

## Would you take your child to see this film?

### The cultural and social work of the family-adventure movie

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One sunny afternoon in August 1994, I was watching the big summer movie of that year, *True Lies*, with a friend in Munich, and in the midst of all the magnificent mayhem on the screen, he suddenly turned round to me and said: 'Wouldn't family therapy be much cheaper?' What he referred to is the peculiar *raison d'être* for the action in this biggest and most expensive of all action movies: the hero and his wife have to learn to understand, and interact with, each other in a new way so as to revive their marriage, and once this is achieved the action-hero has to go through the motions all over again to overcome the alienation of his daughter. It was both annoying and strangely touching to realize that the spectacular attractions brought to the screen with the help of a reputed production budget of \$120 million was ultimately geared to the completion of the simple dramatic feat of turning mummy and daddy and child into a happy family again.<sup>1</sup> Therapy would indeed have been cheaper. Yet, buying a ticket to see the family drama played out on the big screen is, of course, cheaper still, and in response to my friend's comment I wondered whether a trip to the cinema wouldn't have made the *True Lies* family just as happy as all the adventure they got involved in. It also occurred to me that, by offering itself to the audience as a substitute for the adventures undertaken by the family on the screen, this was perhaps what the film was trying to tell us, if it was trying to tell us anything at all: Enliven your family life – go to the movies together once in a while. Maybe, then, my friend and I became so self-conscious about, and frustrated with, the film's machinations and our own position as spectators precisely because we had left our families behind and thus had already failed to heed the advice *True Lies* was giving us.

In this chapter, I shall argue that the obsessive concern of many of Hollywood's biggest blockbusters with family issues indicates that they attempt to broaden their appeal beyond the core audience of teenagers and young adults to reach the family audience; that is, small groups of parents and children going to the movies together. Hence, many of today's action-adventure movies are, in fact, family films. At the same time, the traditional children's or family film has been upgraded

with a heavy injection of spectacular adventure to appeal to teenagers and young adults as well as children and their parents. These two developments have resulted in a group of films which I would like to call family-adventure movies. It is my contention that family-adventure movies are the most successful production trend in American cinema since the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> I shall suggest that the cultural work that the films' narratives perform to reconcile family members with each other on the screen translates into a kind of social work performed by the films on the familial units in the auditorium, creating shared experiences and opening up channels of communication. My discussion will focus on a number of massive box-office hits, combining textual analysis with a discussion of the films' marketing and reception. The key films are the top five entries in *Variety's* list of all-time box-office hits, as of February 1996: *E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Lion King* (1994).<sup>3</sup> Before embarking on my discussion of family-adventure movies, however, I wish to indicate how it intersects with some of the key concerns of academic criticism of contemporary Hollywood.

### Fathers and sons in contemporary Hollywood criticism

Families and familial relations, most notably those between fathers and sons, figure largely in academic criticism of contemporary Hollywood cinema, especially where the work of Hollywood's most successful filmmakers George Lucas and Steven Spielberg is concerned. For Robin Wood, for example, the 'Lucas-Spielberg Syndrome' affecting most American films since the mid-1970s is constituted by a twist on the traditional category of the children's film, resulting in 'children's films conceived and marketed largely for adults – films that construct the adult spectator as a child, or, more precisely, as a childish adult, an adult who would like to be a child.'<sup>4</sup> The address of spectators in the auditorium as children is complemented by the 'Restoration of the Father' within the narratives on the screen, which Wood sees as 'the dominant project . . . of the contemporary Hollywood cinema, a veritable thematic metasystem embracing all the available genres and all the current cycles.'<sup>5</sup> The films' stories frequently focus on problematic father figures whose authority is initially being questioned, yet who will eventually 'be accepted and venerated', and on the 'Oedipal trajectory' of the young male hero who has to work through his problematic relationship with the father, learning to accept his power and to identify with him, so that 'he will one day in his turn *become* the father'.<sup>6</sup> The male spectator is invited to adopt the position of the young male hero, regressing to childhood and submitting to the power of the father in the story at the same time as he submits to the power of the spectacle and narrative drive of the film itself, 'totally passive, ready to be

taken by the hand and led step by step through the narrative to participate emotionally in its reassuringly reactionary conclusion'.<sup>7</sup>

Wood's forceful analysis is representative of an important strand in contemporary Hollywood criticism.<sup>8</sup> Yet, unlike many other writers, Wood makes explicit the set of assumptions about audience composition, audience response and the quality of cinema-going experiences which underpin his work as well as that of other critics. Most importantly, Wood states that today's movie audience is largely made up of adults in search of regressive pleasures, implying that actual children constitute a negligible segment of this audience. Second, he claims that the audience is dominated by men who are 'all too ready to accept the films' invitation to infantile regression', whereas women are easily alienated from the experience on offer due to the films' patriarchal agenda. Thus, while men 'generally love *E.T.*, women generally don't'.<sup>9</sup> Third, Wood distinguishes between 'the energetic, inquiring and often profoundly skeptical mind' possessed by 'real' and 'uncorrupted' children, and the infantile mind set contemporary Hollywood encourages in its adult spectators.<sup>10</sup> While he admits that he enjoys 'being reconstructed as a child, surrendering to the reactivation of a set of values and structures my adult self has long since repudiated', he can distance himself from this pleasurable experience and critically evaluate it as 'extremely reactionary, as all mindless and automatic pleasure tends to be'.<sup>11</sup> Using Wood's assumptions and claims as a point of departure, I am now going to take a look at family-adventure movies and their audiences, paying particular attention to the presence of children in the cinema auditorium, to the determining effect that gender may have on audience responses and to my own cinematic pleasures as well as those of others.

