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by Mark Bernard

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING THE SPLAT PACK
I. INTRODUCING THE SPLAT PACK

THE ‘NEW BLOOD’: A NAME CATCHES ON

Excitement about the Splat Pack seems to have been ignited with the April 2006 issue of the British film magazine *Total Film*. The issue featured an article by Alan Jones, entitled ‘The New Blood’. Its title was accentuated by a ‘Parental Advisory: Explicit Content’ label to let readers know they were about to enter forbidden, dangerous territory. Evidently, the local cineplex had been transformed into dangerous territory because ‘a host of bold new horror flicks’, such as Eli Roth’s *Hostel* and Alexandre Aja’s 2006 remake of Wes Craven’s 1977 shocker *The Hills Have Eyes*, had assaulted audiences with levels of brutality missing in ‘all those toothless remakes of Asian hits starring Jennifer Connelly, Naomi Watts and Sarah Michelle Gellar’ (Jones, 2006: 101, 102).

Jones devotes his article to showcasing the young directors who were ‘taking back’ horror from purveyors of ‘watered-down’ genre movies (2006: 102). One of the auteurs in the movement featured in Jones’s article is Eli Roth who positions himself as one of the power players of this movement. Jones’s article features a photo of Roth brandishing a chainsaw, a devilish smirk on his face, surrounded by photos of bloody carnage from Roth’s *Hostel*, including an image of a man being castrated with a pair of bolt cutters. These grisly visuals imply that Roth can deliver the gory goods. In the article, Roth – a graduate of New York University’s film school whose father and mother are, respectively, a Harvard professor and fine artist – comes across as forcefully as these images
would suggest. Roth declares: ‘Guts and gore are in right now because audiences are fed up with loud bangs substituting for scares and quick cutaways from the money shots’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 102).

Roth’s effusive language, which conflates horror and pornography, continues as he claims that he was the one who got this movement started with his 2003 directorial debut, Cabin Fever: ‘I don’t want to sound egotistical, but Cabin Fever was one of the first of the new distressing rash that didn’t hold back [but instead] put full-frontal gore back on the agenda’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 104). If one considers the numbers, it is not difficult to see why Roth felt that he was at the forefront of a successful cinematic new wave. Cabin Fever, the story of a group of young campers infected and destroyed by a gruesome flesh-eating virus, cost only a million-and-a-half dollars but grossed over $30 million worldwide for Lionsgate. His follow-up film Hostel, made for under $5 million, had just, in Jones’s words, ‘taken the box office by storm’ in the United States by grossing $47 million (2006: 101). After these gory hits, Roth had emerged as a cinematic celebrity.

Another director on Jones’s list of significant horror directors was already a celebrity before he stepped behind the camera. Rob Zombie was the lead singer of the groove metal group White Zombie that had risen to prominence during the early 1990s thanks to heavy airtime on MTV. After White Zombie disbanded in 1998, Zombie continued to record and tour as a solo act before turning his attention to making horror films, a logical extension of his music which is laden with references and audio samples from horror films such as Night of the Living Dead (Romero, 1968). Displaying Zombie’s vision of kaleidoscopic carnage, his first film, House of 1,000 Corpses (2003) resurrected the carnival excesses of the ‘hillbilly horror’ subgenre of the 1960s and 1970s by unfolding, in grisly detail, the exploits of the Firefly family, a clan of white-trash murderers living in the 1970s whose only pleasures in life are the torture and murder of any suburbanites unfortunate enough to cross their path. According to Jones, Zombie’s debut film ‘was no classic but is still a key title in the current neo-nasty movement’ (2006: 103). Jones was not alone in feeling that Corpses was notable; even though the film was not a huge box office hit – grossing only around $16 million globally during its cinema run – it garnered enough of a following on video to convince Zombie – (and Lionsgate who picked up the film for distribution after Universal and United Artists passed on it) – to produce a sequel. Thus followed The Devil’s Rejects (2005), a gritty epic that pitted fugitive members of the Firefly family against a twisted sheriff in the burned-out, western-style desert of 1970s-era rural Texas.

According to his comments in Jones’s article, the 1970s are, for Zombie, more than an historical backdrop for the narratives of his films; this era also produced films that had an influence on his own. As Zombie puts it: ‘There was a realism and bleakness to 70s genre cinema . . . All the kids blown away
by those 70s shockers are old enough to be making movies themselves, and they want to emulate the same effect’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). The content of Zombie’s films reflect these sentiments, as few genre films in the 1980s or 1990s had been as bleak, merciless and visceral as Zombie’s tales of the Firefly family.


I wanted [the film] to be hard-hitting and back-to-basics brutal because it was the 70s-styled survival picture I’ve always wanted to make. . . . The reason why so many titles from that golden period in the 70s have stayed in my memory for so long is they were starkly oppressive, visually stunning and very frightening. (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103–4)

Another European film-maker, profiled in Jones’s article, who looks to genre cinema of the 1970s for inspiration is French film-maker Alexandre Aja. According to Aja, his 2003 neo-slasher *Haute Tension* (released by Lionsgate in the United States as *High Tension* in 2005) ‘was [a] self-confessed homage’ not only to 1970s genre fare, such as Craven’s *Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* and Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but also brutal, ‘survivalist classics’ from the era, such as *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971) and *Deliverance* (Boorman, 1972) (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). Aja explains that he ‘wanted to recreate that atmosphere of savagery with no apparent boundaries’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). Even though the audacious twist ending of *Haute Tension* baffled some audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, the film was successful enough to land him the job of helming a remake of Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* for Fox Searchlight. Given that he is such a professed fan of films from this era, Aja was elated by the opportunity to remake Craven’s story about a Midwestern family stranded in the desert and under siege by vicious clan of cannibals.

Jones emphasises these new horror film-makers’ allegiance to horror films of the past, specifically the 1970s, by including a sidebar entitled ‘The Old Blood’, with the byline ‘More gore? The new guys on the chop-block have a lot to live
up to . . . ’ (2006: 106). This sidebar includes a list of five films accompanied by photos and a brief blurb about each film. Out of the five films featured, three are films from the much-celebrated era of 1970s horror: *Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Shivers* (Cronenberg, 1975). The other two films on the list – infamous Italian shocker *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980) and American slasher film *The Burning* (Maylam, 1981) – are both chronologically close to the 1970s and also similar in that they share the other films’ high-violence, high-gore ethos. As Jones’s byline suggests, the ‘New Blood’ directors profiled in his article have high levels of violence and brutality to live up to in their film-making. Comments from Zombie, Marshall and Aja suggest they are ready to take up this unforgiving attitude in their films.

These young horror directors not only share indebtedness to the past: Jones’s article also shows that many of these film-makers believe that their films have a specific relationship to the present as well. Aja positions the films made by his cohort as reactions to the traumatic events of 9/11 (Jones, 2006: 103). This sentiment is echoed by Eli Roth who argues that, in 2006, ‘Americans feel unsafe in their own country . . . They are scared of an unseen enemy they can’t do anything about. They are so wound up they want to scream’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). The ‘golden period’ of 1970s also influences how these film-makers react to their current historical moment, however; Jones compares their output to how ‘the 70s spawned one subversive shocker after another’ (2006: 103). Aja’s comments support this connection as he explains that he had to change very little of Craven’s original film as he was working on his version of *The Hills Have Eyes* because ‘2006 is so similar to 1977’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103). Aja even seems to insinuate that the situation in Iraq War-era America is more strained, more paranoid and more intense than in Vietnam-era America; according to Jones, he ‘shrieks with glee’ when he learns that his version of the story was too violent for Craven (2006: 106).

Ultimately, Jones suggests this generation of horror film-makers will produce horror films that are more intense, more graphic and more subversive than their predecessors from the 1970s. At the very least, the work of these directors represents a unified new wave of horror directors. He underscores this notion in another sidebar wherein he groups together a select number of these directors under the catchy moniker ‘The Splat Pack’, an appellation that evokes the hip swagger of the 1950s ‘Rat Pack’ combined with the youth and vitality of the 1980s ‘Brat Pack’, with a splash of gore added. Though Jones’s article mentions a number of current horror directors, only five make Jones’s illustrious ‘Splat Pack’ sidebar: Neil Marshall, Eli Roth, Alexandre Aja, Rob Zombie, and Greg McLean, an Australian-born director who scored a minor hit in the United States with *Wolf Creek* (2005),
the violent tale of a savage killer stalking backpackers in the Australian outback.

Even though Jones worried if this group of film-makers was really a revival that was ‘built to last’ or only ‘a slash in the pan’ (2006: 100), Jones’s name for the group definitely stuck. In late 2006, articles began to appear in the American press that used Jones’s term for the group and heralded these filmmakers as the next wave of horror cinema. On 22 October 2006, two articles appeared, one in *Time* magazine and the other in the *New York Post*. Rebecca Winters Keegan, the author of the *Time* article titled simply ‘The Splat Pack’, alters Jones’s list of Splat Packers. There is no mention of Greg McLean and, in his place, she adds three new members to the list: James Wan, Leigh Whannell and Darren Lynn Bousman, the creative minds behind the successful *Saw* franchise.

In 2004, Wan, a director, and Whannell, his writing partner, teamed with independent studio Twisted Pictures to produce *Saw*, a meagrely budgeted, gory thriller that followed the exploits of Jigsaw, a mastermind serial killer who creates elaborate and sadistic traps for his victims. Picked up for distribution by Lionsgate, *Saw* became a gruesome blockbuster, grossing over $100 million worldwide. *Saw* became a successful franchise for Lionsgate, and *Saw II* and *III*, both directed by Bousman, followed in 2005 and 2006. A film school graduate new to Hollywood, Bousman was recruited by Wan and Whannell to lead the continuing adventures of Jigsaw. Bousman took *Saw* to new heights, both viscerally – Jigsaw’s traps became more elaborate and victims’ deaths became gorier – and financially, as the second and third *Saw* films both grossed more than the original. Keegan’s article and Reed Tucker’s article in the *New York Post* arrived just in time for the release of *Saw III* which was opening nationwide the following Friday, 27 October.

As Jones started a trend with his coinage of the term Splat Pack, Keegan began a trend as well. For American journalists, Splat Pack membership congealed around Roth, Zombie, Marshall, Aja, Wan, Whannell and Bousman. American journalists rarely mentioned McLean in association with the group after this point, and Keegan admits that even the core seven members of the group are ‘loose knit’, more kindred spirits than partners working shoulder to shoulder (Keegan, 2006). Keegan does, however, attempt to unify the work of these filmmakers by identifying the semantics of a Splat Pack genre. According to Keegan, films made by the Splat Pack have in common a ‘basic plotline [of] people [who] are stuck somewhere and have to endure horrible things – or indeed, do horrible things to each other – to escape’ (Keegan, 2006).

Despite the darkness and oppressiveness of this plot outline, both Keegan’s article and Reed Tucker’s *New York Post* piece portray the Splat Packers as attractively devious, fun-loving mischief-makers. Tucker begins his article by detailing Roth’s trip to Home Depot to do some ‘research’:
... while throngs of customers shop for insulation and garden hoses, Eli Roth is prowling the power-tool aisle with a special twinkle in his eye... When he takes a shine to particular drills and saws, you can bet the implement won’t end up building a deck. Instead, it’ll turn up drilling into someone’s thigh or power-sanding someone’s eyeball. (Tucker 2006)

Similarly, Keegan’s article begins with an anecdote about Bousman, distressed about trouble with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) over Saw III’s rating, calling Zombie to ask for advice. According to the article, Zombie advised Bousman to ‘Explain why the extreme violence is necessary to tell the story in a way that’s more socially responsible’ (quoted in Keegan, 2006). Keegan reveals, however, ‘When pressed, Zombie admits he doesn’t actually care what’s socially responsible. He just wanted to help out a kindred spirit, another guy who understands the unique beauty of a properly lighted viscera shot’ (Keegan, 2006). In these articles, the Splat Pack comes across as a rag-tag group of naughty boys that enjoys disgusting audiences and ‘pulling a fast one’ on the curmudgeonly MPAA by cloaking their love of gore in the garbs of ‘social responsibility’ (Keegan, 2006).

Nevertheless, both Keegan and Tucker respect the Splat Packers’ ability to generate revenue at the box office and on home video. According to Tucker, ‘Their films have modest budgets but end up earning big bucks for the studios’ (Tucker, 2006). Likewise, Keegan notes that, by keeping their budgets under ten million, Splat Packers ‘are given almost free reign . . . to make unapologetically disgusting, brutally violent movies’ that reap ‘gruesome profitability’ at the box office (Keegan, 2006). Along with admiring the Splat Packers’ abilities to make money with their low-budget films, Keegan’s remarks also suggest that the profitability of Splat Pack films allows their makers a certain level of independence from studio interference. Another similarity between Keegan’s and Tucker’s assessments of the Splat Pack is their opinion that films made by the Splat Packers are an attractive departure from the various horror film trends that preceded them. Like Alan Jones, Tucker bemoans the day before these new film-makers came along, when ‘Self-referential horror [Scream (Craven, 1996)] and Asian-derived creepiness [The Ring (Verbinski, 2002)] ruled the cineplexes’ (Tucker, 2006). Keegan admits, ‘it’s still too soon to tell’ if ‘there’s a nascent Stanley Kubrick or Steven Spielberg in the mix’ because ‘Most of the Splat Packers are on only their second or third film’ (Keegan, 2006). At the same time, she gushes that their ‘innovative filmmaking . . . rises above the mindless slasher sequels of the 80s or such predictable teen-star killfests of the 90s as I Know What You Did Last Summer (Gillespie, 1997)’ (Keegan, 2006).

For all of their mischief and antics, the Splat Packers, as depicted by Keegan and Tucker, display flashes of ambition and purpose. For instance, when discussing horror films of the recent past, Zombie laments, ‘Horror [movies] had
been watered down to nothing [and had] lost all their impact’ (Tucker, 2006). While Zombie’s ambitions seemed to veer more towards terrifying and disgusting audiences to the fullest extent, Roth was apparently aiming even higher, towards both shocking audiences and offering social and political critique. In Keegan’s article, Roth claims that when people attack him and ask, ‘How can you put this [violence and gore] out there in the world?’ he replies, ‘Well, it’s already out there’ (Keegan, 2006). To unpack Roth’s elliptical statement, Keegan cites an appearance that Roth made on the Fox News Channel’s Your World with Neil Cavuto in April 2006. While Roth’s appearance on the show coincided with – and was surely meant to hype – the DVD release of Hostel on 18 April, the director also took the opportunity to defend his films and, by extension, the work of fellow Splat Packers, by arguing that their films belong to a rich tradition of horror films that are critical of, among other things, the United States’s military policies. He explained:

> With horror movies, it goes in cycles. In the 70s, with Vietnam, you had films like Last House on the Left and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Dawn of the Dead [Romero, 1978] . . . If you talk to all the horror directors of the 70s, they say that they were making films as a reaction to watching Vietnam on television . . . now, thanks to George Bush, Dick Chaney, and Donald Rumsfeld, there’s a whole new wave of horror movies . . . we’re in the war now and you feel like it’s never gonna end.

Judging by their respective articles, both Keegan and Tucker appear to agree with Roth’s assertion that the Splat Packers’ films continue the mission of horror films of the past – the ‘subversive shockers’ of the 1970s mentioned in Alan Jones’s article – that had been subversively oppositional and politically progressive. Keegan notes, ‘The Old Guard of horror directors, including Craven and Tobe Hooper, has welcomed the newcomers, inviting them to . . . dinner parties in Hollywood’ (Keegan, 2006). To punctuate the point further, Tucker ends his article with a brief interview with ‘Old Guard’ horror director John Carpenter who assesses the films of the Splat Packers and praises, among others, the Saw films and films by Rob Zombie who would go on to remake Carpenter’s slasher classic Halloween (1978) in 2007.

Over the next couple of months, the Splat Pack picked up steam. In an article by Pamela McClintock, published in Variety on 26 December, the stakes seemed to be getting higher. Like Keegan and Tucker, McClintock praises the Splat Packers for producing profitable films on a low budget: ‘Their films cost next to nothing to make. Yet they mint gold’ (2006: 1). Also similar are the ways in which she designates the bloody, gory and violent films of the Splat Packers as radically better than other horror films in a genre that ‘has been hijacked by watered down PG-13 fare’ (2006: 1). Unlike Keegan,
however, who, just two months earlier, described the Splat Pack as ‘loose-knit’ (Keegan 2006), McClintock claims that the Pack is ‘closely knit, young and well-educated’ (2006: 1). Rather than being kindred spirits, the Splat Pack now sounded like a full-blown movement. According to Roth, ‘We all have the same agenda: to bring back really violent, horrific movies’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1).

Described by McClintock, the Splat Pack’s agenda is an independent movement, originating outside mainstream Hollywood machinery:

By and large, the fresh-faced and enthusiastic helmers go unrecognized by the press and Hollywood establishment, which has long considered horror the bastard stepchild of the movie business. The men in the group still feel like outcasts as they make their movies for indies like Lionsgate or studio genre labels. (McClintock, 2006: 1)

Many who reported on the Splat Pack for the popular press, like Keegan, Tucker and Vanessa Juarez (2006), in her article ‘Sweet Torture’ for the 13 October issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, discussed the Splat Pack in conjunction with the wave of horror movie remakes that emerged around the same time as the Splat Packers’ films. For example, in addition to interviews with Splat Packers, Tucker’s article mentioned director Marcus Nispel who directed the remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* released in 2003. It also featured quotations from Jonathan Liebesman, who directed a prequel to Nispel’s remake, entitled *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006). Behind the production of these films was Platinum Dunes, a company run by Hollywood insider Michael Bay, director of such action blockbusters as *The Rock* (1996) and *Armageddon* (1998). These films were released via New Line Cinema, a subsidiary of Hollywood conglomerate TimeWarner.

While other journalists bring up directors such as Nispel and Liebesman in their assessments of the Splat Pack, McClintock does not mention them and thus cements the Splat Packers as rebellious Hollywood outsiders who work for independent studios like Lionsgate which she dubs ‘the home studio of this group and their films’ (2006: 1). When McClintock notes that Warner Bros. courted Eli Roth to direct a remake of *The Bad Seed* (LeRoy, 1956), she dismisses such a thing ever happening: ‘It’s doubtful whether the majors would really go for the jugular and make the kind of movies Roth and his cabal make’ (2006: 1).

