at children. When *Home Alone* was released theatrically in 1990, it was such a surprise hit that Fox did not have the necessary lead time to work out extensive tie-in or licencing promotions. John Hughes made sure that the same thing did not happen with the sequel. Collaborating fully in one of the most sophisticated promotional and licencing arrangements to date, Hughes worked directly with Tiger Electronics to develop two toys that could be used by Macauley Culkin's character in the film and then sold commercially: the 'Talk Boy' voice-altering cassette recorder and Monster Sap soap.²³

The shifts occurring in relation to the family film – from audience to markets, from film as celluloid experienced in a theatre to film combined with so many other manifestations over a longer period of time – not only alters the logics by which films are made and marketed, but also alters what a film 'is' in an economic sense and, by extension, in both an ontological and epistemological sense as well. For example, in the summer of 1991, McDonald's offered *Batman* action figures as part of its Happy Meal promotion during the theatrical run of *Batman Returns*, which had been rated PG-13 for its violence and language. McDonald's received considerable criticism for promoting the film to children who, presumably, were barred from seeing it. A McDonald's executive attempted to explain the problem away by saying that McDonald's 'simply [wanted] to allow young people to experience the fun associated with the character Batman and [that the campaign] was not designed to promote attendance at the movie.'²⁴

Beyond the blatant disingenuousness of this remark (which winks at the likelihood that some children had seen the first *Batman* on video and would see *Batman Returns* when it came out on video), this public relations débâcle suggests that, as a marketable commodity and enhancer of value for other, non-filmic commodities, a film is no longer reducible to the actual experience of seeing it. This, and other similar examples of the complex relationship between a film and its promotion through other objects, raise any number of interesting questions about what now, in a phenomenological sense, constitutes 'the film', and in what relationship it stands to things that are not it but of it. When my daughter was three years old, a visiting adult friend asked her what character she wished to be on the next Halloween. 'Batgirl,' she responded. My wife and I looked at each other quizzically, knowing that Madeline had not to our knowledge been allowed, in the words of the McDonald's executive, 'to experience the fun associated' with this character. 'Where have you seen Batgirl?' we asked her in unison. 'In the movie,' she responded. 'In what movie?' we asked. 'You know,' she said, 'the movie on the lunchbox.' One of her classmates at pre-school, it turned out, had a *Batman Returns* lunchbox featuring Batgirl.

Licencing complicates what we think of as a given film. It also changes the role of the movie star in relation to it. Since licencing is such a lucrative proposition for the studios, it becomes increasingly important for them to be able to extract the likeness of a film's stars in character and to transfer that likeness from the filmic text to licenced products and tie-in promotions. Studios usually secure the co-operation of big stars in allowing the use of their character likeness on licenced merchandise by giving them a piece of the licencing royalties. The 'value' of character likenesses might seem to emanate from the recognisability of the star as a star; that is, the trans-textual charisma

that is the basis and definition of the classical Hollywood movie star, and is what he or she brings from outside the film to the embodiment of a particular character. But with so much of the licencing and tie-in market directed at children, whose knowledge of or interest in any adult star might be non-existent, the value of a star's character likeness is based much less on star power than on preserving a co-extensive identity between the licensable character in a film and its extra-filmic representation.

In line with this dictum, industry insiders were predicting disappointing returns for the expensive, Spielberg-directed family film *Hook* in 1991 before anyone had seen it, precisely because stars Robin Williams, Dustin Hoffman and Julia Roberts had refused to allow their likenesses to be used on paraphernalia. The *Wall Street Journal* predicted that as a result, children would be confused by three different versions of Peter Pan, *Hook* and *Tinkerbell*: those in the film (as embodied in the stars), generic versions produced by the studio, and other generic versions on toys manufactured under licence by Mattel. By 1995, quipped *Variety*, it was clear who the real stars were in Hollywood: McDonald's, Burger King and Pepsi. Executives from these and other companies contemplating tie-in arrangements with particular films now routinely review scripts before they go into production to make sure that the film under consideration is consonant with the image the company wishes to project for its soft drink, fast food or other product line.²⁵