### Parents, children and critics at the movies

At first sight, *The Lion King* confirms the critique of contemporary Hollywood put forward by Wood and other critics. The film tells the story of a young boy (the lion cub Simba) who wants to be king, a position currently held by his father. When his father is killed by Simba's jealous uncle, the boy is made to believe that he is responsible for the killing. He runs away from home and lives a life of forgetful hedonism, until he is encouraged to confront the past, learns the truth, overcomes the villainous uncle and finally assumes the position of his dead father, thus completing his 'Oedipal trajectory'. The press book for the film explains that 'Simba realizes that his father's spirit lives on in him and that he must accept the responsibility of his destined role'.<sup>12</sup> And Disney studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg described the film as 'a love story between a father and son' concerning 'the responsibility we have as torchbearers from one generation to the next'.<sup>13</sup> This would seem to suggest, in the terms of Wood's analysis, that the film offers adult males the opportunity to regress into a replay of their own Oedipal trajectories.

However, a look at actual audience composition and response complicates this conclusion.

When I went to see *The Lion King*, I found myself surrounded by hordes of children with adults in tow. As the only adult not accompanied by a child, I felt like an outsider and intruder. It seemed to me that I looked decidedly suspicious, as if I had the worst possible reasons for mingling with all these kids in the darkened movie theatre. I almost feared that I would be refused entry, yet once inside I soon forgot about my dubious status and lost myself in the film. Instead of feeling distanced from the children around me, in a very real sense I became one of them, perhaps recovering the sense of magic which had infused the fairytales my mother read to me when I was a child, and the first films I ever saw at the cinema with her. Memorably, these early cinema experiences included Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967), the story of an orphan boy who has to leave the people who have loved and nurtured him like parents. *The Jungle Book* is very much a story of separation and loss, told from a child's point of view, as is *The Lion King* for a substantial part of its duration. Coming out of the cinema, *The Lion King* partly felt like a revisitation of that crucial earlier movie experience, and my status as a lone adult contrasted sharply not only with the groups of parents and children leaving the cinema with me, but also with the memory of going to the cinema with my mother. This added another layer to the experience of separation and loss that *The Lion King* had played upon.

Like Robin Wood, then, I admit to the pleasures of 'being reconstructed as a child'. However, I don't think that these pleasures are in any way 'automatic' and 'mindless'. Instead they are likely to be bracketed by reflections on one's present status as an adult and one's relationship to children, as well as on memories of past moviegoing experiences as a child and the relationship with one's parents. Furthermore, even when the films' stories concentrate on the relationship between fathers and sons, mothers are likely to have a prominent role, taking children by the hand both in the movie theatre in the present and in memories of the past. On and off the screen, rivalry and identification with the father is only part of the (Oedipal) story.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the onscreen representation of childhood, like the offscreen memories of childhood which are being evoked, is by no means idealized. Far from being depicted as a paradisaical state, characterized by endless pleasure, straightforward wish-fulfilment and irresponsibility, childhood emerges as a difficult phase indeed.

According to Wood the appeal of contemporary Hollywood's regressive fantasies is 'the urge to evade responsibility – responsibility for actions, decisions, thought, responsibility for changing things: children do not have to be responsible, there are older people to look after them'.<sup>15</sup> *The Lion King*, however, shows exactly the reverse. Here, the child feels responsible for something he hasn't done, and the guilt arising from this keeps him in a state of suspended maturation. There is a

hint that in Simba's mind, the killing of his father is connected to his impatient declaration 'I just can't wait to be king' towards the beginning of the film, implying as it does the death of the present king. Thus, the death of the father is an implied wish come true.<sup>16</sup> Simba's transformation later in the film is based on his ability to gain a realistic view of the relationship between his wishes, thoughts and actions, on the one hand, and developments in the world around him, on the other hand. This allows him to understand what he is, and is not, responsible for. The 'escapist' experience that contemporary Hollywood is said to offer its audiences (equivalent to Simba's years of suspended maturation), then, is precisely what *The Lion King* reflects upon, examining the psychological causes of the need to escape from responsibility (here identified as an overwhelming and misguided sense of responsibility) and highlighting the need to overcome the escapist condition.

So far, my analysis has approached *The Lion King* from an adult point of view, but most of what I have said about the ways in which the film tries to affect audiences also applies to the children in the audience. However, what is perceived by an adult as a fantastic evocation of past experiences is more likely to be seen by a child as a realistic extension of everyday feelings and experiences. Indeed, in a critical attack on Disney's animated features, focusing on *The Lion King*, Matt Roth accuses Disney of a kind of emotional hyperrealism – 'that obsessive plumbing of horrors more real to children than death: parental loss, withdrawal of love, exile from family and friends, and blame for unintended acts of destruction.'<sup>17</sup> Roth sees this as an attempt 'to induce (emotional trauma) in young children' so as to open them up for the reassuring 'fascist' principles Disney 'feels it must implant in each new generation'.<sup>18</sup> While I disagree with his conclusion, Roth's description of the severity and realism of Disney's treatment of childhood experiences would seem to be apt.<sup>19</sup>