In McClintock’s article, the Splat Packers evince a more serious attitude towards their films. McClintock includes the story of how Zombie offered advice to Bousman when *Saw III* ran into trouble with the MPAA but, this time around, the story seems less about merely thwarting the ratings board but more about rebelling against Hollywood by making films that convey a
message and rise above mere exploitation. Bousman says that the situation with the MPAA forced him to defend the film on grounds of artistic expression:

Only a filmmaker can eloquently say why someone is getting tortured or massacred. It’s not just exploitive. Take the scene of a naked woman being tortured [referring to a scene in Saw III in which one of Jigsaw’s victims is stripped naked, hung in a freezer, and sprayed with cold water until her body freezes solid]. The rating board just saw torture and nudity, they didn’t see the raw emotion. I, as the filmmaker, could explain that. (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1)

This time around, Zombie seems to echo Bousman’s sentiments and claims that he wants his films to unsettle audiences, not offer escapism: ‘My movies are supposed to be shocking and horrible. I don’t want it to be fun’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). As the Splat Pack gained momentum, McClintock’s overview of the group suggests something more than exploitation and escapism is going on in the gore-filled narratives of their films.

Perhaps the most audacious claims in McClintock’s article come from Eli Roth who, thanks to his television appearances and visibility, was becoming a spokesperson for the Splat Pack. Speaking about the films made by his cohort, Roth declares, ‘These films are very subversive’ and boasts, ‘Art Forum magazine said that Hostel was the smartest film in terms of being a metaphor for the Iraq war and America’s attitude overseas’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). Roth’s comments are similar to the ones he made during his appearance on Fox News. He scoffs at the notion that films made by the Splat Pack merely exploit audiences’ fear of torture, a controversial topic since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003 and especially after the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal of 2004. He insists, ‘People assume these are movies by idiots for idiots. They’re not’ (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). Roth implies that films by the young, well-educated Splat Packers offer subversive social critique for intelligent, discerning audiences. Regarding the Splat Pack’s audiences, McClintock notes that the Splat Pack directors are heroes among horror fans, who consider the director the star, not the actors, a distinction any auteur craves’ (2006: 1).

Selling Independence and Subversion

The ways in which these articles herald the Splat Pack’s arrival offer an intriguing glimpse into how notions of independence, outsider status, and claims of subversion are used to sell films and the personalities of their directors. Cynthia Baron notes: ‘the “authoritative” material about films and film stars found in the press can be an important component of what Hans Robert Jauss calls the “horizons of expectation” held by audience members’ (2002: 19).
The ‘horizons of expectation’ established by these journalists’ comments about the Splat Pack tend to involve two assumptions about these directors: they are ‘independent’ and operate ‘outside’ the Hollywood establishment; and their films, by virtue of their ‘independent’ nature, are subversive critiques of their historical moment.

The assumption of the Splat Pack’s ‘independence’ manifests itself in several ways. For many, the term ‘independent’ evokes film-making by ‘young film-makers with a strong personal vision away from the influence and pressure of the few major conglomerates that control tightly the American film industry’ (Tzioumakis, 2006: 1). Journalists cater to this idea by crafting an image of Splat Pack directors as mavericks ‘breaking away’ from dominant trends in horror. Jones establishes this notion by framing the Splat Pack’s films as a rebellion against ‘toothless’ horror of mainstream Hollywood (2006: 102). Other journalists took up the notion that the Splat Pack represented a departure from the mainstream. McClintock’s Variety article especially emphasises this point as McClintock quotes Roth’s claim that a major studio ‘wouldn’t know what to do’ with a rebel like himself (quoted in McClintock, 2006: 1). Another way in which journalists and the directors themselves position the Splat Pack as ‘independent’ is by framing their films as a reaction to audience desires. Roth argues that Splat Pack films are popular ‘because audiences are fed up’ with other horror films that fail to deliver scares and gore (quoted in Jones, 2006: 102). He even goes so far as to claim that, if the success of Hostel ‘has proven anything, it’s that audiences absolutely determine taste’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 102). According to Roth, Splat Packers are not beholden to any corporate parents; their only ‘bosses’ are the audiences who demand the blood and gore that the Pack delivers.

These claims, however, should be carefully qualified. Scholars who have researched the genealogy of the term ‘audience’ would temper Roth’s argument that the Splat Pack merely serves audiences’ demands. Vincent Mosco and Lewis Kaye find that the ‘audience’ is ‘a product of the media industry itself, which uses the term to identify markets and to define a commodity’ (2000: 42). Thus, Roth’s comments reflect a specious model of the culture industry. Roth attempts to create a scenario in which an audience democratically votes for what they want to see in movies and gets it. If the audience itself is a creation of the culture industry, however, this bottom-up model dissolves, and one can see that the apparent groundswell for violent films has been manufactured by the Hollywood machinery. These film-makers’ relationship to the machinery of corporate Hollywood bears examination. McClintock cites Lionsgate as ‘the home studio’ of the Splat Pack, though ‘home distributor’ would be a better description. Lionsgate has handled distribution for all Roth’s films, all of the Saw films, Zombie’s first two films, and the United States releases of Aja’s Haute Tension and Marshall’s The Descent. Lionsgate
is ‘one of the leading independent companies’ currently active in a corporate Hollywood environment wherein ‘independent distributors are rare’ (Wasko, 2003: 79). Tom Schatz describes Lionsgate as a ‘powerful Vancouver-based indie producer–distributor that has remained steadfastly independent’ (2008: 30). Schatz is quick to note, however, that Lionsgate ‘often collaborates with Conglomerate Hollywood, as it did on Hostel. Lionsgate handled the domestic (North American) theatrical release of that film, while Sony Screen Gems handled foreign theatrical and Sony Home Entertainment handled the DVD release’ (2008: 30).

While McClintock acknowledges this partnership in her article, she frames the relationship in a more sensationalist manner. She writes, ‘Screen Gems, part of the Sony empire, gave Hostel to Lionsgate to market and sell, reportedly concerned about content’ (2006: 1), suggesting that Sony was worried about being associated with the film’s content. Sharing distribution deals as Lionsgate did with Sony on Roth’s Hostel, however, is simply a smart way to do business. Thus, Sony profits by distributing overseas a film that was already a hit in the United States; Lionsgate gets to enjoy the security of a major distributing their film overseas. This security in overseas territories which is offered by a major distributor is especially important given that, as Roth himself admits, Hostel ‘plays on the xenophobia of a nation where only ten percent of the population has a passport’ (quoted in Jones, 2006: 103).

Ultimately, the Splat Pack’s claims of being ‘independent’ – not to mention journalists’ claims of their independence – should be equivocated. According to Yannis Tzioumakis, the term ‘American independent cinema’ operates as a discourse that ‘connote[s] a particular brand of quality that [is] perceived as absent from the considerably more refined (and expensive) but impersonal mainstream Hollywood productions’ (2006: 13). With these connotations, the term ‘independent’ often becomes a ‘marketing category’ (Tzioumakis, 2006: 13). In this light, the hype surrounding the Splat Pack, rather than seeming like a populist movement, actually begins to look like Hollywood marketing and advertising. One of the foundational mantras of all commercial advertising is the promise that something is ‘new and improved’. Repeatedly, journalists positioned Splat Pack films as ‘new and improved’ horror, not the ‘safe’, watered-down horror of films such as the American remakes of The Grudge (Shimizu, 2004) or Dark Water (Salles, 2005).

Independent Splat Pack distributor Lionsgate was, no doubt, pleased that journalists packaged the Splat Pack in this manner because independents need all the help they can get. Independent studios and distributors have to play by the rules set by the majors if they want to survive in corporate Hollywood where the major studios ‘very much govern the way [independent] film moves through the marketplace’ (Lewis, 2001: 29). Given that independents do not have the cushion of corporate money to land on if their films are not successful
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at the box office and in ancillary markets, they have to be fiercely competitive. Independents are often forced to utilise ‘saturation releases and other marketing techniques associated with mainstream cinema’ with significantly smaller marketing budgets (Tzioumakis, 2006: 265). If, as the old saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, independents always need to find new ways to market their films.

This necessity may have led Lionsgate and the Splat Pack directors to sell their films in different ways, thus representing a shift in the long history of how films have been sold by Hollywood. Crucially, these different modes of marketing are connected to film ratings and industry self-regulation. During the Hollywood studio era, the Production Code not only regulated film content, it also promised consumers, not to mention ‘the press, religious, educational, and civic groups, and state and national legislatures’, that Hollywood’s output was ““pure” entertainment, amusement that was not harmful to its consumers’ (Maltby, 2003: 61). A key component of this notion of ‘harmless entertainment’ was that movies, ostensibly, contained no ‘moral or political intent’, and their ‘producers’ attitude denied responsibility for the meaning of any movie’ (Maltby, 2003: 61). Studio-era Hollywood claimed that it delivered entertainment, instead of messages, with its movies because audiences want to be entertained, not preached at.

With the implementation of the ratings system in 1968, Hollywood shifted its mantra from ‘harmless entertainment’ to ‘responsible entertainment’ (Sandler, 2007: 41). According to Kevin S. Sandler, ‘responsible entertainment’ consisted of a balance of ‘artistic freedom with restraint’ or ‘artistic expression and cultural sensitivity’ (Sandler, 2007: 41). More specifically, the rating system allowed Hollywood film-makers to deal with possibly provocative subjects, such as sex and violence, but one of the board’s sanctioned ratings – G, PG, or R – assured audiences that these taboo subjects would be handled with ‘suitability’ and ‘respectability’ (Sandler, 2007: 44). Sandler details the struggles between film-makers, studios, civic groups, ratings boards and other industry self-regulatory agents to achieve an ‘Incontestable R’ which is ‘a social contract between Hollywood and consumers that guaranteed responsible entertainment to Hollywood’s critics and audiences’ (2007: 9). In the era of ‘responsible entertainment’, film-makers could excite audiences with provocative material, as long as the provocative material was kept to a minimum and presented only in service of telling a socially and morally responsible story.

The discourse surrounding the Splat Pack suggests that Hollywood’s ideas of responsibility, the role of entertainment, and ratings shifted again. In contrast to the ‘harmless entertainment’ model of the studio era, film-makers like Roth claim that viewers ‘want’ films with both social commentary and an increased amount of brutality that reflects the harshness and uncertainty of the war-torn world around them. The other ‘horizon of expectation’ created by the jour-
nalists in their writing on the Splat Pack is that their films are subversive and critical of dominant political ideologies or beliefs. Roth and Aja, in particular, argue that their films are critiques of their current historical moment, a milieu structured and informed by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration’s global ‘war on terror’, and global economic recession. They feel that their films make national trauma visible.

In bringing these horrific elements to light, the Splat Pack is not only willing to go to new levels of cinematic excess, but eager to do so, eschewing the restraint expected of directors during the era of ‘responsible entertainment’. Even a film-maker active during this previous era, like Wes Craven, who often found himself at odds with the guardians of ‘responsible entertainment’ (Lewis, 2000: 178–80), is shocked by the level of violence in Aja’s remake of his The Hills Have Eyes (Jones, 2006: 106). Similar to film-making practices during the eras of ‘harmless entertainment’ and ‘responsible entertainment’, the Splat Pack’s ability to push the boundaries of what can be depicted on screen is tied to a change in Hollywood’s policies of self-regulation. More specifically, the DVD market – and the acceptance of widespread release of ‘Unrated’ movies on DVD that followed – facilitated the Splat Pack’s emergence in a range of ways that are detailed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Splat Pack was not exactly a group of film-makers operating ‘outside’ Hollywood machinery but rather a part of it, with their outsider status manufactured by media coverage. Given McClintock’s audacious claims for the Splat Pack’s independence, an ironic image appears in her article. Placed beside a photograph of Roth directing actors on the set of Hostel: Part II is a drawing of a man holding aloft a chainsaw with the blade dripping blood. Using this type of drawing to ornament an article about horror is expected but what is unexpected is the man wielding the chainsaw is dressed in a suit and tie. While this outfit may seem like strange attire for a maniacal killer, it is perfect for the Splat Pack, for it represents, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, two contradictions yoked together by violence in the Splat Pack’s media image. On the one hand, there is the rebellious iconoclast with a mischievous penchant for violence represented by the chainsaw. On the other hand, there is the corporation man represented by the suit.

As the sampling of articles in this chapter demonstrates, one of the ways in which Jones and the other journalists tend to obscure the suit and emphasise the chainsaw is to compare the Splat Pack to the celebrated horror film-makers of the 1970s. Jones calls the 1970s an era that ‘spawned one subversive shocker after another’ (2006: 103). This connection is taken even further with 2007’s ‘It’s only a Movie’ film series at the Museum of the Moving Image that places films by the Splat Pack alongside their counterparts from the 1970s. This marketing position – depicting horror films from the 1970s and 2000s as oppositional, and the consumption of these films as a subversive act – is
tempting for journalists to take. It is especially understandable that Jones, a British journalist writing for a British film magazine, takes this position about consuming horror films. During the ‘video nasties’ moral panic that took place in Britain in the 1980s, many violent and gory horror movies on video were banned by the Video Recordings Act (VRA) which Kate Egan identifies as ‘perhaps the most stringent form of regulation imposed on the media in a western country’ (2007: 1). During the ‘video nasties’ era, the consumption of horror films could be framed as a subversive act. Vipco, a video distribution label in Britain, however, has more recently used the ‘video nasty’ label to sell their products and ‘to create a commercial niche for itself as a historically authentic and nationally specific outlaw company’ (Egan, 2007: 219). Jones evokes the nasties discursively to brand the Splat Pack as ‘authentic outlaws’. When the label travels to the United States, however, where horror films have never been subjected to restrictions such as the VRA, this strategy loses its national specificity and becomes another marketing tool to sell ‘rebellion’ to audiences and to hide the material base of film’s commodity status.

The discussion that follows exposes, rather than obscures, the ways in which the Splat Pack’s success is tied to a material base. Because the Splat Pack draws much energy and many claims of significance by evoking the films and film-makers of horror’s ‘Golden Age’, the next chapter takes a close look at the American horror films of the 1970s. Emphasising film as a business and foregrounding the film product as commodity, this study reveals that Aja’s claims about 1977 and 2006 being ‘similar’ are, indeed, true but not in ways he may realise.

Notes

1. ‘Neo-nasty’ is a play on the term ‘video nasty’. This term originated during the early 1980s when in Britain, there was moral panic surrounding the release of violent and gory horror films on video cassette. Tapes of these films came to be known as ‘video nasties’. Eventually, seventy-two of these titles were banned under the Video Recordings Act (VRA) in 1984. For more on the video nasties controversy, see Barker (1984), Martin (1993) and Egan (2007).

2. Corpses was shot on the Universal lot during 1999 and 2000 but Universal, after learning that the film would probably get an NC-17 rating, dropped the film from its 2001 release schedule (anon., 2001). MGM reportedly considered releasing the film but they ultimately passed on it as well (Nigro, 2008).

3. Three of these titles – Last House on the Left, Cannibal Holocaust and The Burning – were among the seventy-two video nasties banned by the VRA.

4. Wan and Whannell contacted Bousman after they read a script he had written called The Desperate. The duo felt that, with a few changes, Bousman’s screenplay would make a good sequel to Saw. Bousman agreed to adapt The Desperate into Saw II only if he could direct the film as well. Twisted Pictures agreed, and Saw II was Bousman’s first feature-length film as a director (Berman, 2009: 147–48).
American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture

by Michele Schreiber

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Half a century separates the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the book commonly credited with igniting the second wave of the women’s movement, and Facebook Chief Executive Officer Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 best-seller *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, which assesses the challenges that American working women continue to face today. Reading the two volumes side by side, one cannot help being struck by the dramatically different cultural landscapes they describe. Socially and professionally, American women have soared to unprecedented heights in this fifty-year period, yet the elevated terrain they occupy today is something of a plateau. In 1963, Friedan identified the ‘problem that has no name’ experienced by those who ‘learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for’.1 Five decades later, Sandberg admits that in the United States of 2013, ‘women are better off than ever’ but that the ‘revolution has stalled’; women remain ‘hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves’ by internalizing ‘the negative messages we get throughout our lives.’ As a result, in Sandberg’s view, American women today ‘compromise our career goals for partners and children who may not even exist yet.’2

Sandberg’s argument is corroborated by a 2012 Pew Research Study that showed that in 2010 women made up almost half – 46.7 percent – of the American labor force. This represents an 8.6 percent increase over 1970 when women comprised only 38.1 percent of the labor force. The same study found a correlation between these changes in women’s professional lives with a major
American Postfeminist Cinema examines these interrelated issues as portrayed in a series of movies made from 1980 to 2012 that I call the postfeminist romance cycle. These films provide compelling evidence that the complex and mixed messages that have permeated American culture since the turn from the feminist rhetoric of the 1960s to the postfeminist rhetoric in the 1980s have found their most potent realization in popular romance films for and about women. These films depict and reflect contemporary women’s anxieties, and perhaps more importantly, anxieties about women, in light of these profound changes. This close study makes apparent how the romance film became the safe, dependable and often pleasurable terrain on which these knotty and provocative female-centered issues are negotiated.

This book expands upon the rich body of scholarship on postfeminist media culture by arguing that the romance genre plays an essential role in that culture, and that the cycle’s patterns reflect and inform the postfeminist era’s most potent anxieties. Case studies delineate how the symbiotic relationship between postfeminist discourses and romance results in these popular films’ mediation of the illusory notion that contemporary women’s lives can be reduced to either/or options. The most significant of these is the age-old choice between career versus love and family, but such dilemmas also include
the choices between sexual expression or abstinence, and self-absorption or community investment, among others. The films represent this conundrum of personal and often political alternatives for women, and, typically in their concluding moments, offer resolutions that, at least on the surface, appear to resolve these quandaries.