Hollywood has developed other ways to get around the problem of overpaid stars who dislike the prospect of their image forming the focus of a merchandising campaign. Hollywood's embrace of fantasy over the past decade has been, in large measure, a result of the fact that fantasy characters are more easily licenced and marketed, so that the studios can keep a larger share of the licencing royalties. Fantasy characters lend themselves to the graphic condensation of the 'visual icon', as one advertising executive put it. In the language of the toy industry trade papers, they are more 'toyetic': they make a better basis for toys than recognisable human figures. Moreover, their identities are often separable from particular human representations. Disney and other animation producers might use stars to provide the voices for their characters, but there are no star rights or royalty issues involved in the marketing of Little Mermaid bathmats or Aladdin toothbrushes. Nor did the sentient pigs, dogs, cats, whales or other creatures who have filled movie screens for the last five years or so demand a cut of the *Babe* underwear licence royalties or the *Free Willy* bathroom slippers. Marketing discourse in the trade press routinely notes the considerable advantage represented by films whose concept is reducible to a graphic sign that can easily be applied to a range of objects, packages and advertising forms. The distinctive *Batman* logo is an excellent example. Conversely, advertising executives frequently complain about the difficulty of exploiting films that are not so reducible. One such executive lamented that so few films planned for the 1992 holiday season would be promoted through tie-ins or licencing. 'I can't see Jimmy Hoffa on a Pizza Hut Collector's Cup,' he moaned.²⁶

The step beyond writing toys into film scripts for human characters to use is, of course, making toys themselves into characters, a feat accomplished by Disney with its release of *Toy Story* in 1996. The 3-D effect produced by computer animation rendered characters more convincingly than could have been done through conventional cel animation processes. 'For Mr. Potato Head, we were able to get that pebbly texture that

plastic has, which adds a sense of believability to the character', *Toy Story* director, John Lasseter, noted. Fidelity to the audience's experience of a toy has now become the standard of character 'believability' and verisimilitude. The film's logic makes the 'human' characters in the film not the forces that transform toys into characters, but rather the opposite: in the presence of 'human' characters the toys 'freeze into icons of their toy origins', as *Variety* put it so well.²⁷

By the 1990s, George Lucas was in the product licencing business as much as he was in the film-making business, with the *Star Wars*TM films functioning as a part of a complex corporate strategy, the goal of which is to keep the licence viable indefinitely as a merchandising asset. Any given *Star Wars*TM film adds value to the brand, in part because of the qualities it possesses as a distinctive *Star Wars*TM experience. By this point in the history of the brand, however, any participating film's value is also what we might call contingent or anacitic: the experience of film itself leans heavily on the audience's exposure to *Star Wars*TM products, promotions and discourses, which may include, but are not limited to, previous *Star Wars*TM films. Current and new products, promotions, and discourses in turn lean on the experience of newTM films and the hype associated with them. A film becomes the narrative and iconographic field through which old licences are renewed and from which new licences can be harvested – the malleable materials of fantasy from which other fantasies can be fashioned. Trade paper discourse routinely exposes the house-of-cards structure of licencing relationships by rhetorical conflation. A pyjama manufacturer analysed the Spielberg-produced animated film *An American Tale: Fievel Goes West* in these words: 'We think *American Tale* will be strong in sizes 2-7.'²⁸

Another force driving both the organisation of film-making around the family film and around the production of films as marketing assets is the consolidation of the entertainment industry since the 1980s. Especially for Disney, the company most identified with the family film, but also for multinational media conglomerates such as Viacom, News Corporation and Time-Warner, what they 'own' as assets are licences or brands and what they control, attempt to control, or leverage is access to the markets where these licences and brands can be exploited. They are no longer in the film business or the television business or, arguably, even the entertainment business, but in the business of 'synergistic brand extension'. As Disney's Michael Eisner put it, 'If you don't have synergy, you have nothing but new products. . . . If you have synergy, it goes on and on.'²⁹

The Role of the Post-Hollywood Movie: Size Matters

Have the movies simply become an interchangeable prop for a licensable asset, as what I have been arguing might seem to suggest, or is there something unique that the film as film continues to represent? Clearly, I think, the Hollywood cinema – the institutional, cultural and textual apparatus we have known since the 1910s – is dead. For the eighty years from roughly 1910, when film began separating itself from vaudeville and established 'movie-going' as the activity around which movie theatres would be structured, until the late 1980s, the principal business of the Hollywood film studios was making movies for movie theatres, particularly North American movie theatres. To be sure, films were distributed internationally and, from the mid-1960s onward,

television provided a post-theatrical life for feature films, but these and other markets were ancillary to Hollywood's main business. Films were conceived, written, cast, shot, edited and marketed for an imaginary American audience going out to a movie theatre, observing what the industry placed on offer, choosing from among those films currently on release, paying for a ticket, and going home a few hours later. Certainly the nature of the movie experience varied over time, from town to town and neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and the audience for the movies was never unitary or unchanging, but the imagined universe of movie reception was pretty clearly bounded, and the theatrical experience of movie-viewing was clearly at its centre. Furthermore, modern cinema studies, as it has been practised since its emergence in the late 1960s, has conceived itself in relation to a model of reception that places the theatrical experience of movie-going at its centre and largely excludes other modes of engagement with cinematic texts.