If screen representations can be seen in terms of emotional realism rather than fantasy, it is also possible to approach the social and psychological experiences of audiences through observation rather than psychoanalytic theoretization. This allows, among other things, for a far less deterministic view of the role of gender in the shaping of audience responses. Discussions of male-centred films such as *The Lion King* and *E.T.* with students, for example, do not confirm Wood's contention that male responses to these films and their male protagonists are stronger and more positive, whereas females are easily alienated from the films' oedipal concerns. As with *The Lion King*, at first sight *E.T.* would seem to be a perfect example for Wood's critique. The film tells the story of a 10-year-old boy whose parents have recently separated. Elliott misses his father, perhaps also resenting him for going away. When he befriends an alien creature who hides in his shed, the alien comes to serve as both a kid brother and a wise old man, an ideal yet temporary father figure, who eventually has to leave the boy who loves him. In the heart-breaking yet reassuring farewell scene at the end of the film, E.T. tells the boy

that he will always be with him, right there in his head. Now, far from rejecting the film for its oedipality, female students tend to be more willing than males to shed the tears the film works so hard to provoke, and to talk about this emotional experience in class. Furthermore, while all students freely admit to having wept when they first saw the film as children (often during one of their first ever visits to the cinema), they are somewhat surprised and puzzled by the fact that the film still has the power to move them. Thus, students' responses and reflections are influenced by their assumptions about what is, or is not, an appropriate emotional response in terms of both sex and age, rather than by the force of same-sex identification with screen characters.<sup>20</sup>

When asked about the significance of the protagonists' sex, students suggested that the fact that Elliott is male, and E.T. appears to be male as well, adds to the drama. They argued that females are much more open to intimate friendships and shared emotional experiences; whereas boys have to work much harder at them. The intimate bond which is being established between Elliott and E.T., and Elliott's extreme expressions of grief and jubilation, especially in the scene in which the alien first dies and then comes back to life, are all the more dramatic and effective for the difficulties usually encountered by boys in handling their emotions. To take this line of argument further, it is possible to say that, rather than constructing their spectators as male, films like *E.T.* are in effect working to 'feminize' both their young male protagonists and their male audiences; that is, to allow them to experience and freely express emotions (in the darkness and anonymity of the movie theatre) in a way which is usually considered to be typically female.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, it is true that female spectators are encouraged to identify with the young male hero rather than with the film's female characters. Elliott's mother, recently abandoned by her husband and struggling to earn a living and raise three kids all on her own, is a sympathetic character, especially for adult female spectators, and Elliott's little sister Gertie gets a chance to teach E.T. to speak and to dress him up in women's clothes. Yet, the narrative is determined to a large extent by Elliott's inquisitive mind, ingenuity and decisive action, which establishes him as the main point of identification.

In an essay on the problems of writing women's history, Sue Zschoche regrets 'the poverty of imagination that characterizes the stories told about women's lives', which may make it necessary for women to identify with great men in order to experience vicarious heroic action. The example she gives concerns her daughter, who developed an obsession with *E.T.* at the age of 3, watching the film over and over again. The little girl soon became quite convinced that she really would find E.T. herself, and at that point she 'announced that henceforth and forevermore, she was to be called Elliot'.<sup>22</sup> While Zschoche sees this as a symptom of a male-oriented culture unwilling to grant heroic status to women, the anecdote also illustrates the openness of films such as *E.T.* for cross-sex

identification.<sup>23</sup> What both girls and boys are encouraged to identify with is not so much a clearly gendered character than a child figure who combines masculine and feminine traits (heroism and empathy, stoicism and expressiveness) in the same way that it combines traits usually associated with children (an active imagination and a willingness to believe in the impossible), with a strong sense of responsibility for, and active commitment to, the welfare of another being which is surprisingly mature.

By transcending culturally encoded dualities of sex and age, the child figure in *E.T.* and *The Lion King* is turned into an idealized point of identification for both males and females, children and adults.<sup>24</sup> This identification is further enhanced through the parallels between the qualities displayed by the child on the screen and the conditions of spectatorship in the auditorium. For example, Elliott's ability to empathize with E.T. mirrors the audience's need to empathize with Elliott, which is a precondition for their enjoyment of the film. Also, Elliott's willingness to believe in the existence of E.T. corresponds to the audience's necessary suspension of disbelief with respect to the film they are watching, his expressions of grief and joy are echoed by those provoked in the auditorium, and his final farewell to E.T. (the film's very last shot is a close-up of Elliott's composed face staring into space) prefigures the audience's farewell to *E.T.*, the movie. This farewell results in a return to reality after the excitement of fantastic adventure, which allowed both Elliott and the audience to deal with issues and emotions that are part and parcel of everyday life yet are difficult to deal with there. The film's focus on the problematic relationship between children and adults is closely connected to the immediate concerns of the familial units of parents and children making up a large proportion of the audience. The narrative importance of divorce in *E.T.* would seem to connect directly with the social reality of divorce or dysfunctional family life affecting many people in the auditorium, in the same way that the death of the father in *The Lion King* taps directly into children's fears.