I analyze the machinations of these heterosexual romance films not to render them as bad objects or to suggest that there is a fundamental opposition between feminist politics and romantic desire. Rather I argue that it is illuminating to examine how this span of films that targets ‘everywoman,’ uniformly appropriates a type of narratological and discursive framework as a way of reconciling these two elements of the contemporary female experience, in an attempt to smooth out the bumps and fissures that can arise when they meet.

In fact, pitting serious, explicitly political sentiments against seemingly more pleasurable feelings related to romantic love or consumerism constructs a conflict that is buttressed by the postfeminist cultural landscape. In postfeminist thought, feminism takes on a negative connotation, what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have described as ‘an “othering” of feminism.’ Feminism is either construed as ‘extreme, difficult and unpleasurable’ or, in keeping with neoliberalism, is turned into a self-serving, self-absorbed discourse about one’s own personal choices that lacks social or political resonance.

Popular media is where postfeminist discourses are most visible and persuasive because they are usually intertwined with an otherwise appealing individual, product or narrative. In this context, ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ are defined quite differently than in decades past. Diane Negra argues that ‘across the range of the female lifecycle, girls and women of every age are now invited to celebrate their empowerment in a culture that sometimes seems dedicated to gratifying their every desire.’ Susan J. Douglas concurs, arguing, ‘buying stuff – the right stuff, a lot of stuff – emerged as the dominant way to empower ourselves.’

Not surprisingly, in light of this shift that worked ‘to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer,’ successors to political feminist figureheads such as Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem are nowhere to be found. Instead one sees consumable fictional characters and contexts that serve as stand-ins for real women. An oft-cited example of this tendency is TIME magazine’s hotly debated June 1998 cover story, ‘Is feminism dead?’, which featured pictures of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem fading into a picture of the television character Ally McBeal. Indeed, during much of the postfeminist era, the media has used fictional characters as a way of talking through women’s social and political progress.

The films in the postfeminist romance cycle are perhaps the prototypical examples of how appealing, consumable elements of postfeminist culture can also provide illuminating glimpses into the mechanics of that culture.
Examining postfeminism and romance side-by-side, I argue, is fundamental to truly understanding how both function. Romance, surprising as it may seem, shapes the postfeminist mindset. But even more interestingly, postfeminism is reshaping romance. The postfeminist romance film is always about a woman who has choices, but the most important choice – of a romantic partner – has already been predetermined and made for her by the conventions of the cycle. In spite of this predicable and reliable structure, and the degree to which the mythology of heterosexual romance has worn thin over the last thirty years, the films have remained incredibly popular.9

Why has the cycle lasted so long and remained so resilient? As we will see, it is because these films, like other postfeminist media, elicit and reward complex spectator engagement in which pleasure and critique can coexist, and romance can be both seductive and problematic: there can be problems and solutions. When one watches a postfeminist romance film, there is pleasure from observing the changing nature of contemporary women’s everyday lives along with the intoxicating allure of the traditional ‘happily ever after’ resolution. Rather than traverse explicitly political ground that might pit these two kinds of pleasure against each other (as is often the case in postfeminist culture), the postfeminist romance cycle films reframe these debates into a question best summed up by self-help author Lori Gottlieb: ‘What does it mean to be empowered and also want happily ever after?’10

The Conventions of the Postfeminist Cycle

Anyone who has viewed even a few of the postfeminist romance films under discussion in this book is acquainted with what Amanda Ann Klein has called a film cycle’s ‘slavish repetition’ of ‘the same images, characters and plots that they enjoyed in previous films.’11 Postfeminist romance films follow, or at least gesture toward, the reliable, familiar, formulaic plot structure that mythologizes the redemptive qualities of love and heterosexual coupling that has characterized the film genre for decades. However, as much as romance is about ‘what happens’ in the film, it also exists as a subject for discussion apart from individual films and groups of films, that is, romance informs the ways in which we discuss our own love lives. As David Shumway has argued, discursive analysis is essential to understanding romance so that one can ‘emphasize the role that stories and other representations play in shaping experience.’ He further says that ‘discourses are not doctrines or systems of ideas but rather groups of related narratives in terms of which men and women have projected the “natural” course of their lives.’12

Shumway’s use of the word ‘natural’ here is notable because it is exactly the tension surrounding changing cultural conceptions of what is ‘normal’ for both genders that infuses postfeminist romance films with their own his-
torically situated set of concerns. Romantic love is an oft-desired part of a full and happy life for both heterosexual and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals alike. However, we will see that in the postfeminist period, the language of heterosexual romance is appropriated to speak not just about love, but also to advance normative assurances in an era when traditional conceptions of gender are in a state of upheaval.

Admittedly, this study focuses on only one piece of this much larger landscape, specifically that which deals with straight women and heterosexual romance. There still remains much to be written about the limited representation of non-heteronormative romantic love in American cinema. The exclusion from this study of lesbian and queer romance films such as *Go Fish* (Troche, 1994), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), and *Imagine Me & You* (Parker, 2005), among others, is not an endorsement of the industry’s resistance to offering a wide range of diverse representations of love. On the contrary, the book’s focus on the complex operations of the postfeminist cycle highlights the uniformity of the industry’s resistance to dealing with anxiety-provoking deviations from heterosexual gender norms. It aspires to contribute to the conversation of how such models might be challenged in the future.

The postfeminist romance cycle is what Amanda Ann Klein would call an intrageneric cycle because it adheres to the traits and tropes of the romance film genre, but ‘serves as a cross-section of one specific moment in time, accurately revealing the state of contemporary politics, prevalent social ideologies, aesthetic trends, and popular desires and anxieties.’ Its thirty-plus years is significantly longer than the cycles about which Klein speaks, but this longevity results from the persistence of postfeminism’s particular combination of politics, ideology, desires and anxieties. Subdividing the contemporary crop of romance films into smaller cycles or subgroups would not provide this kind of revealing glimpse into how the discourses that sustain ‘one specific moment in time’ can endure for decades. Isolating how romance speaks through postfeminism, and how postfeminism speaks through romance, allows us, as Raphaëlle Moine describes, to “reconnect” film texts and their contexts’ by integrating what he calls structural and textual theories of genre with its functional definitions.

**Romance’s Narrative Stages**

As David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger have argued, the romance plot is highly ubiquitous in Hollywood films. The narrative structure and the formal elements engaged to support this structure have become so reliable that they frequently tread on the terrain of cliché. My characterization of romance’s ‘stages’ pertains to the postfeminist romance film, but relies on, and has relevance for, the structure of films released prior to the 1980s.
framework is broad and flexible enough to account for both comedies and dramas – a matter that I will discuss at more length – and for films that experiment with the typical narrative trajectory. Indeed, it is not uncommon for these stages to be presented out of order or even skipped altogether.

For instance, there are many popular films – such as When Harry Met Sally (Reiner, 1989), Something to Talk About (Hallström, 1995), High Fidelity (Frears, 2000), and Someone Like You (Goldwyn, 2001) – that feature relationship breakups as the impetus for romance narratives. Some but not all of these employ the well-known ‘remarriage’ framework as outlined by Stanley Cavell.17 By contrast, in some texts, like The Night We Never Met (Leight, 1993), Sleepless in Seattle, and The Lake House (Agresti, 2006), the two protagonists never actually meet until the end of the film.

In addition, many contemporary films work within the chaste tradition of classic romance films and feature protagonists who never actually consummate their love for each other, but remain in a state of longing, including Broadcast News (Brooks, 1987), The Age of Innocence (Scorsese, 1993), and Lost in Translation (Coppola, 2003).

By and large, however, romance texts can be expected to follow the following trajectory:

The First Meeting
The two primary characters’ first meeting is one of the least consistent of the structural elements of the romance narrative. In fact, the manner of meeting (the ‘meet cute’ as described in screenwriting manuals) can be one of the primary points of differentiation among romance texts. This stage is of chief importance because the (early or delayed) meeting sets the tone for the rest of the film.

The Courtship
The courtship involves a series of interactions between the two characters that endear them to each other, even if they are not looking for love. This occurs either through in-person exchanges, or through letters, phone calls, or e-mails. Montages, usually set to lively, popular music, are the most frequently used stylistic device used to visually convey the courtship process in the postfeminist romance. The characters share comedic moments, or engage in activities that expose their qualities, talents, and backstories, and which render them ‘special’ or ‘different.’

There is usually a scene or a series of scenes that signal a sort of ‘falling in love’ moment for one or both of the characters. For instance, in Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990), Edward’s (Richard Gere) ‘falling in love’ moment is evident
when he uncharacteristically takes a day off from work to engage in equally uncharacteristic activities, such as sitting in a park and having a picnic, and eating dinner in a diner. At the end of this day, Edward’s moment is joined with Vivian’s (Julia Roberts) when she finally kisses Edward on the mouth (something that she vows she does not do with her clients).

Similarly, in The English Patient (Minghella, 1996), when Katharine (Kristen Scott Thomas) accidentally comes across Count Laszlo’s (Ralph Fiennes) journal and discovers that it contains repeated amorous references to someone named ‘K,’ she asks him if she is the K in his book. His expression reveals that she is, and their exchange of glances indicates the shift of their relationship into the romantic realm. Often characters are represented as unaware that they are falling in love, or they resist the feelings; however, even if there are extenuating circumstances that may prevent the two protagonists from ending up together, they will inevitably act on or admit their feelings for one another during this courtship sequence.

The Consummation

The tone with which a film represents the sexual consummation of a romance depends largely on whether it is comedic or dramatic. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, romantic comedies do not usually portray the sexual act in an explicit manner, and if they do, it tends to be rendered comedic in some way. Because most contemporary romance films aim for a PG (Parental Guidance) or a PG-13 rating in order to attract the widest possible audience,
the consummation is generally limited to the ‘falling in love’ moment. If the two protagonists have sex, they are often shown in bed after the fact, with an edit serving to keep most of the sexual act hidden. And, if sex is discussed, it is generally done with comedy that diffuses the associated emotions.

Romantic dramas, on the other hand, tend to be more explicit in their representation of sexuality. In fact, Catherine Preston argues that sex and the display of the female body is the main point of differentiation between what is generally designated as romantic comedy versus romance drama.\(^{18}\) What is notable about sexuality in romance dramas is that it is often represented most explicitly when the love affair is ‘forbidden’ in some way, usually in the act of infidelity or rebellion, such as in *Cousins* (Schumacher, 1989), *Legends of the Fall* (Zwick, 1994), *The English Patient*, *The End of the Affair* (Jordan, 1999), *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), *Unfaithful* (Lyne, 2002), and *The Notebook* (Cassavetes, 2004).

**The Problem**

After the cathartic consummation of the relationship through sex or the ‘falling in love moment,’ problems arise. These problems can derive from one of the other plot points of the film, initially unrelated to the romance, but more often than not they are a result of one of the protagonists not being completely honest with him or herself or the other about something. For instance, in *Kissing Jessica Stein*, Jessica is not honest with her family about the fact that she is dating a woman, and thus does not tell her girlfriend Helen about her brother’s upcoming wedding.

Often the conflict is caused by one character’s unwillingness to overcome his or her own stubbornness to accommodate the relationship, as in *Keeping the Faith* (Norton, 2000), when Jake (Ben Stiller) will not commit to a relationship with Anna (Jenna Elfman) because she is not Jewish, or in *Something’s Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003), when Harry (Jack Nicholson) is unwilling to give up his womanizing ways. Often miscommunications arise between the two protagonists, or one or the other is merely scared to commit to the relationship. The two characters part, convinced that the relationship is at an insurmountable impasse. Montage sequences are frequently employed at this stage of the narrative to depict one or more of the characters mourning the loss of the relationship. Their daily routine is seen to have lost its luster. This – what we might call post-breakup – montage regularly reveals the passage of time through visual cues, such as seasons changing and holidays being celebrated.

*Notting Hill*’s (Michell, 1999) digitally composed sequence, set to Bill Withers’s ‘Ain’t No Sunshine’ that shows William (Hugh Grant) mourning the loss of his relationship with Anna (Julia Roberts), is a classic example of this type of montage. The sequence shows William walking through his Notting
Hill neighborhood, first during the summer, then through the rainy fall, then the snowy winter, and then back into the summer, in one long continuous, digitally manipulated shot. In addition to differing weather patterns, the course of time is clear from William’s use of his coat. He begins with it slung over his shoulder, then he puts it on while shivering in the winter, and then he removes it again in the spring. Time is also clear from the progression of his sister’s relationship with her boyfriend. At the beginning they appear blissfully in love, and toward the end they are fighting and presumably in the midst of a breakup. We understand that the length of time chronicled is around a year, based on both the seasons and the prominent placement of a woman in the mise-en-scène: she begins the sequence pregnant, and ends it with a baby in her arms. The montage successfully and succinctly conveys mood, narrative information, and a fairly precise idea of how much time has passed since William and Anna’s breakup.

The Resolution

In order for a problem or problems to be resolved, one character must either admit to being wrong, and/or be willing to change whatever it was that brought on the problem in the first place. Thus, love functions as a transformative agent, causing one or both of the central characters to become better versions of him or herself, or themselves, than they were at the film’s outset. The transformation serves as both the impetus and the reward for a character’s willingness to progress beyond the emotional place in which he or she began the narrative. This resolution stage commonly comes by way of a dramatic scene in which one of the leads (usually the one with the problem) has a revelatory moment in which he or she realizes the other character’s importance to his...
or her life. This typically is followed by a rapidly edited sequence in which the character with the problem runs, or employs some form of rapid transportation, to tell the other of the revelation. The problem character’s efforts to get to the destination are usually crosscut with scenes of the object of affection’s activity at the same moment, that sees the latter entirely oblivious to the dramatic denouement that awaits. Sometimes he or she is on the verge of making a decision or taking an action that will betray the romance, raising tension and suspense about whether the problem character will get there ‘in time.’

This type of sequence has its origins in pre-1980s classic romances such as *The Apartment* (Wilder, 1960) and *Manhattan* (Allen, 1979). Some of the best-known postfeminist romance cycle examples include Zack carrying Paula out of her blue-collar factory in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Hackford, 1982), Harry’s run at the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve in *When Harry Met Sally*, Jerry’s run through the airport and ‘you complete me’ interruption of a women’s group therapy session in *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe, 1996), a scooter ride through a gay pride parade in *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman, 2001), and a rapid drive down New York City streets in *Friends with Kids* (Westfeldt, 2011).

The End

The happy ending is a mainstay of the romance narrative structure, and its promise of long-term happiness is what drives romance’s continued cultural
currency. The happy ending generally sees one or both of the protagonists admitting love and having learned an important lesson from the problem stage, along with acknowledgment that forming a long-term partnership will bring them the happiness and fulfillment they seek.

For heterosexual partnerships, the narrative either implies or visually demonstrates that marriage is the next step. But not all romance narratives end happily. One of the most common exceptions to the happy ending stage is death as the primary factor that prevents the formation of a couple. Harking back to the classic melodramas and women’s films such as *Dark Victory* (Goulding, 1939), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophuls, 1948), and *Love Story* (Hiller, 1970), death is the ultimate source of pathos, and one of the few obstacles that cannot be overcome. Contemporary films such as *Titanic* (Hoffman, 1997), *Sweet November* (O’Connor, 2001), *Autumn in New York* (Chen, 2000), *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990), *Moulin Rouge* (Luhrmann, 2001), and *P.S. I Love You* (LaGravenese, 2007) present death as the ultimate transformer, teaching the character who lives about the importance of love. These films suggest that romance has the capacity to withstand or overcome death, continuing in spirit beyond the grave.

Variations on the happy ending structure in the romance film have been the subject of some discussion by film scholars. For instance, Celestino Deleyto has argued that some contemporary romance films’ alternative endings suggest that ‘heterosexual love appears to be challenged, and occasionally replaced, by friendship.’ He cites the film *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (Hogan, 1997), in particular, as questioning the redemptive possibilities of heterosexual romance through its ‘unhappy’ ending that sees the female protagonist – Julianne (Julia Roberts) – failing to lure her best friend Michael (Dermot Mulroney) away from his fiancé (Cameron Diaz). After watching the two get married, she finds solace in the company of George (Rupert Everett), her gay best friend. The two end the film twirling away happily on the dance floor.

Deleyto raises a compelling point in suggesting that this film’s ending contests heterosexual love. However, two qualifications should accompany his case. First, the film does, for all intents and purposes, have a happy ending that reinforces heterosexual coupling; it’s just not the central female protagonist who gets the classic happy ending, but her friends instead. She is a perfect example of the quirky, discombobulated postfeminist romance heroine who is pitted against a more conventionally feminine counterpart (a common trope on which I will elaborate more in Chapter 1’s case study of *27 Dresses* (Fletcher, 2008)). She does not win in this narrative, but given her resemblance to so many other female protagonists, we as viewers have confidence that she will win the love of another man sometime in the future. The fact that she is played by Julia Roberts only further confirms this belief.
This presumption leads to what I consider as Deleyto’s second oversight, which is that we should take the ending of My Best Friend’s Wedding at face value within the confines of the text. Even if we were to accept that Julianne has chosen a friendship with George over heterosexual love (a problematic assumption in itself since Julianne does not choose this position, but is forced into it when Michael rejects her), the film’s allegiance to all other romantic comedy conventions broadens its message and instantiates a discourse beyond the text. The ending is not an ending for her but a beginning. Julianne has come to recognize throughout the course of the narrative that she values romantic love, and it is assumed that she will seek a more willing heterosexual love match in the future.

My counterargument is not meant to dispute Deleyto’s assertion that contemporary films can offer an alternative approach to romance structures, but merely to suggest that films like these have implications beyond the confines of their plot structures, and that they should also be read through this supplemental lens. Julianne’s pairing with George does not posit a real alternative to the romance narrative any more than do individual episodes of the wildly popular postfeminist television show Sex and the City (1998–2004), which exhibit and reinforce the staying power of Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha’s friendships in the absence of fulfilling romantic relationships.