And yet, although Hollywood would continue to refer to them as such long after they ceased to be accurately reflected in the term, by 1987 so-called 'ancillary markets' provided fully one-half of studio revenues, and by 1990 studios received \$3.2 billion from video sales alone – 50 per cent more than from the box office that year. As late as 1980, the domestic box office represented 80 per cent of studio revenue; by 1992 the box office was good for no more than 25 per cent. Only two films out of ten were making back negative and marketing costs at the domestic box office alone,³⁰ and Jack Valenti, the film industry's long-time chief cheerleader and lobbyist had started speaking of theatrical exhibition not as the core business of the film industry, but rather as a 'platform to other markets'. Of these 'other markets', video rental and sale were clearly dominant, equalling all other sources of revenue (including theatrical, broadcast television, cable, and pay per view) combined. As the emblematic form of American popular entertainment, as an enterprise devoted to the experience of being engulfed by larger-than-life images on movie screens and economically driven by people buying the right to sit in the dark for two hours in a movie theatre, the Hollywood cinema is no more. This economic shift also reflects a profound change in the manner in which films are experienced by viewers. Most people today in the US watch most films through a VCR, not in a movie theatre. This applies with particular force to American students who over the next few years will emerge as the first generation of 'film' students who have probably encountered films on video long before ever setting foot in a movie theatre.³¹

But the movies are not dead and, to stand Walter Benjamin's argument in 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' on its head, the movies continue to possess a lingering residue of their connection with the cinema in their promise of the auratic elevation of products, people and experience above the level of the ordinary, the quotidian, the mere commodity. The movies continue to want to claim the ground of authenticity, as the originating site of experience in relation to which licenced products are souvenirs, as the prior body for which the 'Happy Meal' figure is substituted as fetish part. Or, to express this another way, the movies desperately try to retain the power to enchant, to transform human beings into celestial bodies, labour into dream works, multinational corporations into magic factories, the release of run-of-the-mill movies into 'events'. This enchantment is the 'value' added by the embodiment of a licensable asset in a film. It is the cinema, not human beings, that brings the toys in *Toy Story* to life.

Thus, more and more effort has to be expended continually to re-enchant individual movies, to make them, in industry parlance, 'events' that stand above the everyday and command our attention. When Hollywood was in the cinema business and movie-going in the local picture palace was habitual, the release of any new film drew upon the cinema's institutional capacity for enchantment, and individual films were 'promoted' by their participation in the cinema. Today, however, films have to constitute themselves as events on an *ad hoc* basis, and they need as much help as they can get from promotional tie-ins to stand tall as movie 'events' at least for a couple of weeks. Thus, the Happy Meal toy our kids demand before the film is released derives its value through its strange metonymic connection (in which the part precedes the whole) to a movie that commands our attention as a cinema event because it has already been prefigured as the inedible part of a Happy Meal.

Many Hollywood executives believe, with some justification, that a film's domestic theatrical release and subsequent two-week run in movie theatres across the country are influential or even determining factors in that film's profitability, overall marketability in other formats, and value as a generator of licences and other ancillary revenue streams. The first two weeks are, quite literally, the most profitable for the film's producers because box-office revenue during that period is split overwhelmingly in favour of the distributor/producer, with the exhibitor being left with as little as 10 per cent of each box-office dollar. The hype surrounding the film's release (through direct media advertising, coming-attraction 'trailers' shown in theatres in the months preceding, promotional tie-ins, star interviews on television and radio, etc.) is designed to create a 'buzz' about the film, through word-of-mouth communication that this is a film that 'everybody' is seeing in the movie theatre. Hollywood executives, journalists and industry pundits talk about 'water cooler' film experiences: films that become the topic of discussion around the figurative office water cooler in the days and weeks following their theatrical debuts. 'Buzz' about a film can help give a film 'legs': sustainability as a theatrical box office draw, which, in turn, increases the film's stock as a licensable property and marketable asset in video and other markets.