Furthermore, in both films the central male child is integrated into a group of people of different sex and age who share many of his experiences and, to a greater or lesser extent, participate in his heroic action, also joining him in the film's concluding scene. Elliott is joined in his adventures by, and through them is finally united with, his siblings, his brother's friends and eventually even his mother and 'Keys', the scientist. Simba is helped along throughout the film, and joined in the final tableau, by his father's adviser Zazu, the wise old man Rafiki, his irresponsible, hedonistic jungle friends Timon and Pumbaa, and his girlfriend Nala. Identification with the heroic male child, then, also means vicarious participation in group experiences and efforts, which again mirrors the very conditions of cinema spectatorship. Crucially, the group that is being assembled at the end of these films is, just like the target audience, a mixture of men and women, children and adults. At the centre of this group is the family unit, yet the group extends

well beyond this unit to include people who have bonded with members of the central family in the course of the adventures depicted in the film. Not only do the films work to strengthen the bonds between family members, then, but they also incorporate these families into a wider community, both on the screen and in the auditorium.<sup>25</sup>

All of this is perhaps not too surprising in the light of the fact that both *The Lion King* and *E.T.* are effectively children's films, a rather loose, yet easily identifiable category defined by the films' primary appeal to children, which is usually achieved through child and/or animal protagonists. It could be argued, then, that commercially successful children's films will tend to surround their young protagonists with adults so as to represent on the screen the very adults who are expected to accompany children to the cinema, and who are thus offered two points of entry into the film's narrative scenarios – a regressive identification with the child protagonist and a mature identification with one of the adults. Having said this, most of the above analysis of *The Lion King* and *E.T.* would also seem to apply to action-adventure films which do not centre on child protagonists and are not primarily aimed at children.

*Star Wars* is a striking example. Marketing research before the film's release in May 1977 showed that on the basis of the film's title and a brief description of its story and main attractions, interest in *Star Wars* was highest among young men, whereas women and older people (including parents) were put off by the film's generic classification, science-fiction, which was associated with technology and the lack of a human dimension.<sup>26</sup> The original advertising campaign, which emphasized the film's mythic and epic qualities, its fantasy and romanticism to overcome the resistance of female and mature cinemagoers, was directed primarily at 12- to 24-year-olds and secondarily at 25- to 35-year-olds. Following the enormously successful release of the film, subsequent advertising campaigns for re-releases in the summer of 1978 and 1979 were aimed primarily at people over 35. According to media analyst Olen J. Earnest, the theme of these later campaigns 'was a reminder to older moviegoers of the fun of the Saturday matinee, Errol Flynn swashbuckling entertainment experiences of their younger movie-going days – or how to be a kid again for two hours'.<sup>27</sup>

While childhood was a central concern in the marketing and reception of *Star Wars*, there was little consideration of actual children. Nevertheless, the film operates very much like the children's films discussed earlier. After its action-packed opening, *Star Wars* focuses for quite some time on the interaction and misadventures of the two robot characters 3-CPO and R2-D2, a rather childish comic duo, not that far removed from young Simba and Nala, or Timon and Pumbaa, or the children in *E.T.* The film then shifts focus to its teenage hero, Luke Skywalker, an orphan who lives and works on the farm of his aunt and uncle, wishing to leave this humble existence behind to join a military academy and

become a warrior like his father. His wish is fulfilled under tragic circumstances, when his foster parents are killed, which allows, and indeed forces him to go off to save the princess and the known universe from domination by the evil empire. In his adventures, he is accompanied and supported by a substitute father (Obi-Wan Kenobi), a kind of older brother (Han Solo) and a young woman (Princess Leia) who he never quite gets romantically involved with, as well as assorted creatures and robots, most of whom are assembled in the concluding tableau of the film. This tableau emphasizes heroic group effort and community spirit rather than individual heroism and romantic coupling, and includes a final turn by the main protagonists towards the camera and the applause of the assembled rebel forces, mirroring quite precisely the cinema audience's (hoped for) response to the film itself.

In the sequels *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the familial configurations become even more central and literal. The villain (Darth Vader) turns out to be Luke's father, and the princess his sister. With the continuing support of two substitute fathers (Obi Wan-Kenobi and Yoda), Luke finally confronts his real father, and mobilizes the remnants of Vader's paternal feelings to turn him against his master, the evil emperor. By killing the emperor, Luke's father redeems himself. The trilogy's final tableau again features a celebration, assembling Luke and his companions as well as a cross-section of friendly alien creatures for a party. At the very end, a thoughtful Luke encounters the spirits of his three fathers (presented through superimposition), who are dead, yet who will remain with him forever precisely as projections (much like the film itself). Again, as in *The Lion King* and *E.T.*, the young male protagonist is incorporated into a community, which has been brought together more closely by the film's adventures, and is overseen by the spirits of dead or absent fathers. Again, the audience is invited to see itself on the screen – men and women, children and adults, celebrating the end of the adventure (which has been a wish come true) and also saying an emotional farewell (to fathers and to the film itself). Given all the similarities with children's films such as *The Lion King* and *E.T.*, it is not surprising to find out that, despite the initial marketing focus on teenagers and young adults, in the long run *Star Wars* has been recognized as a film for the whole family. In an interview on the occasion of the enormously successful release of the *Star Wars* special edition in February 1997, Twentieth Century Fox chairman Tom Sherak cited surveys which showed that one-third of the audience for this latest re-release were families.<sup>28</sup>