Certainly, in reality, many women live perfectly happy and successful lives without a man and in the company of close friends; but films like My Best Friend’s Wedding are so steeped in romance narratological strategies that one should approach the ascription of truly alternative paths with caution. Even films such as The Break-Up (Reed, 2006) or Celeste & Jesse Forever (Krieger, 2012) that chronicle the dissolution of a long-term relationship between each of their two main characters, suggests that there is a possibility for a romantic future, beyond the ending: a ‘to be continued’.

In other words, as Woody Allen aptly surmises following the similarly ‘unhappy’ ending of Annie Hall (Allen, 1977), even when one affair ends, people will keep looking for love because they ‘need the eggs.’ As Deleyto argues in a more recent work, a film does not necessarily need to have a happy ending in order to be defined as a romance. And David Shumway has contended, ‘While relationship stories end both “happily” and “sadly,” no ending can ever be assumed to be final. Another breakup or another relationship is always possible, if not likely.’ Happy ending or unhappy ending, consummated or unconsummated, popular culture perpetually reinforces the notion that romantic love is integral to a fulfilling life. As Shumway suggests, what a film communicates about love and romance trickles into, and out of, the culture at large.
Romantic Comedy and Romantic Drama

It is already clear that my definition of the postfeminist romance cycle includes both comedic and dramatic films. Admittedly, this is an unorthodox approach, as scholars tend to separate romantic comedies and romantic dramas (usually called melodramas or women’s films) into two mutually exclusive genre categories. More contemporary discussions of female-focused and female-targeted films have challenged these boundaries, including Karen Hollinger’s discussion of the female friendship film, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young’s book on the ‘chick flick,’ and Diane Negra’s work on the neo-liberal bent of postfeminist media. My case studies will further illustrate how instructive and necessary such a comparison can be. Examining trends that cut across previously demarcated genre lines allows us to delineate how romance ebbs and flows in accordance with ideological shifts. Sometimes, as described in Chapter 4’s consideration of sexuality, the marked difference between comedies and dramas is integral to the discussion of how discourses of romance differ based on a film’s tone. Without considering both types of films concurrently, this contrast would be muted and the richness of romance underestimated.

The ubiquity of the romantic comedy in contemporary culture has made it the default discussion category for film critics. Consequently, ‘rom-com’, not ‘rom-dram’, has become common industry and lay-person parlance for any film having a romantic plot, with the consequence of a proliferation of books on the subject. However, even romantic comedy scholars have addressed the blurred boundaries between comedies and dramas. For instance, Tamar Jeffers McDonald has argued that the lines of demarcation between the two forms are unstable: ‘while films of the genre [romantic comedy] generally end well and may elicit laughs along the way, I am also aware of the importance of tears to the romantic comedy.’ Indeed, ‘the mixed emotions these films commonly depict and elicit’ that lead to the simultaneous laughter and tears of which McDonald speaks, can just as easily be applied to dramas.

As Peter William Evans and Bruce Babington have conceded, a film’s ending can be a tricky barometer for identifying its category. They argue, ‘In some films . . . the happy ending is often little more than a precarious arrangement, as likely to be breached as honored. On these occasions romantic comedy seems at times to draw very close to melodrama.’ Many of the most seminal romantic comedies do not have a traditional happy ending. For instance, as I noted previously, Annie Hall is considered one of the great romantic comedies of all time, but it does not see Alvy and Annie’s relationship end happily. The same is true of the more contemporary film 500 Days of Summer (Webb, 2009). Likewise, dramatic films such as An Officer and a Gentleman and The Notebook can have happy endings, and numerous other texts defy these happy versus sad parameters. What are labeled dramatic films can have comedic
moments, and comedic films can have dramatic scenes. Definitive codification is difficult because both types of films elicit feelings of sentiment, nostalgia, affection and pleasure.

To be sure, there is a great deal to be gained from expanding the parameters of romance. Doing so allows us, as Celestino Deleyto’s work has evinced, to acknowledge the ‘variety of discourses, approaches and ideologies articulated by the texts.’27 In *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, Deleyto argues that the romantic comedy genre has been defined too narrowly, excluding otherwise appropriate films from the canon simply because they do not fit scholars’ pre-ordained criteria. This type of compartmentalization can ‘obscure the importance of the interrelations between the various types of stories.’28 His aptly titled book points to the crossover between dramatic and comedic elements in films such as *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Allen, 1989), and *Before Sunset* (Linklater, 2004). The fact that romance can stray from romantic comedy and find a ‘secret life’ in unexpected places is a clear sign of its fluidity.

My objective is not to refute the past and its scholarly discussion of genre categories such as romantic comedy or melodrama but only to argue that they are not appropriate for an examination of the postfeminist romance cycle. As Rick Altman has argued, ‘genre theorists have generally sought to describe and define what they believe to be already existing genres rather than create their own interpretive categories, however applicable or useful.’29 In this case, creating an expansive, rather than limiting, framework helps us delineate how romance is structurally stable and cyclical, ebbing and flowing in accordance with historical shifts.

**Visual/Cinematic Style in the Postfeminist Romance**

The aesthetics of most postfeminist romance cycle films are quite conventional, exemplifying what David Bordwell has called ‘intensified continuity,’ which merely heightens classical style through various narrative and aesthetic techniques. In fact, one of Bordwell’s illustrations of this style – which includes rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide-ranging camera movements – is *Two Weeks Notice* (Lawrence, 2002), a postfeminist romance film.30 He discusses how a dialogue scene among the female protagonist, Lucy (Sandra Bullock), the male protagonist, George (Hugh Grant), and June (Alicia Witt), another female love interest, uses rapid editing, close shots, and camera movements to contribute to the developing love triangle where ‘the straightforward technique throws all of the weight into the flow of the action.’31

Most films in the postfeminist romance cycle, like *Two Weeks Notice*, conform to Bordwell’s model, which he characterizes as a ‘vanilla-flavored
version of intensified continuity’ in which form is engaged to support plot. A quintessential example of this heightened yet still safe use of formal conventions is the aforementioned montage sequence from *Notting Hill*. It adapts the montage to convey the passage of time using what we might call an intensified style of digital manipulation, rather than classical editing. In fact, the montage sequence is one of the most oft-used, cliché-ridden devices for conveying story information quickly in romance films. As Bordwell states, ‘nothing indicates more clearly the persistence of classical construction than this summary device.’ It is most commonly seen in comedic texts, usually in the courtship or problem stage, to convey the passage of time and the progression of feelings, and features one or more pop or rock songs from the film’s soundtrack.

Another key formal element of the cycle is what I call a ‘mise-en-scène of luxury.’ It may be most noticeable in romance-of-manners films that feature period sets and costumes; Jim Collins has characterized this as the ‘excessive mise-en-scene’ of the adaptation film that sees the ‘interplay between narrative and spectacle . . . forming an entire taste culture.’ However, it is equally significant in films set in contemporary times, wherein clothes, settings, and particularly the décor of domestic spaces are key to orienting the viewer not just to historical time, but also to class, and the protagonist’s relationship to commodity culture. Most of the films I will discuss in the case studies were made with sizable budgets, which results in production design filled with products and décor that sometimes indicate middle class, but usually signify upper-middle-class economic status. Indeed, class plays a largely unspoken but significant role in the postfeminist romance film, as the wealth and upward mobility of the female characters undergird their personal dilemmas, but also enable a pleasurably commodified backdrop for their love affairs.

Certainly, the class dimensions of love are evident in films dating back to the silent period. However, class in the postfeminist romance is rarely discussed. Romance’s transformative effects, and its momentum toward a permanent commitment (and quite possibly marriage), suggest its promotion of middle-class values, and as a result, capitalist structures. The high production values and glamorous, well-appointed décor and costumes in many of these films create an attractive environment for product placement, and sell romance, even if it is a failing romance, as an attractive lifestyle.

Contemporary texts such as *Sex and the City*, as well as *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006), *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009), and director Nancy Meyers’s entire oeuvre (a subject of one of Chapter 5’s case studies) are excellent examples that market the link between an attractive, upwardly mobile lifestyle and romance. In these texts, even if our protagonists stumble through their efforts to achieve a sense of satisfaction in their romantic relationships, their lifestyles – filled with designer clothes and accessories, spacious and attractively decorated apartments, and expensive restaurants – remain
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desirable to viewers. In the postfeminist period, these intersections among commodity culture, female desire, and feminist ideas of choice, function, as Negra has argued, to attach ‘considerable importance to the formulation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it.’

**The History and Politics of the Postfeminist Cycle**

The reliable structure of the romance film and the subtle variations on it outlined thus far have, throughout film history, resonated closely with American historical, cultural, and political developments. For instance, Virginia Wright Wexman has discussed the degree to which film’s early history reflected cultural acceptance of shifting conceptions of love. Inspired by John D’Emilii and Estelle Freedman’s *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, Wexman tells how movie theatres became the site of romantic coupling (for example, ‘making out’ in the balcony, which was so popular in the 1950s and ’60s), and that ‘the movies were ideally positioned to instruct audiences about the changing mores regarding romantic love.’ Stanley Cavell has famously argued that screwball comedy films of the 1930s, such as *It Happened One Night* (Capra, 1934), *The Awful Truth* (McCarey, 1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks, 1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, 1940), *His Girl Friday* (Hawks, 1940) and *The Lady Eve* (Sturges, 1941) were ‘fairy tales for the Depression.’ Thomas Wartenberg and Wexman’s work has contributed to our understanding of how the evolution of types of couples in movie romances tells us a great deal not only about performance style and presentation, but more significantly about broader social trends concerning race, class and sexual orientation.

The social, political and industrial changes that occurred from the early 1980s to 2012 contribute to our understanding of the postfeminist romance cycle, like any cycle, as, in Klein’s words, a ‘mold placed over the zeitgeist, which, when pulled away, reveals the contours, fissures, and complicated patterns of the contemporary moment.’ By entwining the romance genre with current-at-the-time socio-political issues, the films of this period maintain a balance between fluctuating conceptions of romantic ideals as well as evolving portrayals of the position of the woman at its center. Thus, over thirty-plus years, the films in the postfeminist American cycle present women’s personal and professional gains (per the aforementioned Pew statistics), including the slow and often conflicted cultural embrace of female sexuality and rights.

As we know, both comedic and dramatic pre-1966 romance films were predicated on the suppression of sexuality. These code-era films adopt aesthetic and narrative techniques that suggest but do not explicitly represent the sexual chemistry between the female and male protagonist. Influential romance films,
like *Kitty Foyle* (Wood, 1940) and *An Affair to Remember* (McCarey, 1957), feature autonomous women with their own careers and strong convictions. However, the romantic affairs in which they are entangled, with their witty repartee, longing glances, and strategic elliptical edits necessarily require marriage, the only socially acceptable place – narratively speaking – in which these romantic feelings can be fully realized.

The classical era of the romance film began to decline in the late 1950s and early 1960s, seeing its last gasps in a subgenre of films often referred to as ‘sex comedies.’ Best exemplified by the Doris Day and Rock Hudson trilogy, *Pillow Talk* (Gordon, 1959), *Lover Come Back* (Mann, 1961), and *Send Me No Flowers* (Jewison, 1964), these films reveal the increasing tension between the constraints of the classical romance conventions and the suddenly ubiquitous discussion of women’s sexuality, heralded by cultural milestones such as the publication in 1953 of *Playboy Magazine* and the Kinsey report on Female Sexuality, as well as the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960. Tamar Jeffers McDonald suggests that these films ‘could in fact be called “Battle of the Sexes comedies” since this more accurately encapsulates their dynamic.’

By the beginning of the transitional period of the 1970s, which saw the restructuring of the big studios and the advent of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system, Hollywood was actively searching for ways to connect with a younger audience because the classical romance films lacked currency: they no longer matched the mood of the time. There is no better example of this era’s attitudes toward romance than the ironic ‘happy ending’ of *The Graduate* (Nichols), made in 1967, a turning point year for Hollywood. The lead character Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) makes the seemingly romantic gesture of rescuing Elaine (Katharine Ross), the daughter of his older lover, Mrs Robinson (Anne Bancroft), from her wedding to another man. They successfully escape the disapproving crowd of wedding attendees and catch a passing bus, but their celebratory smiles soon fade into blank stares when they realize that they do not know what they are supposed to do next. They share no loving embraces, no promises of love, but merely sit silently next to each staring off into the distance.

Similarly, the 1970s saw a handful of classically inspired romance films such as *The Way We Were* (Pollack, 1973) and *Love Story* achieve popularity and box-office success but the decade was dominated largely by revisionist romance films, also called ‘nervous romances,’ and ‘radical romantic comedies,’ both of which are best described as reflecting a sense of romantic ennui. Either by experimenting with form or questioning the stability and perseverance of the institution of heterosexual marriage, the 1970s romance film reflects many of the social and political movements whose platforms challenged the assumptions at the heart of the genre. Of these movements, second-wave feminism was the most significant. Its precepts subtly, but rarely explicitly, were voiced
through these films’ disenchantment with marriage as a desirable conclusion for both female and male protagonists.

Flora Davis argues that while the feminist movement was frequently blamed for the rising divorce rate, which increased by 100 percent between 1963 and 1975, it was as likely that the ‘second wave was, in part a response to the insecurity of marriage.’ Whether feminism led to divorce or divorce led to feminism, it is clear that the tone of 1970s’ romance films was inextricably tied to the fact that as of 1975, ‘there was one divorce for every two marriages.’ There were not only fewer romance films produced, but the films that were released, such as *An UnMarried Woman* (Mazursky, 1978), which I discuss in Chapter 1, reflect a more cynical perspective on the conventions and expectations of the classical romance, and maintain a tenuous connection to feminist politics.

This landscape began to shift again in the early 1980s, with an increase in the production of romance films and a marked change in tenor that saw cynicism slowly turn again to lightheartedness, optimism and nostalgia. Catherine Preston claims that in the 1960s and 1970s, the average number of romance films per year was in the single digits – seven and five per year, respectively. Yet by 1984 the numbers began to increase into the double digits, to an average of twenty per year. By 1991, the average peaked at forty romance films per year. Steve Neale has called this contemporary cycle film the ‘new romance’ film that incorporates ‘markedly – and knowingly – “old-fashioned”’ attributes. Mimi White similarly highlights the retrograde tendencies of this new crop of films, as she discusses their implications for the female protagonists at their center. Focusing on a group of 1984 films – including *Romancing the Stone* (Zemeckis), *Thief of Hearts* (Stewart), and *American Dreamer* (Rosenthal) – that ‘reintroduce romance with a vengeance,’ she contends,
On the one hand they attempt to construct, address, or fulfill the socially perceived and circumscribed demands of an audience with an increasingly feminist consciousness, as female protagonists are afforded narrative agency within fictions that engage strategies of self-conscious fictionality. At the same time the films can be seen in terms of postfeminist and neoconservative pressures, as the weight of narrative development hinges on and concludes in the formation of a traditionally conceived couple.47

The dynamic of ambivalence that is central to White’s examples is central to the postfeminist romance cycle. That is, the coexistence of a feminist consciousness by way of a female protagonist who is professionally and personally autonomous (and has narrative agency), and a narrative structure that foreshadows the formation of a heterosexual romantic partnership.

As I will describe in more detail in Chapter 1, the postfeminist romance cycle relies on the structure of stages outlined in a previous section, but this structure has a subtext that reflects the socio-political and cultural position of the woman at its center. The female protagonist’s status as a single woman or as a participant in an unfulfilling relationship is seen as a result of some problem from which she suffers. Although it is not socially mandated, heterosexual romantic partnership is presented as a desired complement to this female character’s otherwise fulfilling life. However, the choice she makes to be or not to be in a relationship, and the subsequent success or failure of that relationship, are both inextricable with, and often representative of, her perceived failings or quirks. These idiosyncrasies are implicitly, if not explicitly, linked to her social position, and the ‘problem’ she must overcome.

The postfeminist romance film gestures towards the political precepts of second-wave feminism, and absorbs, without necessarily reinforcing or negating, its ideals. It is frequently self-conscious and self-reflexive, and reveals, through plot structure and characterization, an awareness of romantic cultural tropes as circulated by other past and present media texts. The postfeminist romance film cautiously reconciles past and present narrative conventions and how those conventions align with past and present conceptions of womanhood.

These postfeminist romance films operate in an experiential space between multiple sets of oppositional tendencies, resulting in their deeply ambivalent and often contradictory affect. What is particularly fascinating about postfeminist culture for the purposes of this study is that, as the opening Pew statistics and Sheryl Sandberg’s book attest, there are still traces of political feminism’s forward momentum toward equality for women woven with a shift backward toward women’s embrace of more traditional conceptions of individualized femininity. Angela McRobbie’s characterization of postfeminism as a ‘double-entanglement’ is particularly useful here. For her, this double-entanglement is comprised of ‘the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender,
sexuality and family life . . . with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations. Or, as she argues specifically in reference to the film Bridget Jones’s Diary, postfeminism ‘seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent.

McRobbie’s double-entanglement paradigm has a great deal in common with White’s discussion of the return of ‘romance with a vengeance,’ and both frameworks inform how postfeminism will be characterized throughout this book. The double-entanglement term provides a historical and ideological demarcation, by marking the shift away from the political feminism of the 1970s. Postfeminism also describes a mentality that simultaneously looks backward and forward, both politically and historically. In other words, my spotlight is on how the postfeminist romance cycle films attempt to convey, sometimes successfully, occasionally not, the possibility of the coexistence of ideas and desires that postfeminist culture frequently posits as being at odds. American Postfeminist Cinema uses case studies of cinematic ‘either/or’s to explore the potential of the ‘both/and.’ In this context, the term postfeminism reveals a struggle and/or conversation, not an impasse.

Unlike scholars like Diane Negra who argue that postfeminist media culture leaves no ‘open spaces’ for spectator negotiation, with ‘conservative norms . . . as the ultimate “best choices” in women’s lives,’ I argue that despite the conventionality of the postfeminist romance cycle, these films do provide a range of experiences and provoke a range of interpretations, some of which might reflect progressive, politically engaged feminist attitudes and others that celebrate decidedly ‘old fashioned’ and conservative ideas of femininity. Heterosexual romantic coupling is always the desired resolution of postfeminist romance films and for that reason they might be considered retrograde and, even more extremely, antifeminist. However, to pigeonhole these films and stop the conversation there is to ignore the many complex issues with which they engage, and to assume that women spectators cannot find a variety of pleasures in the same texts that they simultaneously understand to be limited in their representations of women’s choices.