To get audiences into movie theatres these days, Hollywood must sell them not only on the inherent pleasurability of a given film but on the experience of seeing that film in a movie theatre – which is to say, on the distinctive sensory and social qualities of theatre film-viewing. In the first decades of Hollywood's competition with television broadcasting, it could claim that distinctiveness in relation to the range of subject matter that could be represented on movie screens: certain 'mature' themes, glimpses of body parts, and language could be experienced only in the movie theatre and not on television screens. Since the advent of cable television, satellite services and the availability of films themselves on videocassette (including hard-core pornographic films viewable almost exclusively through a television set since the collapse of the theatrical market for movie porn in the 1980s), the distinction between movie and television 'content' no longer works as a marketing ploy. Studios have turned increasingly to selling theatrical film-viewing in terms of physical size, sensory intensity and phenomenal scale. The computerisation of special effects since the 1980s has made it possible for Hollywood films to imagine resurrected dinosaurs, cataclysmic natural disasters, nuclear-mutated monsters, doomed luxury liners, atomic Armageddon and colliding

meteors with a verisimilitude and visceral impact on the viewer hitherto unachievable. Interpersonal relationships, social tensions and individual anxieties have been radically externalised and rendered as gigantic epiphenomena of cosmic proportion and import. The movies are still important, Hollywood seems to be saying, because the movies are about such big things, and only the movies can afford to spend the tens of millions of dollars required to render a convincing Los Angeles-inundating tidal wave or bus-crushing monster.³²

Belying this aesthetic of literal and phenomenal gigantism in contemporary cinema, however, is an unavoidable anxiety over size that arises precisely from the fact that the film and its parts will be experienced in relation to very different relative scales (between 'viewer' and filmic manifestation) in other formats and versions. The same film marketed during its theatrical release as an unprecedented and unreproducibly BIG event is marketed a year later for display on the 'small screen' of the home television monitor. The spacecraft whose massive size eclipses the sun over an entire American city is shrunk to fit in an eight-year-old's pocket when released as an officially licenced toy.

The television advertising campaign supporting the theatrical release of the 1998 film *Godzilla* played quite self-consciously with Hollywood's fascination with, and anxiety over, size and scale. Prior to the theatrical release date of the film (20 May 1998), promotional tie-in advertisements were carefully orchestrated to conceal the full body of the monster from view and to suggest its gargantuan proportions metonymically by displaying only small parts of its body in relation to human figures and artefacts. If you want to see all of the beast, the campaign suggested, you'll have to wait until the big-screen venue was ready to contain him. In the month prior to the film's release, Sony even placed ten-foot-tall computerised displays in 150 key movie theatres depicting a Godzilla-ravaged New York City but not showing the monster himself. The key fast-food tie-in with the film was Taco Bell, whose advertising mascot was a chihuahua, one of the smallest of domestic dog breeds. In one ad, the dog is shown at the Taco Bell drive-through window ordering thousands of tacos and soft drinks for his 'friend' Godzilla, whose enormous shadow we see as he opens his mouth to engulf the food. The joke, of course, derives both from Godzilla being impossibly large and the dog being inappropriately small for his role as the canine embodiment of fast-food consumption. The ad suggests that both Godzilla the creature and *Godzilla* the movie are too big to fit on the TV screen. Furthermore, to the extent that the Taco Bell chihuahua is a creature of television, the ad suggests that television is both the 'friend' of Godzilla and something that could be consumed by the cinematic monster. However, the ad also has a closing tag, displaying the range of *Godzilla* figures offered as premiums with the purchase of Taco Bell kid's meal figures. Both Godzilla and *Godzilla*, it turns out, are protean phenomena in terms of their size and power: they can be larger-than-life devourers of non-cinematic experience and the toy portion of a child's meal.³³

A further irony, of course, is that the merchandising logic that results in *Batman* collector's cups and *Jurassic Park* soap dishes works to disenchant the cinema as its magic dust is sprinkled over an ever-growing miscellany of products and as those products take their place as parts of the quotidian of mass culture. Moreover, the marketing logic upon which the studios now depend for their profitability further contributes to

its disenchantment, because it encourages as many people as possible to buy a film in a store where it shares shelf space with motor oil and foot powder, and in a medium that subjects the text to the promiscuous manipulation of the viewer – zipping, zapping, glancing, heckling, extracting – in the domestic, unglamorous, over-familiar settings of everyday life, where the messy dynamics of postmodern family life are not left behind but become the social dynamics of reception.