This emphasis on the family is also at the very heart of both the marketing and the narrative of *Jurassic Park* (1993). However, while the film's multimedia marketing and merchandising campaign was largely based on the apparently irresistible appeal of dinosaurs to children, and its world première took place in the White House in aid of the Children's Defence Fund, reviewers warned parents that the

film may be too scary for pre-teenage children, and Spielberg declared that he wouldn't let his own children, all under the age of 10, see the film.<sup>29</sup> Such public concern only served to foreground and intensify *Jurassic Park's* special relationship with children and their families, which is explicitly addressed in the film itself. After its brief action-packed opening sequence, familial concerns are raised with a reference to the fact that Hammond, the amusement park's owner, has a daughter who is going through a divorce, which later justifies the presence of his grandchildren Tim and Alexis in the park (the mother needs some time on her own to work things out). The scientist couple (Alan Grant and Ellie Sattler) is then introduced in a scene which focuses on a child who is mysteriously present at the site of their latest archaeological dig. The boy is not impressed by all the talk about dinosaurs, until Grant turns to him, describing, and partly enacting, in great and gruesome detail, what velociraptors would do to him, if he ever encountered them (namely slice him open and start eating him while he's still alive). The film here quite self-consciously sends a warning signal to the children in the auditorium, preparing them for the violence to come, much of which is directed against Hammond's grandchildren. The scene continues with a conversation between Grant and Sattler about his dislike of children and her wish to have children of her own. While this wish is not granted in the film, the subsequent adventure in *Jurassic Park* forces Grant to protect Tim and Alexis and encourages him to form a strong emotional bond with them, so that in the final tableau in the helicopter which takes them away from the island, the children happily rest in his arms, with a smiling Sattler looking on. Not coincidentally, this development is paralleled in one of the dinosaur subplots. Despite the fact that all the genetically engineered dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* are female, they do eventually reproduce (after some of them spontaneously change sex), because, as the chaos theoretician Malcolm says: 'Life cannot be contained. . . . Life finds a way.' Both in Grant and in the dinosaurs, reproductive and familial instincts cannot be suppressed.

*Jurassic Park* also contains the most extensive reflections on its own status as family entertainment of all the films discussed so far. When he first appears at Grant and Sattler's dig, Hammond (played by film director Richard Attenborough) says about his amusement park, which carries the same title as the film: 'Our attractions will drive kids out of their minds. And not just kids – everyone!' In the park's main building, which is filled with merchandise prominently featuring the film's logo, Hammond describes the difference between *Jurassic Park* and other amusement parks in terms not dissimilar to the publicity surrounding the film's computer generated images which literally brought dinosaurs to life on the screen: 'I'm not talking just about rides, you know. Everybody has rides. No, we have made living biological attractions, so astounding that they'll capture the imagination of the entire planet.' When the corporate lawyer talks about the enormous fees people will be willing to pay for entry into the park, Hammond

says that the park is 'not only for the super-rich. Everyone in the world has the right to enjoy these animals'. And when his grandchildren arrive, Hammond tells his companions that now they are going to 'spend a little time with our target audience'.

Thus, the film clearly spells out what kind of entertainment it is meant to be: *Jurassic Park* offers an exciting, almost life-like adventure, which is affordable for everyone and appeals first and foremost to children but is also attractive for teenagers and adults. In response to possible accusations that its attractions are either too mechanical, lacking a human dimension, or too frightening for kids, the film tells a little morality tale. Hammond is made to realize that he's gone too far with his park: 'With this place, I wanted to show them [his audience] something that wasn't an illusion, something that was real.' Ellie Sattler replies that Hammond's idea of total control over his creation was an illusion, and that what matters much more than such control 'is the people we love'. At the heart of popular entertainment, then, is not technological power and control but love, both for the characters in the fictions and for the people in the auditorium. As in the other films discussed so far, *Jurassic Park's* final tableau depicts the strong emotional bond which has been forged between the visitors to Jurassic Park, mirroring the bond which the adventure of the film is meant to have forged among members of the cinema audience.

The discussion of these four films has demonstrated that in contemporary Hollywood cinema, there is indeed a convergence of the children's/family film and the action-adventure movie resulting in what I have called family-adventure movies. These films are imbued with sentimentality, spectacle and a sense of wonder, telling stories about the pain and longing caused by dysfunctional or incomplete families (usually with absent or dead fathers), about childish wishes and nightmares magically coming true and the responsibilities that go along with this, about the power of shared adventures to unite the young male protagonist with other members of his family and a community beyond the boundaries of the family, and about the irrevocability of loss and separation (the family remains incomplete, the father does not return). Indeed by foregrounding the cinematic spectacle of special effects and precisely choreographed action, and by constantly referring to their own status as cinematic entertainment for a captive audience, these films offer themselves as a temporary relief from the real-life problems which their stories focus on but can never solve. Here, the young male protagonists, and the groups they are part of, serve as ideal representatives of a receptive audience, and the films' sensuous rides and magical transformations provide fleeting moments of unselfconscious happiness for this audience, which, like the group in the films' final tableau, eventually will have to leave the film adventure behind and re-enter the more mundane world of problematic social relationships and painful feelings. In terms of their marketing and their critical reception, the films are widely understood as familial experiences, and they are best enjoyed as part of

a family outing, or as an occasion to contemplate one's own place in familial networks, past and present. Yet, although they tend to ignore or marginalize romantic love and courtship, two of the most important concerns of the cinema's primary audience of teenagers and young adults, the films are able to please this constituency with their spectacle and emotional impact.

### The family-adventure movie and the family audience at the box office

In the light of the ability of family-adventure movies to appeal to all audience segments, it is not surprising to find that they dominate box-office charts. Sixteen of the top twenty films in *Variety's* list of all-time top grossers can be identified as family-adventure movies (see Appendix). While these films do not necessarily reproduce every aspect of the complex model developed in the previous section, they all share certain basic characteristics. They are intended, and manage, to appeal to all age groups, especially children and their parents, by combining spectacular, often fantastic or magical action with a highly emotional concern with familial relationships, and also by offering two distinct points of entry into the cinematic experiences they provide (childish delight and absorption on the one hand, adult self-awareness and nostalgia on the other hand).