In fact, the truly interesting work begins once we recognize the cycle’s normativity. Because these films speak to one another and to the same sets of issues, an individual text’s full meaning is revealed only when viewed within both the context of the cycle more generally, and the set of false binaries that underlie our case studies. The cycle promotes and elicits an ongoing process of oscillation, narratively and spectatorially, between the past and the present, between the realities of one life and the fictional realities offered by film and other media, between being sexually active and demure, and between being completely independent or occasionally dependent. While particular films and
some issues taken up within the cycle are more antagonistic and conservative than others, the process of engaging with them as a group better reveals their ambivalence and sense of indecision. In other words, the postfeminist romance cycle films mirror the balancing act at the heart of the contemporary female experience.

**Framing the Book**

My case studies are organized according to both how, and in what ways, romance has become interwoven with women’s own anxieties, as well as the broader cultural anxieties about women’s changing social and political status. By arranging the case studies into clusters of the fallacious ‘either/or’s, we can gain a broad view of how seemingly different films actually have a great deal in common. This approach also enables some chapters’ case studies to consider multiple media at once.

As illustrated by such seminal 1980s feminist works as Tania Modleski’s *Loving With a Vengeance* and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, romance has the capacity to flow in and out of multiple media forms, and even to circulate into the language women use to discuss their own relationships. The tendencies of which they speak have proliferated by leaps and bounds over the last thirty years, and there has been a veritable explosion of forms through which romance has extended its reach, including self-help books and new media such as YouTube, blogs and dating sites. In addition, ‘reading’ or watching romance has itself become a performative act: media consumption is (sometimes) embedded in the texts themselves.

The lines between reality and fiction have never been more blurred, particularly when it comes to the way that women articulate their own relationship to the mythology surrounding both real and fictional romance. However, film remains the most effective and persuasive medium for disseminating ideas about heterosexual romance even in the midst of our romance-saturated media environment. Consequently, when I mention other media texts in the case studies, the emphasis is on the way in which they connect to or establish a discursive relationship with films.

Chapter 1 places the postfeminist romance cycle into historical context by examining in more detail how it both follows and deviates from the traits and tropes of its predecessors, the classical romance film and the ‘feminist’ romance film. We will better understand how this continuity and deviation operate by tracing how variations on the structural and discursive tendencies outlined earlier operate in the examples of films from different historical periods: *Kitty Foyle*, *An UnMarried Woman* and *27 Dresses*. The chapter demonstrates how the anxiety over women’s changing social and political status over the last thirty years creates new problems for the romance narrative to solve in old
ways. By delineating, as a starting point, the landscape of the romance film throughout different periods of Hollywood cinema, we acquire a historically nuanced understanding of the postfeminist romance before delving into the case studies that trace the anxieties that permeate the postfeminist romance cycle.

Chapter 2 presents the first of these case studies. It examines how the postfeminist romance film serves an ameliorative function, a bridge, so to speak, that is bolstered by contemporary transmedia and intertextual media landscape. The binary ‘either/or’ that emerges from this cluster of films and related media texts pits a fantasy-driven sentimentality, often associated with women and driven by fictional or historically retrograde conceits, against a more practical and calculated outlook associated with a masculine, business-oriented present day. We will see how this tension in the films *The Jane Austen Book Club* (Swicord, 2007), *He’s Just Not That Into You* (Kwapis, 2009), *You’ve Got Mail* (Ephron, 1998) and *Must Love Dogs* (Goldberg, 2005) circulates into and/or takes inspiration from Jane Austen novels, chick lit, YouTube videos, self-help books, and Internet dating commercials.

Chapter 3 elaborates on Chapter 2’s analysis of sentimentality versus pragmatism, in one particular area: it addresses how the postfeminist romance cycle poses questions about the historicity and temporality of ‘true’ romance. This chapter’s case studies are grouped according to how they work through questions of the relationship between constructions of time and women’s subjectivity, and include analyses of *Somewhere in Time* (Szwarc, 1980) versus *Kate and Leopold* (Mangold, 2001); *Me Myself I* (Karmel, 1999) versus *The Family Man* (Ratner, 2000); and an episode of *Sex and the City* entitled ‘Ex and the City’ and the film *Sleepless in Seattle*. These texts bring to light the political implications of the ‘post’ in postfeminism and how these historical questions are channeled through the ‘gendering’ of time. Ultimately, the chapter considers whether the alignment of female characters with a discourse of romance risks placing women in an ahistorical and overly subjective position that minimizes their agency and investment in the objective present.

Chapter 4 continues the previous chapters’ examination of the reverberations surrounding the postfeminist romance’s preoccupation with the past, but here the past is that of girlhood. Postfeminist culture’s fixation on naive girlishness and hyper-sexualized boldness simultaneously results in a paradoxical representation of sexuality and romance. Case studies of comedy films – *When Harry Met Sally*, *Pretty Woman*, and *13 Going on 30* (Winick, 2004) – alongside thrillers – *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987), *Unfaithful*, and *In the Cut* (Campion, 2003) – make it clear that the postfeminist romance film struggles to maintain a balance between depicting women as demure girls and sexual coquettes. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of how these contradictory sexual identities find some degree of balance in the more recent films
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No Strings Attached (Reitman, 2011) and Friends with Benefits (Gluck, 2011), and in the television program Girls (2012–), even amidst increasingly contentious political conversations about women’s sexual rights.

Chapter 5 continues a consideration of the postfeminist romance cycle’s fluctuation between female dependency and autonomy, but expands the framework to consider industrial context. Focusing on the films of two of the most prominent writer-directors of the contemporary era, Nancy Meyers and Nicole Holofcener, it argues that there are illuminating connections between the representation of romance and the mode of production in which a filmmaker works. Meyers’s Hollywood films have huge budgets and construct a particular brand of lifestyle fetishism unquestionably mixed with heterosexual romance. By contrast, Nicole Holofcener’s small budget, independent films contemplate the connections between money and romantic relationships. Meyers, in It’s Complicated (2009), combines a satisfying romantic catharsis with the consumption of material goods, while Holofcener, in Friends with Money (2006), deviates from typical romantic structures and calls attention to what lies beneath acts of consumption. By illustrating that ‘having it all’ can mean different things to different women (both real and fictional), we can see some variations on the structural and discursive characteristics that typify different concepts of romance.

All of these case studies trace the ways in which the postfeminist romance cycle films are dynamic and complex vehicles through which some of the central issues facing contemporary women are rehearsed and negotiated. Close narrative analyses of film and other forms of media help us parse the false binaries that unite these films, and thus reveal how they deal with multi-layered concerns where politics meet personal choices, and fantasy meets reality. Or, to return to our opening example, where we see traces of Friedan’s ‘feminine mystique’ mixed with Sandberg’s ‘leaning in.’ Romance functions, in the words of Northrop Frye, as a ‘wish-fulfillment dream’ that, despite the great changes that may ‘take place in society . . . will turn up again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on.’ This book illustrates the specific hopes, desires and contradictions that romance has fed on for the last thirty years and how, through its reliability, the narrative structure of romance continues to create new hopes and desires to be fed on in the future. In other words, we will see that the romance film is not merely symptomatic or reflective of the postfeminist era’s political and cultural shifts; it is inextricably linked to these changes.

**Notes**

3. American studios produced most of the films that I discuss in my case studies. The few postfeminist romance films that did not originate in Hollywood – including *Me Myself I* and *In the Cut* – were international coproductions that received wide distribution in the United States, usually through the major studios.


9. A March 2013 *Atlantic* article comments on the tough times that have befallen the romantic comedy in recent years concluding that ‘the easy profitability of the past decade was the worst thing to happen to the romantic comedy – an invitation to stale formulas and ridiculous conceits alike – and a few lean years might do the genre good.’ Christopher Orr, ‘Why are romantic comedies so bad?: The long decline from Katharine Hepburn to Katherine Heigl’, *The Atlantic*, March 2013, 42–3.


15. David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 16. In a 1979 interview with Janet Bergstrom, Raymond Bellour states, ‘If you think about it, you notice that after a certain situation posed at the start as a problem or as an enigma, the film gradually leads to a final solution which allows the more or less conflicting terms posed at the beginning to be resolved, and which in the majority of cases takes the form of marriage. I’ve gradually come to think that this pattern organizes – indeed, constitutes – the classical American cinema as a whole.’ Janet Bergstrom, ‘Alternation, segmentation, hypnosis: interview with Raymond Bellour – an excerpt’, in Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 187.

16. Indeed, there are a great many commonalities in how people account for the essential components of romance plots. For instance, in *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, film scholar Leger Grindon outlines romantic comedy in terms of its narrative ‘moves’. These moves consist of: (1) unfulfilled desire; (2) the meeting; (3) fun together; (4) obstacles arise; (5) the journey; (6) new conflicts; (7) the choice; (8) crisis; (9) epiphany; (10) resolution. On the other side of the cultural spectrum, mass-market book author Kim Adelman, author of *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks*, also writes of what she calls romance’s ‘steps’. In her first, and appropriately named, chapter, ‘From Meeting Cute to the Ultimate Happy Ending: How to Create the Perfect Romance,’ she outlines the steps of this ‘perfect romance’: (1) create a sympathetic heroine; (2) offer up a love-worthy hero; (3) don’t forget the best friend; (4) something’s wrong with the heroine’s life; (5) they meet; (6) toss in impediments to the romance; (7) they dance; (8) pack in as many memorable moments as possible; (9) the hero employs the three magic words; (10) achieve...


25. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

29. Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 11.


31. Ibid. pp. 163.

32. Ibid. p. 161.

33. Ibid. p. 49.


41. See Frank Krutnik, ‘The faint aroma of performing seals: the “nervous” romance and the comedy of the sexes’, *Velvet Light Trap*, 26 (1990), and Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*.
43. Ibid. p. 287.
44. Preston contends: ‘Between 1960 and 1969 there were an average of 7 romances released a year. In the 1970s that figure went down to 5 per year. In 1980 the production of romances began to rise and between 1984 and 1989 an average of 20 were released each year. Between 1990 and 1996, the annual average rose to 26, peaking at 40 in 1991.’ ‘Hanging on a star’, p. 229.
47. White, ‘Representing romance’, p. 41.
49. Ibid. p. 12.
52. Chapter 3’s final case study was originally published as “Misty Water-Colored Memories of the Way We Were” postfeminist nostalgia in contemporary romance narratives’, in Vicki Callahan (ed.), *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010). © Used with the permission of Wayne State University Press.
53. A version of Chapter 5’s case study of Nicole Holofcener’s *Friends with Money* was originally published as ‘Independence at what cost?: economics and female desire in Nicole Holofcener’s *Friends with Money* (2006)’, in Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (eds), *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). Republished with permission of Taylor and Francis Group LLC Books; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.
Death and the Moving Image: Ideology, Iconography and I

by Michele Aaron

A Sample From: Introduction: Everywhere and Nowhere
INTRODUCTION

Everywhere and Nowhere

Death is everywhere and nowhere in contemporary Western culture. Corpses litter Hollywood film; vulnerability or violence propels most mainstream fictions; the recently recovered or slowly dying make bookshelves groan. But the pain or smell of death, the banality of physical, or undignified, decline, the dull ache of mourning, are rarely seen. Cemeteries move further from the city, approach obsolescence as well as capacity, and hospitals hold dying at bay and far from the public eye. Yet our film and television screens are steeped in death’s dramatics: in spectacles of glorious sacrifice or bloody retribution, in the ecstasy of agony, but always in the promise of redemption. This book is about these dramatics or, more precisely, the staging of these dramatics in mainstream film, and the discrepancies that fuel them and are, by return, fuelled by them.

The foregrounding of discrepancy, of the gaps or inaccuracies that characterise death’s mediation in its restless departure from lived experience, has always accompanied its sociocultural study. Since Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller of 1973 announced *The Denial of Death* – that the human condition is characterised by a fear of death which funds our actions but evades our consciousness – debates on the topic have negotiated this question of repression and of death’s faux nowhere-ness in contemporary life. Philippe Ariès provided the historical context to this death denial in his groundbreaking study of 1975: *Western Attitudes towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. In it he traced death’s social role from medieval to modern times: its long and slow journey from being familiar to becoming forbidden. Until the eighteenth century, death was an everyday event: an individual would die at home, surrounded by a steady stream of family, neighbours and children. With modernity, industrialisation and secularisation, things changed: death became an increasingly private or domestic enterprise and more about the loved ones looking on than the dearly departing themselves. Death shifted, in other words, from its function as public but banal ritual, to the intense, private,
and even expressive performances of mourning in Victorian times, and
then again to the conventions of ‘acceptability’, constraint, and solemnity,
attending death in the subsequent period and since. Such conventions
segregate the dying into hospitals, regulate the excesses of grief but still
redirect attention away from the body in decline or examination: ‘Death,
so omnipresent in the past . . . would be effaced, would disappear. It
would become shameful and forbidden’. The manifestations of this inter-
diction would take somewhat different forms in different centuries and in
different countries in the West but its modern entrenchment as taboo was
universal.

This is a grand simplification of Ariès’s historical cartography: its
details are debated with erudition elsewhere but its prevailing themes,
such as the romanticisation of death or its conservatism, will be addressed
and updated throughout this study. What the summary reveals, however,
are several important, and enduring, displacements going on within death
and mourning practices in modern times and within the entrenchment
of taboo. These displacements hold particular significance for any study
of modern culture but especially so for mainstream cinema which trades
more than most on the diversionary promises of lavish fantasy. Freud’s
remark on attitudes towards death that we ‘seek in the world of fiction, in
literature and in the theatre compensation for what has been lost in life’,
achieves its most vivid realisation in this medium. When Ariès connects
responsibility for death’s interdiction to an emphasis upon the preserva-
tion of ‘happiness, born in the United States around the beginning of
the twentieth century’, we gain a clear mandate for the significance to
this project of the Dream Factory, of the Hollywood system, which was
consolidating socially and industrially at just this time, and its part in pro-
moting the ‘American/ised’ way of life and way of death that preoccupy
us here.

Journeying ever further from the truths of the body in decline, Ariès’s
historical displacements in the cultural role of death can be broadly
conjured thus: from the public to the private; from the person dying to
the person mourning; from the everyday to the extraordinary; and from
ritualistic to romanticised remonstration or self-restraint. These new
emphases, upon what can be usefully encapsulated as the exceptionalism
of death, will prove to be very important to its cinematic treatment, and
to my analysis. At their heart, for Ariès, was a certain denial, though he
didn’t call it that. Whether it was eroticised, sensationalised or simply
unmentionable, death from eighteenth-century Western culture onwards
was increasingly cordoned off from the natural and healthy functioning of
society. In this book, I pursue the bifurcated or ambivalent place of death
in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture: the ongoing split between its over- and understatement, between its cold, bodily realities and its fantastical, transcendental and, most importantly, strategic representation. Its cultural expression will be shown still to support the natural and healthy functioning of society but this sense of well-being is, I have found, highly contingent upon social factors that far exceed a universal fear of death. Popular culture, specifically mainstream cinema, will prove the privileged site for scrutinising such strategies’ nurture of the welfare of ‘Western society’.

For Geoffrey Gorer, an early voice in the study of death and dying and to whom Ariès pays tribute, the twentieth-century interdiction must be understood in terms of a specific historical displacement, and one that also renders a universal death fear an inadequate explanation. His seminal article of 1955, ‘The Pornography of Death’, argued that in its taboo and titillating status – as forbidden-but-with-frisson – it held the same role that sex did in Victorian times.9 Death became the new obscenity, to be sequestered and repressed but also, tangentially, indulged, at least in those tawdry spaces that afforded it. A split occurred. Medical developments and the progressive control over the wages of the body caused a separating out of natural and unnatural death in society: ‘While natural death became more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences’.10 This is where mediated death and cultural artefacts gain such prominence within the debate. Repressed in real life, death returns and returns extravagantly in representation. This split, and developing gulf, between sanitised natural and spectacular unnatural death will prove apposite, and even telling, in filmic translation. Not only will cinema’s dramatic display of death contrast with its inconspicuousness in real life but both natural and unnatural death migrate to the screen, albeit in different proportions. Crucially, however, this book will demonstrate that the ‘fantasies offered to mass audiences’ by cinema depend just as much, if not more, upon the niceties of natural death as the blood fests of its special events. Death’s critical importance here will hinge upon its salubrious, rather than lurid, spectacles. Prudery proves the most revealing still.

Since its inception, cinema has provided an ever more dominating forum for society’s depiction of, and dealings with, death. It provides a rare site for representations of illness or grief, of wounded bodies or souls, or of the fringes of life. It is prolific in imaging death by stupefying risk, tragic misadventure or unpalatable crime. This pervasive staging of violent death proves not only gratuitous, or the flipside of repression, but psychologically strategic as Becker might have it: it serves our avoidance
of mortality, distancing death from the self. Becker drew on the work of Otto Rank who put it thus: ‘through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed’. In crude terms, others suffer instead of us: the more we watch the death of others, the more we master it and are reassured of our own survival. For Alfred Killilea the aesthetic dimension of what we’re watching is vital: the more violent or graphic the representation of murder, the more clearly Western culture seeks to avoid the subject of death: ‘We continue to hide from the reality of our natural and unavoidable mortality’, he says, ‘by exposing ourselves to the more bizarre and violent manifestations of death’. More than just an ‘instinct to mastery’, or channelling of the ‘death drive’ in Freudian terms, we become inured to the place of death in our lives, hardened to it, precisely through the graphic visualisations of death and dying. And the more fantastical or discrepant such representations are, the stronger the guarantee of our distance from them. The individual might test and strengthen the death drive through these encounters with mortality, then, and culture, especially cinema, might offer a compelling platform for occasioning such thrills but psychoanalysis is insufficient to explain death’s rich role on-screen. Instead, what is emphasised here is the aesthetic and psychosocial – the compulsory interchange between psychic and social factors – import of these representations and, crucially, their codependence.