Ambivalence and Indeterminacy in the Post-Hollywood Era

The rise of the post-Hollywood cinema, whose earliest and clearest expression was the family film of the late 1980s and early 1990s,³⁴ also manifests itself in a number of narrative and representational strategies within films themselves. Ambivalence and indeterminacy are the distinguishing formal qualities of texts that are subject to protean refashioning as commodities. What post-Hollywood films of the 1990s have to 'say' in any coherent moral, ideological or narrative sense is much less important than how they 'play'. I take the notion of ideological play from Joseph Natoli's recent book on popular films in the early 1990s. In accounting for the lack of narrative or moral resolution at the end of a film like *Basic Instinct*, he says:

The undecidability of the ending makes the whole film undecidable and therefore not able to be funnelled toward a firm ending. We don't end choosing a story; we get caught up in a story we can't end. The story we leave with is not just a story. It's a chart of the way the film plays us, or, how we are brought both with our consent and against our will into the play of the film.

Similarly, in her book about the contemporary family romance, Dana Heller finds some films employing the ideological tactic of 'deniability', whereby films admit of equally plausible but opposing readings. In an essay on the popularity of *Total Recall*, David Bennett argues that the narrative and representational device of virtual reality functions in that film to render undecidable, both for Schwarzenegger's character and the audience alike, the 'reality status of every setting, experience and identity'. Rather than being an initial or complicating factor in the film's narrative logic awaiting eventual resolution, 'ontological indeterminacy, it seems, is precisely the commodity on which the consumer of media spectacles is spending his disposable income'.³⁵

The structuring indeterminacy identified in the thriller and action-adventure films of the 1990s operates differently from that in such family films as *Home Alone*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, *Jumanji*, *Matilda*, *Addams Family Values*, or *Problem Child*. But moral and, by extension, ideological ambivalence is the defining feature of the family film. To be sure, some of these films do express an eventual – if equivocal – nostalgia for the nuclear family, but most are characterised by a profound ambivalence, a tendency toward ideological incoherence, a polyvalence which is not a matter of making room for alternative readings so much as an undecidability about what these would be alternative to.

These features are to be found in both *Junior* and *Home Alone*. For example, in *Junior*, Arnold's character has allowed himself to be impregnated to demonstrate the efficacy of a miscarriage preventative. When it comes time to terminate the clinical trial and hence the foetus, however, Arnold decides to carry the baby to term. 'It's my body



Home Alone (Chris Columbus, 1990).

and my choice,' he says defiantly to the audience. Here is Hollywood's most visible supporter of Republican 'family values' uttering the rallying cry of the abortion rights movement. But, of course, the narrative context of the utterance stands the meaning of this motto on its head: the 'choice' Arnold's character fights to exercise is to bear a child, not to have an abortion.

What everyone remembers from *Home Alone* is, of course, Kevin's infliction of pain and humiliation upon the two would-be house burglars – a sequence which we tend to remember as longer than the fifteen minutes of the film it actually occupies. In the scene immediately prior to the siege, however, Kevin goes to the supermarket. In keeping with his new identity as the self-sufficient guardian of his home, Kevin does not fill his shopping cart with ice cream and Twinkies™ but with the kinds of things his mother would buy if she were shopping for the family: bread, milk, detergent and so on. Kevin even remembers to bring coupons. When his family does return home on Christmas morning (to a spotless house), Kevin does not say a word about his battle with the two burglars. His father breezily asks him what he did while they were away – as if the family had just gone out to McDonald's and not to Paris and back: 'Oh, I went shopping,' he replies. 'Shopping?' his brothers and sisters shout. 'Yeah, you know, the things Mom would get: bread, milk, fabric softener.' His father's response is, 'What a funny guy.'

Kevin is a 'funny guy' because he has learned to be both mother and father to himself. Despite the film's Capraesque allusions and the restoration of the nuclear family in its final scene, these ideological alliances are undermined by the lesson Kevin seems to have learned: if being a child in a postmodern family means being alone – whether the family is physically present or not – then the appropriate coping strategy is to reconstruct the nuclear family within yourself. Kevin's family need never know of Kevin's valiant defence of their home since the change he has undergone is in relation to him-

self and his house, not in relation to them. While the film appears to maintain that we all need and want families, it also shows that Kevin clearly does not need his.