These films are fairly evenly distributed across the period 1977–95, with most years (thirteen out of nineteen) seeing the release of one or two extremely successful family-adventure movies in late spring/early summer or in the second half of November. The US market share of each of these films in its year of release was about 5–10 per cent, and in most cases these family-adventure movies grossed considerably more money than their nearest competitors. The most extreme example is *E.T.*, which grossed more than twice as much as any other film released in 1982 and had a market share of over 10 per cent, which means that more than one out of every ten cinema tickets bought in the United States during that year was for this one film.<sup>30</sup>

What does the market dominance of family-adventure films tell us about the cinemagoing habits and experiences of the American population? It is a well-known fact that the majority of frequent cinemagoers (that is those who go at least once a month) are young people, and that most cinema tickets are sold to people under 30.<sup>31</sup> The vast majority (up to 80 per cent) of people over 30 go to the cinema only rarely (that is between one and six times a year) or not at all; this is especially true of adults without children, 50 per cent of whom attend once a year or never, whereas for adults with children the figure is only about 35 per cent.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that the American cinema audience is chiefly made up of young cinemagoers who attend regularly and of family units who attend only on special occasions. These occasions would seem to be provided primarily by

family-adventure movies, which are conveniently released in the run-up to, or during, school holidays. A release between the end of May and mid-July is the springboard for a long run during the summer holidays, and a November release is the ideal launching pad for a successful run during the Christmas season.<sup>33</sup> There is considerable evidence, then, to suggest that it is the rare holiday outings of groups of parents and children which, complemented by the core youth audience, turn a small number of family-adventure movies into superhits. These superhits provide the majority of the American population who go to the movies very rarely with their only cinematic experiences, while also providing the film industry with a considerable portion of its revenues from theatrical exhibition and related markets such as video, pay-TV and merchandising. Thus, family-adventure movies are central both to the economics of the American film industry and to the moviegoing experiences of the American public.

### Conclusion: the cultural and social work of *Forrest Gump*

What, then, is the point of going to the cinema for the vast audiences which family-adventure movies attract? By way of conclusion, I would like to indicate briefly how this question may be approached with reference to *Forrest Gump*.<sup>34</sup> A starting point is provided by speculations about, and observations of, audience responses in the press. In his *Variety* review, for example, Todd McCarthy writes that *Forrest Gump* 'offers up a non-stop barrage of emotional and iconographic identification points that will make the postwar generation feel they're seeing their lives passing on screen.'<sup>35</sup> Martin Walker notes the special appeal of the film's version of history for thirtysomething and fortysomething adults: 'As the baby-boomers . . . pass through the decades and become parents, professors, senior managers and even president, they feel the need for some discrete (*sic*) but deliberate revisionism of their pasts.'<sup>36</sup> He goes on to argue that the film achieves this by being multifaceted and quite open to a variety of political readings, with both liberal and conservative critics attacking the film, and with both political camps also celebrating it. In *Time* magazine, Richard Corliss examines the movie crowds themselves: 'You see them – folks of all ages and both sexes – floating out of the movie theater on waves of honorable sentiment.' Having 'completed an upbeat encounter session with America's recent past' and an 'emotional journey', each audience segment takes something different away from the experience: 'For younger viewers . . . *Forrest Gump* serves as a gentle introduction to the '60s. . . . And to those who raged, suffered or sinned through that insane decade, the movie offers absolution with a love pat.'<sup>37</sup> These commentators all imply that the release of *Forrest Gump* became an occasion for baby-boomers to reflect on their generational identity and on the wider historical context for their individual biograph-

ies, as well as an opportunity to communicate these reflections and personal experiences to the younger generations.

Indeed, a Gallup study showed that the audience of *Forrest Gump* was dominated by older people: 40 per cent of the audience were 40–65 years old and 35 per cent were in the 12–24 age range.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that the audience did indeed to a large extent consist of baby-boomers taking their children, both little kids and young adults, to share the experience of this film with them. The survey also registered unusually high approval ratings for *Forrest Gump* among all audience segments. Both teenagers and old people, both men and women, both African-Americans and other ethnic groups highly recommended this film. In fact, despite severe criticism of the film's sexism and racism, *Forrest Gump* received a considerably higher approval rating from women than it did from men, and even a slightly higher rating from African-Americans than it did from non-blacks.<sup>39</sup> Again, this confirms the impression that *Forrest Gump* became an occasion for self-reflection and communication across the boundaries of age, sex and ethnicity.<sup>40</sup>

As with other family-adventure films, the social work that *Forrest Gump* performs on the familial units in the auditorium derives from the cultural work it performs on the families on the screen (moving *Forrest Gump* from the position of the child in one single-parent family – mother and son – to the position of parent in another: father and son). As I have argued throughout this chapter, this mirroring relationship is the basis for the significance and success of family-adventure films. Thus, in order to get the point of these films, fully to experience and appreciate what they are trying to do, it may indeed be necessary for audience members, including critics, to take a child along to the cinema, or to be taken along as a child, or at least to be willing to contemplate one's place in families past and present.