Mainstream cinema abounds with such bizarre and violent manifestations, and numerous studies of action, thriller, gangster and horror films have pointed us to both their entertainment and ideological values. Pleasure in, indeed especially in, fear or suspense is pivotal here: mainstream cinema, lest we forget, is above all else an entertainment industry. Similarly, as Joel Black reminds us, ‘[o]ur customary experience of murder and other forms of violence is primarily aesthetic, rather than moral, physical, natural, or whatever term we choose as a synonym for the word real’. Though this study dwells on sombre topics and ethical suppositions, it is underwritten by the visual and visceral allure, or downright delight, these depictions promise their vast audiences. Death and the Moving Image, however, is not explicitly about murder or violence, monsters or villains, or such films’ sensational depictions of ever less natural death. Instead, innocuous or poignant representations, the seemingly more seemly fantasies about mortality, take centre stage. These, I argue, are far more potent as indicators of the distancing devices that surround death’s place in mainstream cinema and of the wider cultural needs such devices serve or betray. These distancing devices are about our fear not only of death but of our implication in others’ deaths. Indeed, the discrep-
ant depiction of mortality, I argue, stems from a set of other fears, cares or unconscious attitudes that are met and satisfied by the death dealings of mainstream film. The principal aim of this study, then, is to pursue and pin down these broader social attitudes and anxieties and, more precisely, what it is we are persuaded of, hardened to, or ‘buy ourselves free’ from in these moving representations.

These innocuous or poignant filmic images of death also provide far more meaty testimony to life’s worth, to, that is, the unerrng valuation of individuals’ existence that takes place in the medium. This is not to privilege existential angst or a philosophical approach, far from it. Rather, it isolates how mainstream cinema works to bestow value upon certain lives, specific sociocultural identities, in a hierarchical and partisan way. So, where the blood fests of the blockbuster might speak to the cheapness of life, these moving images of death divulge also what is held sacred and which lives are sovereign in cinema. It is niceties, then, that populate this study. Whether as the nobility of dutiful sacrifice (Chapters 1 and 3), the beauty of dying (Chapters 2 and 4) or the ‘progressiveness’ of post-racism (Chapter 5), mainstream cinema’s redemptive fantasies of death preach a corrective that masks what I will reveal as far more cynical, and sinister, mortal economies. By mortal economies I mean that film’s structuring logic or systems of exchange or encounter are underwritten by life’s worth, and by its, albeit imaginary, ‘capacity to dictate who may live and who must die’. Mainstream cinema is, in other words, an instrumentalisation of the politics of death or, after Achille Mbembe, ‘necropolitics’. The aim of Death and the Moving Image, then, is to unveil these mortal economies and thus the necropolitical frame to the outrageous fortune conjured by Hollywood and some of its best friends.

Film’s primary corrective, or drive towards resolution or cure, belongs, to a great extent, to narrative itself. Mainstream narratives often end in death. This has as much to do with the Bildungsroman traditions of the feature film, the life journeys it has classically captured, as with the symbolic potential and flexibility of death. Death resolves the problems or themes of the text, in its punitive, profound or just finalising effect, but its functionality is not limited to films’ close. It plays a structural part throughout the narrative, whether or not it even occurs, or occurs only at the end. It provides, in other words, ‘a mechanism rather than a subject of representation’. At the same time, the shape and vibrancy of its part will be genre specific. Cinematic death has a particular relationship to narrative and genre, then, and though it remains subordinate to other issues in this book, its functionality animates the discussion throughout.

In pursuing the paradox of the ‘paucity of experience and surplus of
representation’ of death in current times in the West, John Tercier turns his focus on CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) to its depiction in television’s medical dramas. Pervasive, theatrical and uncommonly successful, television’s CPR skews statistical and other facts. But, for Tercier, it is obscene in that ‘[t]he traumatic realism of the resuscitative scene is meant to arouse us . . . it demands an emotional response not to the life that was lived, but to the spectacle of death’. Contemporising Gorer, Tercier expresses well the gratuitous pleasures of sensational immediacy here, of the ‘frenzied’ visuals of high-budget drama. He also, unwittingly, points to its ethical import.

Making invisible or sequestering the dead and dying raises one set of ethical issues about the dismissal or ‘abjectification’ of vulnerability and the body in decline. But a sense of popular culture, channelling our capacity to be moved away from the human who is suffering and towards the dramatic effects of watching, raises yet another. Ethics will be a major theme in this study of death, as it has been for others, but my contrasting commitment to mass culture welds the concern for human relationality and its violent frame for encountering difference to popular entertainment and to the everyday fantasies of the majority. This is not to erect impenetrable barriers between mass and marginal artefacts or media, between high or low culture, or between real and fabricated suffering – quite the opposite. As I have previously argued of ethical spectatorship, a continuum operates between these. Real and imagined depictions of suffering, which can look alike and fill the same screens, command similar reactions and, therefore, connected theorisation. Part of the ethical landscape is a reckoning with precisely this, with the frame of entertainment for the news, say, or necropolitics for cinema. Similarly, a continuum of ethical reflection operates between the more rarefied or lowbrow images or texts. Where mass culture lends itself to moralism, ‘ethical reflection’, which is prioritised here, contests rather than cohabits with a state-sponsored prescription of right and wrong. Death and the Moving Image divulges the morality to mortality in cinema but it does so to point to something more dynamic, inherent, and even hopeful, in the relationship between film culture and human vulnerability.

Returning to Tercier’s comment, and the parameters of this study, it is not just the grandeur of dramatic effect that lures us away from ethical reflection but the magnetism of affectivity itself. Interest has heightened in the spectators’ emotions, via film studies’ affective turn, or in their trauma, via the ‘cottage industry’ of its theorisation, since the 1990s. It is superseded here, however, by the question of how spectators’ reactions to these moving images extend film’s mortal economies. The valuation
of some lives over others in mainstream cinema, so central to this study, takes place on-screen and off, in the text and in its context. It is, in other words, embedded in the film’s visual, visceral and narrative content but also in privileging the responses and conscience of the assumed audience. The Western spectator of mainstream cinema is woven into its necropolitics which affect and trauma theory don’t adequately cover. After all, as Vaheed Ramazani asserts, ‘the notion of trauma has become a privileged cliché of American, if not Western, culture in the new millennium’. On-screen suffering remains a fundamental coordinate to the moving image of death and dying but sustains complexity, politics and scepticism in this study. This is because, on the one hand, ‘the logic of vulnerability is a vast web of interconnecting vulnerabilities’: suffering always operates within, and compensates for, other systems of privation or stricture. On the other, the image is moving in that it here always depends upon the production of sentiment for its power; it always forces or reinforces channels of feeling and of ‘valuation’ regardless of one’s abilities to resist. So, while the moving image cannot but nod to film’s status as time-based media, and to Barthian concepts of photographic immortality, my use of it in the title of this book, and throughout, prioritises this different emphasis.

When Tercier writes that ‘in the twentieth century death abandoned real life for representation’, his pithy remark rings true in the context of his study but directs us to a central concern of mine: the way in which ‘real life’ so frequently stands for Western experience. It is, after all, only for some that death has abandoned real life. This book, in other words, contests the universality, and apolitics, of cultural interpretations of death and dying. Indeed, it infers they are unethical. ‘Identity’ influences, if not determines, how and where we expire or, as David Field, Jenny Hockey and Neil Small put it: ‘Worldly inequalities are in no way levelled at the time of death but persist, permeating every aspect of death and dying.’ Identity is even, as Cornell West clarifies, a ‘matter of life and death’. More than this, geography, race, class, gender, age and so on determine our proximity to death and are crucial to what Walter Benjamin called our status as ‘dry dwellers of eternity’: whether we revel in the fantasies on the screen as our only, or primary, contact with mortal constraints or remain mired in the problems of malnutrition, disease, civil war or occupation. Context is everything. Though this book is fixed on mainstream Western culture and a ‘majority’ audience, it tries to keep the privileges and contingencies of this site and focus uppermost and seeks to resist the common if not ceaseless return to their concerns only, in other words, to their solipsistic thrall.

Ariès’s work has proven to be a launch pad for much recent thinking
on death and culture. Certainly his tendency ‘to assume that the dead are white, wealthy and male’ and his defining of culture via ‘educated and wealthy elites’ have been instrumental here. Meanwhile, the polarities inherent in his conclusions – the healthy past versus the unhealthy present, for example – proved resonant, if contentious, as did the favouring of loss over desire as the governing trope of culture’s treatment of mortality. Jonathan Dollimore, in particular, speaks extensively to the misdirection of theorists of death who look only to loss and denial, rather than to the erotic binding of desire and death. Elsewhere, I’ve privileged the erotic and ethical economies of spectatorship, and masochism’s primacy within it. Here, however, need and even perversity are oriented away from the self and towards a landscape or geopolitics of inequity and the deathly dealings of alterity that popular culture illuminates. The individual is crucial to this landscape but must not remain exceptional within it. That ‘I’ in this book’s subtitle, then, points to the importance of identity, subjectivity and sovereignty to the meaningfulness of film and to the (Althusserian) triangulation at its heart: of the sociopolitical, the aesthetic and the personal/psychological. Most importantly, that ‘I’ foregrounds the pattern and practice of privilege, the vortex of exclusivity and the tension with the ‘other’ upon which it depends.

The major revision to Ariès’s argument is, of course, that death in contemporary Western society has not retreated into the private realm completely or convincingly at all. Rather, as Chris Townsend for one points out, culture is suffused with ‘engagements with death – literary and visual, musical as well as philosophical’. Scholarship has not been immune. There has been a steady but marked growth in interest in death and related topics, with an explosion in the twenty-first century, all at a time when death’s ‘recognition has become more publicly controlled and defined’. The question of film’s, or even film theory’s, place in such control and definition will haunt this book. Within film studies, death-related topics dominated at first and leant towards the broader themes gaining traction in the arts in the 1990s. Queer readings of AIDS and mourning, millennial analyses of mass culture and apocalyptic mythology, and the continuing, and related, postmodern debate on the death of film itself supplemented the escalating interest at the time in cultural history, memory, but especially trauma whose ‘star [was] rising within the academic firmament’.

Marita Sturken, Suzannah Radstone and later Paul Grainge argue that cultural forms become important sites for the reflection and generation of individual and national loss and memory. The enduring and hyper-mediation of atrocity or disaster underlies the burgeoning critical interest
in cultural trauma that Wheeler Winston Dixon, Kirby Farell, Vera Dika and Mikita Brottman, among others, have written about in various ways in relation to film. Characterised by repetitiveness, redundancy, pessimism and, at times, prurience, these cultural productions, and their viewers, seemed to suggest Western culture’s growing hold on practices of death, and cinema’s distinction as a principal forum for fulfilling this. Certainly, the films that stage catastrophe, whether real or imagined, perform, or provide a public platform for, a cultural practice of death and mourning and, in so doing, they load death with historical and national meaning that cinema is perfectly positioned to impart. According to these theorists, they also work in different ways to displace fear, to offer catharsis, distraction or redemption.

Led by the multifarious place of death in film, rather than the broader and emergent themes it animates, this study nevertheless pivots on its conservative functionality which these earlier works inform in explicit and implicit ways. Informed by the multidisciplinary trajectories of academic debate on the topic, first and foremost, Death and the Moving Image provides a survey of the representation of death and dying in mainstream cinema from its earliest to its latest renditions. In pursuing this range, it traverses narratives and genres fuelled by the prospect or promise of death, films filled with ‘actual’ death, and also grief-stricken tales of loss, fewer in number but more searing in effect. Its ‘before, during, after’ span takes into account this manifold presence – its expression or function as, say, structural charge, necessary spectacle or immobilising sorrow – and reflects this pseudochronology and figurative scope. That said, the three parts are neither discrete nor equally balanced: the brevity of the last is indicative of my turn away from trauma. But it is the benefits and price of death’s abiding conservatism in culture, of that ‘buying oneself free’, and its historical and technological contexts, that will be pursued most relentlessly here: the politics and aesthetics, ideology and iconography, of death in cinema perpetually troubled by ‘my’ part in it.

How, then, do the various roles that death performs in the moving image – as something flirted with, embodied or responded to – determine the structural, aesthetic and political exchange between cinema and death? How do such variables as gender, sexuality or race, nation or narration or film-making practice have impact upon the representation of death and its sociocultural import? How does the fact that death ‘moves’ – in being filmic but especially in being emotive – render the study of the cinematic representation of death distinctly coercive or collective or ethically entangled?

Part I, flirting with death, considers the precedence of self-endangerment,
of the individual risking his or her life, in mainstream cinema. The first chapter addresses the action genre, the second suicide films, and the third looks at sacrifice in post-9/11 Hollywood. Moving from the timeless to the timely, from the recuperative to the absolutory, the section progresses from the structural role of flirting with death in film, its ‘recovery momentum’, in Chapter 1, to its detailed historical and geopolitical contextualisation in Chapter 3. In Chapter 2, film’s limited but highly symbolic representation of suicide, of the individual’s witting or self-willed self-killing, affords the distinction of cinema’s mortal economies.

These, the death-dealing visual and narrative logic of film itself, depend upon the interplay of identity and power, of, more immediately, gender, nation and race. This complex interplay, animated through the discussion of an Oscar-nominated Palestinian film, will remain in tension throughout the study and its identification of mainstream cinema as necropolitical.

Part II addresses dying in cinema. Elaine Scarry’s seminal work on the unshareability and inexpressibility of pain provides the framework for exposing and exploring the rich cinematic language for bodily decline. It is a language of metaphor and of idiom; of the longhand of narrative and the shorthand of genre, but it is pre-structured in mainstream cinema by a grammar that seems irredeemably ideological. Chapter 4 maps out this language via the terminal illness film, its rigidity and its room for manoeuvre beyond Hollywood. The political underpinnings, and especially the racial unconscious of this language, preceding and determining it, are pursued in Chapter 5. Emerging steadily throughout, the ethical dimensions of the moving image of death are most fully explored in Chapter 6. The unshareability but connectivity of watching others die on, and through, film proposes a more radical cinematic language of human vulnerability. The last part contains a single concluding chapter. Drawing together the various discussions of the book, I locate, finally, this more radical relationship to human vulnerability within a Hollywood feature film about the Mexican–US borderland. In so doing, the book ends with the possibility of a more hopeful future for mainstream cinema’s dealings with death.

Mainstream cinema is epitomised by Hollywood, by, that is, ‘white Hollywood’ where, as Mantha Diawara clarifies, ‘Blacks exist primarily for White spectators whose comfort and understanding the films must seek’.44 Hollywood provides most of the case studies here, and African American history a recurring setting for questions of race. This recurrence is inevitable given the pre-eminence of North American cultural history for any study of mainstream film and the primacy of black–white race relations within that history. But the relativity of social value, or the
mortal economy of representation, as it gets played out to such vivid or veiled extremes in cinema, is always more than the seeming binary of this black–white relation.

As Michele Wallace reminds us, ‘black stereotypes have become only the most visible symptom of the problem – the easiest thing to pick on’. Yet it is the broader dynamic of colonialism and subalternism that yields the intellectual frame to the study, that introduces its necropolitical approach to film in Chapter 2 and seals its wishful thinking in Chapter 7. I hope to keep that broader dynamic in play throughout. Though the place of gender within all this is, as always, of vital consideration, its significance is constrained. White Hollywood is invariably male, or at least masculinist, just as the non-white-authored films discussed below are directed, and populated, by men as well, but the double layer of women of colour’s erasure should not go unsaid. This erasure, this invisibility at the level of content and production, is an unavoidable feature of the terrain this study covers. The wishful thinking with which this book leaves off, that more hopeful future of Hollywood’s dealings with death, should be tempered accordingly.

The North American emphasis is augmented by a comparative, as well as longitudinal and latitudinal, approach throughout. Non-Western, non-fiction and early examples expand the scope of this study, pointing to related concerns within film studies at the same time as complicating and, I hope, deepening our understanding of mainstream cinema and its (racialised and sexualised) normative consciousness. There is disproportionate attention to contemporary examples, but forceful reasons for this. Most obviously, there are simply more films of historical atrocity, terminal illness, bloody violence and so on, in this period due to well-known industrial and technological shifts. There was also that surge of scholarship on the topic. But there have been significant social and demographic changes that have had an impact on representation as well. Firstly, as Mary Bradbury acknowledges, ‘people live longer and take more time to die’. More narratives, or genres, about aging and dying would arise naturally, therefore. At the same time, the 1980s’ AIDS crisis resulted in a proliferation of texts about bodily vulnerability and dying in the West, as writers and other artists set their experiences to page, canvas or screen, enhancing this ‘era of autopathography’. The premillennial context occasioned another cause for the surge in apocalyptic narratives and, for Nancy Berns, ‘closure emerged so prominently’ in this period too, but the 1990s also witnessed a major increase in the representation of cancer. According to Robert Clark this occurred because the ‘leading edge of the “baby boom” generation . . . reached 44 years of age in 1990’. Such films,
he continues, ‘were now relevant to this generation’, but were also reflective of how ‘health care costs became a significant economic and political issue in the late 1980s’.

*Death and the Moving Image* is then very much of its time: of the cultural, critical and historical location from which I write; of the urgencies surrounding the world’s economic crises, continuing and emerging conflicts, depleting resources and aging populations, and of the global expansion of film/digital cultures notwithstanding their enduring inequities. For Alessia Ricciardi, death’s proliferation within contemporary culture is down to the predominance of technologies, not least of the screen, providing new forums for death’s ‘basic, if problematic, ubiquity as a signifier’ as well as ‘new modes and constellations’ for mourning and, we might add, for that ‘frenzy of the visible’. While new screen technologies and the expansion of film cultures widen the field for death’s sombre or more extravagant return, such forums, as Margaret Gibson reminds us, inevitably widen the ‘gap between “real death” and its imagined or simulated forms’. Death, which is repressed or inaccessible in real life, returns in culture in various forms, genres and guises but still we must, as Sandra Gilbert puts it, ‘reconcile death denial with death display’. Such reconciliation underpins this book too, even as I seek to expand the context, to impose the politics, and to refuse the solipsism of death’s discrepancies. More than this, the specificities of the technology or media that manage this return, and their mass, niche or otherwise imagined audience, remain key to understanding film’s repetition of entrenched patterns of dealing with, taming, or even curing death in mass entertainment, or even its potential to break free. Indeed, this study traces another course, its own recuperative path perhaps, in pursuing this sense of the potentiality of film, even of mainstream film, to do death differently.