What the family film lacks in narrative or ideological coherence, it makes up for by providing a collection of other pleasures for its audiences: visual (sight-gags, special effects, visual puns); auditory (the penchant for the use of already popular music for the soundtracks of family films, elaborate sound systems in movie theatres – and increasingly in home theatres – to reproduce 3-D audio effects, the rise to prominence of foley artists as producers of intricate noise tracks for films); narrative; representational (using computer-generated effects to make animals talk, manipulate object size, 'morph' faces and bodies from one state to another, and allow live-act figures to interact with animated creatures and characters from other movies); allusional (building in references to other products, films and cultural phenomena). By staying 'open', by refusing unequivocal ideological alliances, by leaving us with a 'yes, but ...' at the end, the family film increases its stock as a source of meaning in some other place, as some other licenced version of itself, and as a part of someone else's narrative. As a Mattel spokesman put it, 'We found that boys really need a fully developed concept and characters in order to play out their fantasies.'³⁶ In this way, family films are not just entertainment for the postmodern family but postmodern entertainment for the postmodern family. They are, like postmodern culture generally, characterised, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, by 'pluralism, absence of universally binding authority, leveling up of hierarchies, interpretative polyvalence, ... [and] by the overabundance of meanings, coupled with (or made all the more salient by) the scarcity of adjudicating authorities.'³⁷

Finally, the new logics of Hollywood film-making and marketing produced by the confluence of technological, demographic and social change suggest the need to review the ways in which cinema studies is taught and films studied. At the very least, certain features of these films – their indeterminacy and systematic equivocation; their episodic, almost hypertextual syntagmatic organisation; their constant allusion to versions of parts of the films (characters, settings, iconographic motifs) that already exist or might exist outside the text itself; and their marked ideological ambivalence – call into question hermeneutic strategies commonly employed as models in media studies and communication studies. Regardless of the theoretical position that anchors them, close readings of such texts tend to stretch them upon grids designed for the closed, unified and organic texts of modernity. Even cultural studies, which has emphasised the polysemic character of popular texts and the variety of reading positions from which texts can be interpreted, clings for the most part to the notion of a dominant reading, the semiotic and ideological basis for which resides within the text and in relation to which, presumably, alternative readings are discerned.

This chapter has argued that the family film, emblematic of post-Hollywood cinema, undermines our ability to identify its audience at all, except as a set of markets across which a given film and its related, but by no means identical, versions, characters and licenced paraphernalia are exploited. These markets 'open' prior to the actual theatrical release of a given film (in the case of *Godzilla* fully a year in advance) and operate long after the film's theatrical run is but a dim memory. The physical site of film-viewing in the US is now dispersed across 50 million households, and these 'home theatres' now

contain more than 500 million legally reproduced copies of Hollywood films on video alone.

Thus, it is now time to write the last chapter of the history of Hollywood cinema and its audience, a chapter that will also serve as the first chapter of a new history whose object we have yet to identify. But, whatever we call it, this new history will have to account not only for what happens when people sit in dark rooms with concession stands attached to them, but also what they do at Walmart and McDonald's and at the mall, where they go on vacation, and what kinds of pyjamas their children wear.