### Appendix: Twenty top grossers at the North-American box office

According to Leonard Klady, "Apollo" launched on all-time b.o. list' (*Variety*, 26 February 1996, p. 46). This list is based on ticket sales in North America (including Canada) for the original release and subsequent reissues. It is not adjusted for inflation. Box-office figures are rounded. Where the exact release date could not be obtained, I have given the date of the film's review in *Variety*, which usually appears within days of the film's release. Family-adventure movies appear in bold.

|   |   |               |
|---|---|---------------|
| 1 | <i>E.T. – The Extra Terrestrial</i> (released 11 June 1982) | \$400 million |
| 2 | <i>Jurassic Park</i> (released 10 June 1993)                | \$357 million |
| 3 | <b><i>Forrest Gump</i></b> (released 6 July 1994)           | \$330 million |
| 4 | <i>Star Wars</i> (released 25 May 1977)                     | \$322 million |
| 5 | <i>The Lion King</i> (released 15 June 1994)                | \$313 million |

|    |  |               |
|----|--|---------------|
| 6  | <i>Home Alone</i> (released 16 November 1990)                    | \$286 million |
| 7  | <i>Return Of The Jedi</i> (released 25 May 1983)                 | \$264 million |
| 8  | <i>Jaws</i> (released 20 June 1975)                              | \$260 million |
| 9  | <i>Batman</i> (released 2 June 1989)                             | \$251 million |
| 10 | <i>Raiders Of The Lost Ark</i> (released 2 June 1981)            | \$242 million |
| 11 | <i>Ghostbusters</i> (1984; reviewed on 6 June)                   | \$239 million |
| 12 | <i>Beverly Hills Cop</i> (1984; reviewed on 28 November)         | \$235 million |
| 13 | <i>The Empire Strikes Back</i> (released 21 May 1980)            | \$223 million |
| 14 | <i>Mrs Doubtfire</i> (released 24 November 1993)                 | \$219 million |
| 15 | <i>Ghost</i> (released 13 July 1990)                             | \$218 million |
| 16 | <i>Aladdin</i> (released 11 November 1992)                       | \$217 million |
| 17 | <i>Back To The Future</i> (1985; reviewed on 26 June)            | \$208 million |
| 18 | <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i> (released 3 July 1991)         | \$205 million |
| 19 | <i>Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade</i> (released 24 May 1989) | \$197 million |
| 20 | <i>Gone With The Wind</i> (1939)                                 | \$192 million |

### Notes

- 1 Cf. Jose Arroyo, 'Cameron and the comic', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, no. 9 (September 1994), pp. 26–8.
- 2 By using the term 'production trend' rather than 'genre' for the classification of films, I follow Tino Balio's example. Production trends can be identified by both textual features (such as story, iconography and forms of spectacle) and extratextual features (such as target audience, release pattern, budget, cultural status and key personnel). See Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Chapter 7.
- 3 Leonard Klady, "'Apollo" launched on all-time b.o. list', *Variety*, 26 February 1996, p. 46. See Appendix 1.
- 4 Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 162–3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 6 Robin Wood, "'80s Hollywood: dominant tendencies', *CineAction!*, no. 1 (Spring 1985), p. 3.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 8 This critical tradition extends from Steve Neale, 'Hollywood strikes back: special effects in recent American cinema', *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1980), pp. 101–5, to Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1997). Cf. Andrew Gordon, 'Science-fiction and fantasy film criticism: the case of Lucas and Spielberg', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1989), pp. 80–94.
- 9 Wood, "'80s Hollywood', p. 5.
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 5.
- 11 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, p. 164.
- 12 Walt Disney Pictures Fact Sheet, *The Lion King* microfiche, British Film Institute (BFI). Press material circulated by distributors is worth studying because its statements find

- their way into a wide range of publications, thus shaping the expectations of prospective film audiences.
- 13 Katzenberg quoted in J. Hoberman, 'The mouse roars', *Village Voice*, 21 June 1994, p. 45.
  - 14 Wood sees the 'Expulsion of the mother' as one of the key aspects of contemporary Hollywood cinema: 'once the Oedipal trajectory has been completed and the identification with the father achieved, she is entirely dispensable and something of an encumbrance' (''80s Hollywood', p. 3).
  - 15 Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*, p. 165.
  - 16 Similarly, *Home Alone* (1990, no. 6 in the *Variety* list of all-time box-office hits) focuses on the problematic status of childish wishes and wish-fulfilment fantasies, that is on the pleasures and terrors of wishes (apparently) coming true. This is highlighted in the press book: 'Once little Kevin comes to terms with this scary reality, that his family is really gone (something he wished for in a fit of anger the previous night), he must fend for himself in the everyday chores of housekeeping' (*Home Alone* microfiche, BFI).
  - 17 Matt Roth, 'The Lion King: a short history of Disney-fascism', *Jump Cut*, no. 40, p. 15.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 18.
  - 19 Again, there are parallels with *Home Alone*. The press book quotes director Chris Columbus who described the film as 'a combination of kids' fears and fantasies of being left home alone'. Despite its excessive comic spectacle, several British critics welcomed the film as a realistic alternative to 'machine-tooled fantasies in plastic and rubber' such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990); see, for example, Geoff Brown, 'Exploitation with a human face', *The Times*, 20 December 1990, p. 17. Interestingly, the press book also quotes Catherine O'Hara, who plays the mother, saying that she 'liked the idea that a good, normal kind of family, good parents, could make such a stupid mistake' (*Home Alone* microfiche, BFI). The film deals extensively with the mother's feelings of guilt and her desperate attempt to get back to her son.
  - 20 Cf. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, 'Moved to tears: weeping in the cinema in postwar Britain', *Screen*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 152–73, and Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and tears', *Screen* vol. 27, no. 6 (November–December 1986), pp. 6–22.
  - 21 The relationship between traditional gender roles and emotional and physical excess on screen and in the auditorium has been explored by Linda Williams in 'Learning to scream', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 1, no. 12 (December 1994), pp. 14–17, and 'Film bodies: gender, genre and excess', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1991), pp. 2–13. See also Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).
  - 22 Sue Zschoche, 'ET., women's history, and the problem of Elliot', *American Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Fall 1995), p. 100.
  - 23 Interestingly, Zschoche notes that her daughter's next obsession were the Oz books, whose heroic central figure is 'a girl on a great quest' (*ibid.*, p. 109). The popularity of these books and of other children's classics such as Lewis Carroll's Alice books indicate that there are powerful models for stories about girl adventurers, but these are largely ignored in contemporary popular culture.
  - 24 The films could also be said actively to encourage identification across racial and ethnic boundaries. After all, the story of *E.T.* revolves around the possibility of transcending such boundaries (here between human being and alien). While *The Lion King* has been attacked for being racist, critics have also pointed out 'just how black it is'