For Leo Bersani the reassurances and redemptiveness that characterise culture can be shattered only by the radicality of art. *Death and the Moving Image*, however, seeks out some kind of shattering of the salvific impulses of Western culture from within its most popular forums. Film or, better still, film culture is taken here as a principal conduit of mainstream Western culture, of its import and, in fact, its exportation. Dedicated to the popular, to the political implications of mass culture’s themes and imperatives, this book’s abiding aim is to take the mainstream to task for its mortal economies but also ultimately to disinter the capacity for film, and film criticism, to engage with life and fragility more productively. Judith Butler, articulating a hope for a global community in the midst of the divisive inhumanity to others’ suffering, post-9/11, and the United States’ ‘war on terror’, prioritises the representation of vulnerability:
One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake. But what media will let us know and feel that frailty, know and feel at the limits of representation as it is currently cultivated and maintained?  

It is to the power of the moving image to let us know and feel that frailty, to coerce but also to commune with human vulnerability, that I now turn.
Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple

by James MacDowell

A Sample From:
Introduction: The ‘happy ending’: the making of a reputation
Introduction:
The ‘happy ending’:
the making of a reputation

Take something as obvious as Hollywood’s happy endings . . .
(Maltby 2003: 16)

The Hollywood ‘happy ending’ is among the most over-utilised and under-analysed concepts in discussions of popular cinema.¹ Though it has seldom been addressed in any detail, the term is nonetheless ceaselessly employed by audiences, filmmakers, critics and scholars, and is one that evokes a whole host of assumptions about mainstream American filmmaking.² This book is the first to interrogate some of the most significant and tenacious of those assumptions, and it does so by delving more deeply than is usual into one especially famous feature associated with the ‘happy ending’: concluding a film with the union of a romantic couple.

One way of describing the status of the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ would be to say that it is burdened with a considerable reputation.³ Indeed, as we will see, for few phenomena of popular filmmaking does the matter of reputation seem more relevant than for the ‘happy ending’. A central aim of this book is to question that reputation. As such, let us begin by outlining some of its contours.

UBIQUITY AND HOMOGENEITY

As in the popular imagination so in academic discussion – the most fundamental assumption about the ‘happy ending’ is that it is a ubiquitous feature of Hollywood cinema. It has thus become virtually traditional for scholars to precede mentions of the term ‘happy ending’ with words like ‘standard’ (Dolar 1991: 38), ‘standardised’ (Mulvey 1978: 54), ‘predetermined’ (Maltby 2003: 16), ‘predictable’ (Schatz 1991: 152), ‘typical’ (Booker 2007: 42), ‘necessary’
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(Mayne 1990: 363), ‘inevitable’ (Kracauer 1960: 65), ‘required’ (Sharrett 2007: 60), ‘requisite’ (Tally 2007: 129), ‘statutory’ (Brownlow 1987: 122), ‘mandatory’ (Kapsis 1990: 39), ‘expected’ (Rowe/Wells 2003: 59), ‘customary’ (Sterritt 1993: 10), ‘usual’ (Žižek 2001: 7), ‘formulaic’ (Uphlett 2006: 38), or – most frequently – ‘clichéd’ (Ort 1991: 380). The same impulse can provoke claims such as ‘few conventions of the Hollywood cinema are as noticeable to its producers, to its audiences, and to its critics as that of the happy ending’ (Bordwell 1982: 2), and even that this is the ‘most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomena’ (Wood 1989: 52). Indeed, it is not uncommon to imply that virtually all Hollywood films have the ‘happy ending’ in common: Redman refers to ‘the happy ending, which is present in almost every Hollywood film’ (2003), Strinati to ‘the “happy ending” associated with the typical Hollywood film’ (2000: 34), Bratu-Hansen to ‘the Hollywood convention of the always-happy ending’ (1997: 101), and so on.4

These are very bold pronouncements. Given their assuredness and prevalence within an academic discipline, we might assume that they have been arrived at based on considerable evidence. Yet it is surprising to realise, in the light of the pervasiveness of these claims, that the ‘happy ending’ has received barely any in-depth attention, or even a satisfactory definition, from film studies. Perhaps the closest we have to a substantiated claim about the ubiquity of the ‘happy ending’ is David Bordwell’s assertion that, ‘of one hundred randomly sampled Hollywood films, over sixty ended with a display of the united romantic couple – the cliché happy ending, often with a “clinch” – and many more could be said to end happily’ (1986: 159). This, at least, is certainly the most frequently cited scholarly proclamation on the subject. Neale and Krutnik, for instance, assert that ‘as David Bordwell has pointed out, [. . . ] the convention of the happy ending was almost universal in Hollywood during its classical period’ (1990: 29).5 There are several problems here. I will return later to the issue of defining a ‘united romantic couple’ as ‘the cliché happy ending’. Regarding the rest of the statement, though: by never revealing the definition by which these many (unnamed) endings ‘could be said to end happily’, Bordwell exhibits two common impulses governing critical responses to the ‘happy ending’: (1) an assumption of its obvious intelligibility as something we all immediately recognise and understand, and (2) a use of this assumption to bolster an argument that the device is near-omnipresent in Hollywood cinema. When combined, these twin claims have an unfortunate potential for circular logic: we know what it looks like because we see it repeatedly, and we know we are seeing it because we know what it looks like.

One reason the ‘happy ending’ is an important subject is that it is common for scholars to use such unquestioned assumptions about it to mount broader generalisations about Hollywood filmmaking. Rather than attempting to demonstrate the prevalence and homogeneity of something called the
‘happy ending’, Rick Altman, for instance, moves directly from a citation of Bordwell’s proffered statistics towards the proposal that classical Hollywood narrative ‘reasons backward’, is ‘retro-fitted’, in order to ensure that all films arrive at ‘the same basic ending’ (1992: 32). Similarly, in his book Hollywood Cinema, Richard Maltby says of the relationship between Hollywood and its audiences that,

> the hidden reason Hollywood movies have happy endings [is that the] re-establishment of order renders the viewer’s experimentation with expressive behavior a matter of no consequence, contained within the safe, unexplored, unconsidered and trivialized space of entertainment. (2003: 36)

It is worth noting that both the claim about most Hollywood films sharing the ‘same basic ending’, and the statement ‘Hollywood movies have happy endings’, are treated here as agreed matters of common sense. We might imagine how persuasive Altman’s and Maltby’s arguments would appear if there did not exist an unquestioned assumption between critic and reader that Hollywood films do indeed regularly – even usually – offer something called the ‘happy ending’. Even when quite possibly exaggerated beyond reasonableness (here it is not simply that even most Hollywood films have virtually interchangeable ‘happy endings’, but that all do), so easily-mobilised are assumptions about the convention’s reputation that they can be relied upon as key components in arguments that might otherwise have little chance of convincing.

Given the types of claims we have already encountered, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover that the ‘happy ending’ has not been viewed kindly by film studies. Indeed, it has regularly been seen as representative of Hollywood’s worst tendencies.

**Ideological Conservatism**

Probably the second most common scholarly assumption about the ‘happy ending’ is that it is inherently ideologically conservative. Mentions of the convention are often accompanied by suggestions that it constitutes an ‘ideological straightjacket’ (Wood 1998: 37) designed to ‘reaffirm the status quo of American society’ (Benshoff/Griffin 2004: 28), and ‘maintain the culture of which [Hollywood films] are a part’ (Maltby 2003: 16). It is extremely surprising that there should be a paucity of research into a convention that is routinely considered not only an ‘extrinsic norm’ (Bordwell 1986: 159) but also inherently ideologically pernicious. As it stands, however, even the only
English-language monograph on cinematic endings, Richard Neupert’s *The End: Narrative and Closure in the Cinema*, though it usefully addresses numerous aspects of closure (as will be discussed in Chapter 2), says little more on the matter of the ‘happy ending’ than that it ‘has become a cliché of the classical Hollywood cinema’ (1995: 71). A recurrent underlying critical assumption should thus be becoming clear: we need not think too deeply about ‘something as obvious as Hollywood’s happy endings’ (Maltby 2003: 16).

Yet, while film studies has tended to avoid addressing the ‘happy ending’ in detail, assumptions about it have helped greatly in the construction of many highly influential theoretical paradigms – even if often tacitly. For instance: models of ‘classical narrative’ stressing ‘a process whereby problems are solved so that order may be restored to the world of the fiction’ (Cook 1999: 40); theories of Hollywood genres focused on their purported ‘methods of problem-solving based on tradition’ (Hess 1995: 55); delineations of the ‘Oedipal trajectory’ – once treated by many as the key to understanding American popular narrative – which emphasise ‘the resolution of a crisis and a movement towards social stability’ (Hayward 2006: 286). Such models have been vital to the growth of some of film studies’ most fundamental attitudes towards Hollywood movies. We might again consider how influential they would have proved if they were not undergirded by implicit assumptions about the homogeneity and prevalence of the ‘happy ending’; note, for example, the ease with which Raymond Bellour enlists the term in the service of his argument that the American cinema as a whole ‘finds itself enacting [. . .] the most classic paradigms elaborated for the subject of Western culture by Freudian psychoanalysis’ – that is: ‘the movement from the adventurer, lawless and faithless [. . .], to the husband, the future father and good citizen. In this case we have a film with a “happy ending”’ (Bellour 1979: 93).

Lying behind many such theoretical tendencies is the further presupposition that narrative ‘closure’ is in itself ideologically suspect – a view rehearsed many times in both literary and film scholarship since at least the 1960s. In literature we might point to Eco (1962), Miller (1981), MacArthur (1990), Booth (1993) or Reising (1996) for extended critiques of ‘closed’ narrative form, while in film studies we could cite Oudart (1971: 5), Wollen (1998: 111/12), Mulvey (1989: 150) or Kuhn (1994: 16) for more localised objections to the narrative device. While less overt today than it once was, the suspicion of closure on ideological grounds has had a significant legacy – one that means that, as Don Fowler balefully puts it, ‘given a simple choice of being open or closed, it is difficult for a twentieth [or twenty-first] century person to choose to be closed’ (1997: 6). It is against this intellectual backdrop that one of the only extensive studies of cinematic closure, Russell (1995), concerns itself exclusively with championing various New Wave films for ‘condemning “closure”’ (1995: 3) –
a negative process framed as ‘a practice of resistance, with aspirations toward a radical politics’ (ibid.: 2). I will address explicitly closure’s own unenviable critical reputation in Chapter 4, but for now it is enough to register that this theoretical context further ensured that the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ should fall into critical disrepute. Perhaps more surprising is that this climate did not prompt more thorough investigation into the convention, or even into film endings more broadly.8

Before we can conclude that the vast majority of Hollywood films conclude with the ‘happy ending’ – and well before we can use this assumption as a linchpin for ambitious arguments about Hollywood film as a whole – we need to know whether there is something called the ‘happy ending’ in the first place. This is one question I shall be addressing in this book.

**THE IMPLAUSIBLE ‘HAPPY ENDING’**

Tellingly, the negative reputation of the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ has also been fundamental to the only widespread critical tendency ever to have made positive claims for the convention.

In 1948 Fritz Lang wrote an article called ‘Happily Ever After’. In it, he condemns certain ‘happy endings’, yet argues that they are acceptable under certain circumstances, including in the case of one of his own films, Woman in the Window (1944). Lang here argues, specifically (and usefully), for what he calls ‘the affirmative ending, in which virtue triumphs through struggle’ (ibid.: 29). Meanwhile, by far the most famous dedicated scholarly work on the cinematic ‘happy ending’, David Bordwell’s ‘Happily Ever After, Part Two’, is a riposte of sorts to Lang. Bordwell suggests that it is ironic that the director cites Woman in the Window, since this film’s conclusion – by suddenly revealing the majority of the preceding narrative to have been a dream – is an example of what Bordwell calls the ‘unmotivated happy ending’ (1982: 6). By apparently reneging at the last minute on Hollywood cinema’s conventional reliance upon cause-and-effect plotting, generic consistency, and coherent narrative point of view, Bordwell argues ‘the unmotivated happy ending is of importance both aesthetically and ideologically’ (ibid.: 6), since it ‘puts on display the demands of social institutions (censorship, studios) which claim to act as delegates of audience desires’ (ibid.: 7). By analysing only conclusions which supposedly ‘pose problems for the happy ending’ (ibid.: 2), Bordwell implicitly suggests that its ‘motivated’ instances are, by contrast, self-explanatory. This suggestion – that this convention requires our attention primarily when it is being undermined – is extremely common in film scholarship, and may take a number of forms.

It is sometimes argued that ‘happy endings’ become acceptable if they fail
fully to resolve earlier narrative issues, meaning we should instead focus on the amount of dust the story raises along the road, [...] which [puts] up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes’ (Mulvey 1978: 54).

Equally, it may be claimed that a ‘happy ending’ includes dissonant elements which succeed in ‘undercutting, even spoiling’ the convention (Orr 1991: 384), or becoming in some other way unconvincing. This has become a ubiquitous and resilient critical category: the ‘happy ending in which the mechanics of cinema are exposed’ (Geraghty 2009: 106), the ‘pseudo–happy ending’ (Affron 1980: 51), the ‘happy ending that seems to “wink” at its viewers’ (Leonard 2007: 122), and thus ‘ironically undermines the codes of the happy ending’ (Straumann 2008: 186) – one which appears to be ‘virtual self-parody’ (Armes 1994: 75), or a ‘deus ex machina’ (Stern 1979: 95), apparently ‘tacked-on’ (Smith 1977: 1), ‘ironic’ (Grant 2007: 79) ‘unconvincing’ (Camper 1971: 61), ‘forced’ (Pollock 1977: 109), or ‘self–consciously artificial’ (Shingler/Mercer 2004: 60). As I will explore later, this critical category of ‘false happy endings’ (Harvey 2002: 186) that guarantee ‘we cannot rest secure’ (Modleski 1988: 54), or leave a ‘subterranean bitter taste’ (Žižek 1991: 9) took root early in the history of film studies, and clearly stems again from the familiar assumption that what might be considered the more typical ‘happy ending’ is both homogeneous and exceedingly prevalent. For convenience’s sake, I will be calling this model the implausible ‘happy ending’.

Claims about implausible ‘happy endings’ can serve different critical purposes. Since the ‘happy ending’ is often seen as a commercial and industrial demand, critics desiring to praise a filmmaker’s artistic integrity may invoke the implausible ‘happy ending’ to recoup what might at first seem to be an uninspiringly traditional conclusion. Robin Wood provides a stark example of this tendency when he says that ‘directors like Sirk, Ophüls and von Sternberg used various strategies of style and emphasis to produce irony: finding the happy ending a prison for the artist, they manage to suggest that it is also a prison for the characters’ (Wood 1998: 37). The model of the implausible ‘happy ending’ has since been used to defend ‘happy endings’ in the movies of many auteurs, from Preston Sturges (Durgnat 1969: 169), through Alfred Hitchcock (Sterrit 1993: 24), to Kathryn Bigelow (Schneider 2003: 87). For other critics, the implausible ‘happy ending’ has served ideological purposes. As Barbara Klinger has noted, the concept was highly useful for the development of 1970s ‘Screen theory’ as a whole (1984: 22), playing a key role in the establishment of the category of ‘the formally subversive “progressive” text’ (ibid.: 17) – an ideologically acceptable permutation of Hollywood’s ‘classic realist text’ (MacCabe 1974: 7).

That the most common approach to the ‘happy ending’ should be to point to instances in which it somehow fails is indicative of the fact that critics have preferred to construct the convention as a ‘bad object’ rather than analyse it
in depth. I do not wish to argue that there are not films in relation to which the implausible ‘happy ending’ might be a useful concept – indeed, we will encounter such films throughout this book. The category is significant, apart from anything, because it allows us to see the extent to which the negative reputation of the ‘happy ending’ controls the discourses surrounding it. However, we have not yet currently grasped the nature of the ‘happy ending’ itself anywhere near well enough to hold it as an assumed monolith that is only critically accessible when being undermined. This approach is only viable if we know there to be an existing standardised norm that it is desirable to ‘subvert’ – a claim virtually no one has yet attempted to prove. While an important topic for discussion, then, the implausible ‘happy ending’ model should not be the only critical game in town.

Despite the continual desire to refer to the concept, film studies has thus for too long been equipped with merely one or two vague, yet tenacious, assumptions to structure its dealings with the convention. Not only are these assumptions persistent but, as the preceding survey suggests, they are also pervasive. In whatever other ways theoretical approaches to Hollywood cinema differ, the ‘happy ending’ as ‘bad object’ seems one matter that virtually all can agree upon: from MacCabe’s ‘Screen theory’ to Robin Wood’s close criticism, from Tania Modleski’s psychoanalytic feminism to Kevin Brownlow’s film historicism, from Bordwell’s neo-formalism to Žižek’s neo-Lacanianism. It may be that this convention’s reputation turns out to be quite justified. My point is, however, that currently we simply cannot say, since that reputation has tended to be built upon assumption rather than demonstrated to be deserved. A major aim of this book is thus to begin a discussion about how merited the reputation of the ‘happy ending’ might be.

**Cliché or Convention?**

Before we can begin interrogating the ‘happy ending’ and its reputation, it is necessary to do some preliminary thinking about what in fact it *is*. In his aforementioned article, Fritz Lang offers the following definition:

> The traditional happy-ending story is a story of problems solved by an invincible hero, who achieved with miraculous ease all that his heart desired. It is the story of good against evil, with no possible doubt as to the outcome. Boy will get girl, the villain will get his just deserts, dreams will come true as though at the touch of a wand. (ibid.: 26/27)

I think we can see something like this description as charting a basic discursive field regularly surrounding the ‘happy ending’. A few points need to be made
about this characterisation. Clearly, the account is exaggerated: certainly not all actual ‘happy endings’ feel as effortless (‘with miraculous ease’) or inevitable (‘no possible doubt as to the outcome’) as suggested here. Relatedly, what Lang presents is a hyperbolic compression of the possible endings of many different kinds of films into one imagined ending. A conclusion in which ‘boy will get girl’ will usually occur in a romantic comedy or musical (as well as certainly cropping up, with varying degrees of reliability, in films of other genres), while the references to ‘good against evil’, and a ‘villain [who] will get his just deserts’ are far more suggestive of genres such as Westerns, thrillers, science fiction, horror, or adventure movies.