Notes

- 1 See Susan Mitchell, 'The next baby boom', *American Demographics*, October 1995; Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1980), especially Chapter 2, pp. 19–35; Jerry Hagstrom, 'The West's thinning ranks', *National Journal*, 8 March 1986, p. 584; Stewart Powell, 'Measuring the impact of the "baby bust" on US future', *U.S. News and World Report*, 16 December 1985, p. 66; Ben J. Wattenberg, *What Happens When People in Free Countries Don't Have Enough Babies?* (New York: Pharos, 1987).
- 2 Mitchell, 'The next baby boom'; 'Tense times for families', *The Public Pulse*, January 1991, p. 1; Dale Russakoff, 'Under-18 population hits record numbers', *Raleigh News and Observer*, 1 July 1998, p. 1-A, 12-A.
- 3 On the rise of the VCR as a domestic appliance in the 1980s, see, among many articles in the general and trade press: 'VCR's: videocassette recording', *Broadcasting*, 20 August 1984, p. 42; 'As the video craze captures American families', *U.S. News and World Report*, 28 January 1985, p. 58; Don Braungel, 'Is your VCR smarter than you?', *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 13 July 1988, p. D-13; *Communications Daily*, 25 October 1989, p. 9; *Broadcasting and Cable*, 5 December 1994.
- 4 *Communications Daily*, 22 January 1992; Katherine Barrett, 'Video: the new family fix', *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1990, p. 118.
- 5 Alan Citron, 'Blockbuster vs. The World', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 June 1990; 'Hurricane Huizenga', *Business Week*, 24 February 1997, pp. 88–93; Andrew E. Serwer, 'Huizenga's third act', *Fortune*, 5 August 1996, p. 73–6.
- 6 On sell-through, see: Denise Gellene, 'Kids turn on to video', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 February 1989, Part 4, p. 5; Paul Schreiber, 'A picture of volatility', *Newsday*, 20 November 1989, p. 3; Peter Newcomb, 'Can video stores survive?', *Forbes*, 5 February 1990, p. 39; Richard Turner, 'Marketing', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 1990, p. B-1; Peter Nichols, 'Pricing videos', *New York Times*, 29 January 1991, p. C-11; Karen Blumenthal, 'Children's tapes help the sales market grow up', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 December 1991, p. B-1; Richard Turner, 'Pretty woman lures new video buyers', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 January 1991, p. B-1; 'Mom and Pop video stores continue to fade', *Hollywood Reporter*, 30 July 1992.
- 7 Richard Turner, 'Tape transfer', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 December 1992, p. 1.
- 8 Nancy Brumback, 'Kids' stuff keeps growing', *Supermarket News*, 13 February 1995, p. 3A; 'Supplier roundtable', *Supermarket News*, 24 April 1995, p. S-22; Dan Alaimo, 'A finish with a flourish', *Supermarket News*, 21 August 1995, p. 4A; Joseph Gelmis, 'Love the movie? Then buy it', *Newsday*, 2 October 1994, p. 18; Peter M. Nichols, 'Facing up to the

- big screen', *New York Times*, 30 July 1993, p. D-15; Jim McCullaugh, 'Consumers Are sold on sell-through', *Billboard*, 10 July 1993, p. V-4.
- 9 Brian D. Johnson and Anne Gregor, 'Home for Christmas', *McLean's*, 9 December 1991, p. 54.
- 10 Richard Corliss, 'Hollywood's summer: just kidding', *Time*, 28 June 1993, p. 62.
- 11 Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 269–80.
- 12 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 13 See, for example, David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Free Press, 1996) and Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
- 14 Thomas Radecki, 'Television and film entertainment', *Mothering*, 22 December 1989, p. 54.
- 15 Hal Hinson, 'In Hollywood, family matters; changing demographics may have made Bob Dole's broadside at movies obsolete', *Washington Post*, 25 June 1995, p. G-4.
- 16 'Moral of 1993: family films drive box office', *PR Newswire*, 3 March 1994.
- 17 See Richard Turner, 'Marketing', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 1990, p. B-1; 'Pretty woman lures new video buyers', 9 January 1991, B-1; Mary Ann Farley, 'Studios serve hearty helping of family fare', *Video Business*, 27 May 1994, p. 38; Joseph Gelmis, 'Love the movie? Then buy it', *Newsday*, 2 October 1994, p. 18; John Horn, 'Kids boost "Home Alone 2"', *Chicago Tribune*, 4 December 1992, p. B-2. On the theatrical box office success of 'family films' in the early 1990s, see Leonard Klady, 'Kidpower propels nat'l b.o.', *Daily Variety*, 6 April 1993, p. 1; Marshall Fine, 'Family fare on the summer movie plate', *Gannett News Service*, 16 June 1993.
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- 19 *Los Angeles Times*, 8 June 1993; Fred Pampel, Dan Fost and Sharon O'Malley, 'Marketing the movies', *American Demographics*, March 1994, p. 48.
- 20 Statistics on video rental and ownership are taken from the websites of the Motion Picture Association and the Video Software Dealers Association. Information is current up to June 1998.
- 21 On the marketing value of product placement, particularly at a time of ballooning marketing budgets, see Jennifer Pendleton, 'Hollywood shuns the "cheap" shot', *Daily Variety*, 21 August 1992.
- 22 Nancy Millman, 'Box-office lingo', *Chicago Tribune*, 26 November 1992, p. 1.
- 23 Millman, 'Box-office lingo'; Jennifer Pendleton, 'Studios rolling out big guns to market Yule pix', *Daily Variety*, 11 November 1992, p. 2; Thomas R. King, 'Marketers' interest dims in movie tie-ins', *Wall Street Journal*, 13 November 1992, p. B-1.
- 24 McDonald's had a similar problem in the promotion of *Jurassic Park* the following summer, which was also rated PG-13. This time, however, the fast food chain used the film to support a 'value meal' promotion rather than a Happy Meal: the *Jurassic Park* value meal consisted of a triple cheeseburger, 'dino' sized fries, and a 32-ounce drink sold in a collector's cup. The enormous quantity of food represented by this value meal