- (Hoberman, 'The mouse roars'), referring in particular to the range of black voices featured in the film.
- 25 While *Home Alone* is largely centred on the actions of a single young male protagonist, it also is concerned both with the reunion of the family at the end of the film and with the strengthening of the protagonist's bond with other members of the suburban community, exemplified by the old neighbour, who, due to the boy's intervention, is reunited with his own son in the final tableau.
- 26 Olen J. Earnest, 'Star Wars: A case study of motion picture marketing', *Current Research in Film*, vol. 1 (1985), pp. 1-18.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 28 Quoted in Claudia Puig, 'Star Wars makes a new killing at the box office', *Guardian*, 4 February 1997, p. 13.
- 29 As reported in the British press; see, for example, Martin Walker, 'Fabulous beasts stumble to extinction in White House', *Guardian*, 6 June 1993, p. 24; Phil Reeves, 'Dino-fever grips nation as cultural tyrant is born', *Independent on Sunday*, 18 June 1993, p. 13; Jonathan Romney, 'Toys for a movie brat', *Guardian*, 21 June 1993, Section 2, pp. 2-3. Cf. Henry Sheehan, 'The fears of children', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 3, no. 7 (July 1993), p. 10. There was similar concern about *The Lion King*, especially about the terrifying and potentially traumatizing impact of the scene in which the father dies. As reported in 'Hamlet with fur makes a box office killing', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 1994, p. 13, and James Bone, 'Critics fear Disney hit may disturb children', *The Times*, 22 June 1994, p. 6.
- 30 These calculations are based on the box-office grosses in the films' year of release which are derived from Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts* (New York: Vintage, 1981), pp. 444-5, and 'The 1980s: a reference guide to motion pictures, television, VCR, and cable', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 27 (Spring 1991), p. 78. Overall annual box-office revenues are listed in 'The 1980s'; Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (London: Octopus, 1988), p. 288; Leonard Klady, 'Numbers game at showest', *Variety*, 10 March 1997, p. 15; and Ralf Ludemann, 'Pay-TV paves the way ahead', *Screen International*, 24 January 1997, p. 74. The dominance of this production trend at the North American box office translates into success in other markets, with a small number of family-adventure films dominating the international theatrical and video market since the mid-1970s, each generating revenues in the region of \$1-2 billion. See, for example, the list of all-time international top grossers in *Variety*, 3 June 1996, p. 70, and the list of all-time top sell-through videos in Adam Sandler, 'Biz ponders Oscar's effect on Gump vid', *Variety*, 24 April 1995, p. 7; also an *Entertainment Weekly* survey calculating total income generated from box-office admissions and video sales and rentals, which is reproduced in a supplement to the August 1994 issue of *Empire* magazine, entitled '101 things you never knew about the movies', p. 32.
- 31 This was first discovered when Hollywood started to do market research in the 1940s. The age distribution of the cinema audience was remarkably stable between the 1950s and the 1970s with about 75 per cent of all tickets bought by people under 30. Yet since the 1980s this dominance of young people has been decreasing (moving closer to the 50 per cent mark). See Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 62-3, 157, 231; Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 476, 485; Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 178; 'Industry economic review and audience profile', *The Movie*

- Business Book*, ed. Jason E. Squire (New York: Fireside, 1992, 2nd edition), pp. 388-9.
- 32 'Industry economic review', pp. 389-90.
- 33 Cf. John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office, 1895-1986* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 181-2.
- 34 Academic critics have taken issue with the history lessons the film provides, in particular with its marginalization and negative representation of women, African-Americans and the counterculture. See Thomas B. Byers, 'History re-membered: *Forrest Gump*, postfeminist masculinity, and the burial of the counterculture', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 419-44; Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 251-7. A more sympathetic view is offered by Peter N. Chumo II, "'You've got to put the past behind you before you can move on": *Forrest Gump* and national reconciliation', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* vol. 23 (1995), pp. 2-7.
- 35 *Variety*, 11 July 1994.
- 36 Martin Walker, 'Making saccharine taste sour', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 14, no. 10 (October 1994), p. 16.
- 37 Richard Corliss, 'The world according to Gump', *Time*, 1 August 1994, pp. 41-2.
- 38 Leonard Klady, 'B.O. bets on youth despite a solid spread', *Variety*, 10 April 1996, p. 14.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 A more detailed study of how this might work in concrete terms could be modelled on sociological field work conducted at the site where the baby-boom hit *Field of Dreams* (1989) was shot. See Roger C. Aden, Rita L. Rahoi and Christina S. Beck, "'Dreams are born on places like this": the process of interpretive community formation at the *Field of Dreams* site', *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Fall 1995), pp. 368-80.