- presumably exceeded the stomach capacity of most children under the age of thirteen. See Millman, 'Box-office lingo'.
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- 28 Danny Biederman, 'Licencing success', *Children's Business*, June 1991, p. 46.
- 29 'Summer's last stand', *Business Week*, 3 March 1997, pp. 67–74; Jay Carr, 'Do all discussions of summer movies have to begin and end with money?', *Boston Globe*, 16 July 1995, p. B-27; Betsy Streisand, 'It's a divisive world after all', *U.S. News and World Report*, 14 July 1997, pp. 45–6.
- 30 Richard Natale, 'Less proves more at b.o.', *Daily Variety*, 1 December 1992, p. 1.
- 31 See Martin Booe, 'Why films are getting younger as boomers get older', *Washington Post*, 27 June 1993, p. G-8; Jessica Seigel, 'Sexy-psycho-killer-bang-em-ups not the ticket, movie honchos say', *Chicago Tribune*, 11 March 1993, p. C-1; 'Marketing the movies', *American Demographics*, March 1994, p. 48.
- 32 Bruce Orwall, 'Here is how Disney tries to put the "event" into the event film', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 June 1998, p. A-1, A-6.
- 33 Ronald Grover, 'He's big. He's upset. He's invisible', *Business Week*, 6 April 1998, pp. 123–5.
- 34 Some commentators see the 'golden age' of the family film waning as early as 1994. That summer, several of the films studios thought would reproduce the success of *Home Alone* (among them *Getting Even with Dad*, *Little Big League* and *Baby's Day Out*) turned out to be flops. Industry observers lay part of the blame on Hollywood's misreading of the success of films, such as *Home Alone*, as evidence of a cultural desire for fantasies of juvenile empowerment. Such a fantasy was not enough to sustain these films or *Blank Check*, in which a Macauley Culkin wanna-be accidentally acquires a million dollars and winds up, as critic David Kehr put it, chasing a girl 'like Frank Sinatra in a 50s movie'. With the echo boom itself ageing, producers became just as wary of a film that aimed itself at too young an audience and thus alienated the pubescent market as one that courted an 'R' rating. By 1997, studios were once again looking at the teen market with new interest, even reprising genres from the 1970s in an attempt to lure both echo-teens and boomer parents. Neo-slasher films such as *Scream*, *Scream 2*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, and even a new entry in the *Halloween* series reprising Jamie Lee Curtis (*H₂O*) hit American movie screens in 1997 and 1998. The summer 1998 release of *Can't Hardly Wait* was regarded by some critics and industry watchers as the first in a new wave of teen comedies (Leonard Klady, '“Show” takes win; Ford, Heche a hit', *Variety*, 22–28 June 1998, p. 8). Also, the baby-boom gener-

- ation itself continued to age out of the child-bearing and child-rearing cohort, signalled by the oldest boomers turning fifty in 1996. Hollywood responded to this demographic trend with paranoid fantasies (*Breakdown*, *Absolute Power*, *The Edge*, *The Game*, *Ransom*, *Airforce One*, *A Perfect Murder*) addressing the masculine anxieties of grumpy old(er) men and providing vehicles for its ageing baby-boom male stars, including Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson and Michael Douglas. In some of these films, a middle-aged, white, usually wealthy and powerful man is propelled into a scenario in which he is required to reassert his lost, scarred or diminished masculinity one last time to save himself, his wife, his family and/or his nation. The book and film versions of *The Bridges of Madison County* might be seen as a 'feminine' counterpart of the grumpy old(er) men tendency in post-Hollywood cinema with masochistic melodrama substituted for paranoid action-adventure. On the 'decline' of the family film after 1993, see Richard Natale, 'Family films abound, but successes don't', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 1994, p. F-1; Michele Willens, 'So much for the family trend?', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 1995, p. F-1; Stephen Galloway, 'Hollywood's focus on kids' films for kids is giving way to movies that teenagers and parents can also enjoy', *Hollywood Reporter*, 24 October 1995.
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- 36 Danny Biederman, 'Licencing success: only in the movies?', *Children's Business*, June 1991, p. 46.
- 37 Bauman, *Intimations*, p. 31.