It might be objected that Lang is not in fact attempting an image of an actual ‘happy ending’, but rather a general impression of what the ‘happy ending’ represents; we might say that we know, in short, what he means. This, however, is exactly the point: that Lang should allow himself to become so hyperbolic on this subject – and that we know roughly what he means – suggests how simple, exaggerated, and pervasive the convention is routinely viewed as being. The ‘happy ending’ he sketches is not ‘traditional’, it is prototypical. Yet the assumption (which the reader is encouraged to share) seems to be that to describe the ‘happy ending’ using such overstatement and generalisation is merely to choose the appropriate rhetoric for so overstated and generalisable a convention. What is being offered here, then, is in fact the idea – or, rather, an abstracted ideal – of the ‘happy ending’, and it is this that makes the account telling.

It seems to me that a prototypical description like Lang’s is more representative of what the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ is than the conclusion of any real film could hope to be. That is to say: the ‘happy ending’ is less an actual, observable type of ending repeated again and again across Hollywood cinema than a discursive imaginary amalgam of the kinds of exaggerated images conjured up here. Rather like the way in which genres are sometimes treated, it is essentially a Platonic ideal, existing in the minds of critics, filmmakers, studios and audiences, and often exerting its influence most forcefully by what it represents as an ideal. Just as Hollywood cinema has plainly produced a great many of what we call Westerns, but never the prototypical Western, so has it produced a great many of what we call ‘happy endings’, but never the ‘happy ending’. Yet this oversimplified conception of the ‘happy ending’ is unfortunately seldom acknowledged as such, but is rather understood to be referring to an actual, existing ‘type’ of ending. This is what permits the surprisingly common critical practice of implying that almost all Hollywood films have this ending in common – references to ‘the “happy ending” of most Hollywood films’ (Hallam/Marshment 2000: 63), or simply ‘the Hollywood happy-ending convention’ (Buckland 2006: 219). Unlike the critical discourses around genre, which have often been concerned to question just such Platonic
understandings of the concept, film studies has demonstrated little interest in disabusing itself of the notion that the prototypical ‘happy ending’ not only exists, but may be virtually ubiquitous. In other words, viewed in this prototypical, Platonic form – and tied to the definite article – the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ has come to be treated absolutely as a cliché. How appropriate is this characterisation?

Stemming from the French word for a particular mechanical printing process (Haberer 2005: 1), the term ‘cliché’ has gone on to mean, for language, ‘set word-combinations which are reproduced in a form fixed once and for all’ (Permakyov 1979: 12), and for literature, ‘a hackneyed [. . .] expression whose origins and freshness of appeal have been lost through overuse’ (Myers/Wukasch 1985: 65). This overuse, however, needs to be of a particular kind; as Ruth Amossy and Terese Lyons put it, ‘clichés are clichés by virtue of a phenomenon of repetition [. . .]. Moreover, this repetition must be perceived as something purely mechanical, as parroting’ (1982: 34–5). It is important to stress the fixed and mechanistic quality of cliché, for without it the word is easily confused with other useful terms. Shira Wolosky, for instance, distinguishes between cliché and topos – a particular recurring subject or conceptual scheme: ‘a cliché [. . .] repeats something the same way. A topos repeats in different ways. It is always used distinctively. It is a building block, but one that is put to different uses from text to text’ (2001: 69–70). Another helpful term whose relation to cliché might be said to be somewhat similar to that of topos is convention. Whereas cliché serves the function of a standardised code, ‘a convention in art is not just an established rule,’ but ‘an agreement to be secured’ (Perez 2000: 21, 23). Furthermore, the nature and development of that agreement – though still predicated on repetition – can in practice be a dynamic process that produces extremely varied results; indeed, as Andrew Britton puts it, ‘artistic conventions are at the furthest possible remove from those of mathematics, and they are useful not because of their invariance, but because they conduce to the most complex particularized modifications and inflections’ (1993: 214).

As we have seen, film studies has tended to treat the ‘happy ending’ as if it almost always functioned the same ways, and meant the same things – that is: as a cliché. By contrast, I will be concerned to suggest that the ‘happy ending’ is better conceptualised, not as an unvarying cliché, but rather as an artistic convention, and that it is thus – unsurprisingly – as conducive to variation as is any other convention. At the same time, however, I will be suggesting that the seeming flaws in the Platonic model of the clichéd, unchanging ‘happy ending’ do not mean that we shouldn’t engage with this model. In fact, I believe it is necessary that we do, since that model (however misleading it may be) also exerts an extremely significant influence – over audiences and critics, but also over Hollywood films themselves (see, in particular, Chapter 3).
As common in public as in critical discourse, the characterisation of the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ as a standardised cliche has undoubtedly been helped by the fact that the history of the American cinema seems to be filled with well-rehearsed production stories about altered endings: *Baby Face* (1933), *Suspicion* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), *The Vanishing* (1993) – tales of directors, writers or source texts betrayed by additions of ‘upbeat’ conclusions. Such familiar tales help to present the process of creating cinematic conclusions as a battle between binary alternatives: ‘happy’ vs. ‘unhappy’, ‘commercial’ vs. ‘artistic’. In doing so, they have the power to make the kind of hyperbole employed by Lang appear reasonable. It sometimes seems that, given a choice between two entirely demarcated options, Hollywood will always settle upon one rather than the other. It is absolutely true that many endings will have been affected by choices of this kind, and that there will have been screenwriters, directors and producers who conceptualised the issue along precisely such lines. Yet the truth is, of course, that – whatever may go on behind the scenes – what ends up on screen never merely reflects one simple choice. One aim of this book is to draw attention to the many choices that may affect film endings beyond the bald logic of merely ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’.

**MY FOCUS AND APPROACH**

Barbara Creed brings together several strands of the scholarly view of our subject when she refers to the ‘happy ending’ ‘in which all loose ends are usually neatly tied up and the values of the status quo confirmed – the couple, family, society and the law’ (1995: 155). Rather like Lang’s list, and those scholars who imply that virtually every Hollywood film shares the ‘happy ending’ in common, Creed’s words demonstrate that the convention is often taken to refer to something simultaneously very specific and very broad. This is in part facilitated, here and elsewhere, by ensuring that the clichéd Platonic image of the ‘happy ending’ evoked by the critic collapses distinctions between possible differences between different kinds of films and kinds of endings: how many Hollywood conclusions that we might wish to call ‘happy’ can be equally concerned to neatly tie up and ‘confirm’ values associated with the couple and the family and society and the law? A few, no doubt, but very far from all. A main point to note here, however, is that there are a great many features that are regularly linked to the ‘happy ending’ – all of which deserve careful scholarly attention.

While it would be theoretically possible to try to discuss all the many sub-features so often associated with this convention, to attempt this within the space of one book would risk sacrificing the penetration of depth for the
illusion of breadth. As may already be clear, something like this mistake is far from uncommon, finding its most extreme expression in indiscriminate lists of all that this Platonic cliché called the ‘happy ending’ is imagined to contain. At this early stage in the development of critical work on this topic, a more productive approach, I argue, will be to restrict oneself to an aspect of the convention about which one can hope to be somewhat more detailed and specific. While I therefore look forward to future research on, for example, the convention of a hero defeating a villain, or the upholding of the law, this book will concern itself with one particularly famous element of what is commonly assumed to make up the ‘happy ending’: in Creed’s terms ‘the couple’, in Lang’s ‘boy will get girl’.

The assumption that the ‘happy ending’ requires a ‘united romantic couple’ (Bordwell 1986: 159), can be seen again and again throughout film studies: Benshoff and Griffin define the ‘Happy Ending’ as a ‘type of narrative closure usually found in Hollywood cinema as the protagonist […] “gets the girl”’ (2004: 325); Mellencamp economically twins the concepts via a hyphen: ‘the couple – the happy ending’ (1995: 56); Strinati refers to ‘the coming together of the male and female leads in a romantic happy ending.’ (2000: 217); Lapsley and Westlake refer to ‘the standard happy ending in which the lovers come together all set to live happily ever after’ (1992: 43). In large part because it is routinely considered so ‘standard’ a feature of ‘the cliché “happy ending”’ (Bordwell 1986: 159), the presence of the romantic couple in a film’s final moments will be my predominant focus in this book. For brevity’s sake, I will henceforth be calling this convention the ‘final couple’.

Narrowing my main focus further, I will for the most part be restricting myself to films whose narratives concern themselves to a significant extent with romantic love. One reason for this is simply that – as will become clear – the scholarship surrounding romance genres (and particularly romantic comedy) has produced noticeably more thoughtful work on the subject of ‘happy endings’ than most other strands of film studies. It thus seems fitting, apart from anything, that the first extended study of the ‘happy ending’ should collect together some of this disparate writing and draw upon its most worthwhile findings – something that focusing on depictions of romantic love allows. However, a few more words regarding my corpus and approach are required.

I will be excluding from my account films that clearly grant their romantic storyline an auxiliary function, and whose endings thus render the final couple of only secondary concern. Equally though, so as not to narrow the focus too far, in order to be suitable for analysis a film does not necessarily need to be straightforwardly a ‘romance’ per se – be it a romantic comedy, romantic melodrama, or otherwise. This allows us to consider the function of the final couple beyond narrowly genre-specific parameters (a necessary measure, given the common association of the convention with Hollywood films of all kinds),
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Whilst simultaneously not broadening our focus beyond all manageability. Whether or not a film is applicable for analysis, then, depends on how central matters of romance are to its resolution. The moment virtually any Hollywood movie introduces a potential romantic couple, narrative and ideological expectations surrounding fictional depictions of romance all but guarantee that one question in particular is likely to be raised: will these characters become and remain united by the film’s end? However, this question will assume more significance in some cases than in others. For most romantic comedies it will almost certainly be the primary or sole focus. In other movies the development of a romantic relationship will exist alongside other concerns, but still be of significant importance. The Best Years of Our Lives (1946), for instance, although concerned with the ‘social problem’ of returning veterans, relates that issue intimately to its characters’ romantic relationships. Equally, The Graduate (1967), for example, focuses on youthful alienation and ennui, but also establishes that the romance between Ben (Dustin Hoffman) and Elaine (Katharine Ross) may be importantly linked with that ennui being overcome. On the other hand, a film such as, say, Shadow of a Doubt (1943) does contain a potential, and finally united, romantic couple, but treats it as far more peripheral to the narrative and its ending than (in this case) the film’s serial killer plotline. The function of the final couple for films as comparatively unconcerned with romance as Hitchcock’s is an interesting topic in itself, but not one with which I will concern myself here.

My study will draw on many periods, with the earliest movie discussed in detail having been made in 1923, the latest in 2006. This is not, however, a history of the final couple ‘happy ending’, nor a survey of permutations it may have gone through over time. I will necessarily be taking into account the historical moments in which particular films were made and, where appropriate, will make reference to the significance of this context. Indeed, part of the reason for not confining myself to a finite period is in order to test the assumption that the final couple ‘happy ending’ is an unchanging monolith, or in other words that Hollywood narrative has ‘since its codification’, ended thus: ‘the heterosexual couple is united romantically, [...] signaling a traditional “happy ending”’ (Benshoff/Griffin 2004b: 61). While not attempting a coherent history, it is nonetheless important for my study to remain cognisant of the role historical context can play in a convention’s shifting meanings. This is partly why, as my thinking has progressed, I have become increasingly interested in the ways in which more recent films have navigated the concept, since they shoulder the greatest burden regarding the convention’s foregoing history (see, in particular, Chapter 3). However, although historical specificity will always affect the development of any convention, when it comes to the final couple it is necessary to add a few qualifications.

The act of concluding a narrative with a final couple has just as material a
historical genesis as any other artistic convention, even if its origins may be
difficult to define with certainty (while Germaine Greer has suggested that
Samuel Richardson’s 1740 novel Clarissa is ‘the real source of the marrying-
and-living-happily-ever-after myth’ [1971: 213], we can certainly trace the
outline of the convention at least back to the Ancient Greek ‘New Comedy’
[Frye 1969: 1]). This is due to nothing so much as the plainly historical nature
of conventions tout court. Yet, although not ahistorical, it is certainly true to
say that the final couple ‘happy ending’ is most undeniably old – a fact that, for
our purposes, is as important to the convention as its formation under specific
historical conditions. Consider the film Shakespeare in Love (1998), in which
one of Shakespeare’s (Joseph Fiennes) benefactors demands of him, ‘Let us
have pirates, clowns and a happy ending’ – the joke being that the convention’s
supposed stranglehold on the entertainment industry stretches back to the
sixteenth century. Interestingly, though, looking at Shakespeare’s plays them-
selves in fact confirms quite how old are precisely such assumptions about the
convention’s antiquity. The final scene of Love’s Labour’s Lost (first published
1598), for example, sees Berowne comment on the unceremonious interrup-
tion of the play’s various courtship plots by observing that ‘our wooing doth
not end like an old play; Jack hath not Jill’. Although made four hundred
years apart, both these references to the ‘happy ending’ rely upon the assump-
tion that it is equally ‘old’.

This, it seems to me, is because what is generally being referred to in invo-
cations of the final couple ‘happy ending’ tends to be less a historically-specific
phenomenon than a cross-medium version of the imagined, clichéd Platonic
ideal mentioned previously. It is important to distinguish between the conven-
tion in this abstract sense and its embodiment in any particular instance – a
distinction that will become key to this book. Quite evidently, to end a narra-
tive with a final couple on an Elizabethan stage could only ever hope to mean
something very different than to end a 90s Hollywood film in a superficially
similar manner. Yet despite this, the references in both Shakespeare in Love
and Love’s Labour’s Lost can be fairly unproblematically assumed to be refer-
ring to broadly the same (idealised) narrative convention. While its particular
execution and meaning will always be historically specific, then, it seems likely
that virtually any popular Western fiction engaging extensively with romance
– especially if we are focused on the last one hundred years or so, as in the
case of film – also necessarily finds itself in dialogue with a largely unchanged
paradigm of the final couple as a narrative event. This book will be dedicated
in part to exploring tensions arising from this relationship between the ideal
and its navigation in actual, realised cases.

One immediately obvious potential problem for this study is the quite
possibly subjective nature of the term ‘happy ending’. The issue of opinion
is never far from the surface of virtually any critical discussion, but the
matter becomes even more relevant when speaking of a term made up of two words, one of which is an adjectival description of an emotion. We must of course face the fact that, for instance, although I may be made ‘happy’ by an ending, someone else may easily not be. Could this mean, then, that the task of addressing the ‘happy ending’ would in fact be best served by, say, research into audiences? I am keen not to engage in detail, at this early stage, with the hugely complex matter of whether meaning is better conceptualised as being dictated by text, context, viewer, etc. – something which must wait until Chapter 4 to be addressed somewhat more explicitly. Research into groups of viewers’ responses to, or definitions of, ‘happy endings’ would undoubtedly produce interesting findings, but it will have to be carried out in a different book than this one. I do not at all wish to imply a hostility towards reception studies, ethnographic research, and so on; on the contrary, I will be drawing on useful findings of such work later on. However, I also agree with Judith Mayne that analysing spectatorship involves, at least in part, ‘an analysis of one’s own fascination and passion’ (2002: 84). Furthermore, I am equally of the opinion that, as Carl Plantinga argues, a ‘film’s intended affective focus can be reasonably well determined in many cases’ (2009: 11; emphasis added).

Given these twinned assumptions, throughout the book I will be making use of a similar process to that described by V. F. Perkins in ‘Must We Say What They Mean: Film Criticism and Interpretation’, wherein he explains his reason for analysing a particularly striking moment of the film *Caught* (1945): ‘the starting point for an inspection of the *Caught* fragment was a desire to figure out what it was in the moment that made me smile’ (Perkins 1990: 6). As Perkins goes on to say: ‘the evidence of feeling demands an acknowledged place in the process of interpretation’ (ibid.: 6). Yet this kind of evidence must also, as Perkins acknowledges, serve only as a ‘starting point’, a guide to judgment, which becomes valuable if practised in the context of the corresponding recommendation that ‘film criticism becomes rational, if not “objective”, when it displays and inspects the nature of its evidence and the bases of its arguments’ (Perkins 1993: 7). It is primarily with these two complementary forms of ‘evidence’ that I shall be engaging in this book.

Tackling issues raised by ‘the happy ending’ from a variety of perspectives, and divided into four chapters, my discussion is focused around four key aspects of our subject’s critical reputation: homogeneity, closure, ‘unrealism’, and ideology. Since this book is the first in-depth study of the cinematic ‘happy ending’, I believe it necessary for it to offer such a wide-ranging interrogation of these exceedingly widespread assumptions regarding the convention. The hope is that approaching the subject from multiple angles will both permit a better view of what the ‘happy ending’ can be and mean, as well as provide some alternative theoretical groundwork that may serve either to supplement, qualify or revise existing scholarly commonplaces.
Chapter 1 necessarily confronts the most basic assumption, touched on above: that there exists in Hollywood cinema something homogeneous that we can justifiably call the ‘happy ending’. My discussion here tries to construct a definition for the ‘happy ending’ – and finds the task a challenging one. To avoid possible accusations of unfairly comparing chalk with cheese, this chapter confines itself to one demarcated period and one sub-genre: the romantic melodrama between 1939 and 1950. A central aim of this discussion is to allow me subsequently to begin analysing individual ‘happy endings’ relatively free from suspicions about the convention’s innate uniformity; yet, almost as important as the many variations uncovered in this chapter are the traits that many ‘happy endings’ do seem to share, which will help guide our investigations in following chapters.

In Chapter 2 I interrogate the assumption that the ‘happy ending’ and the final couple necessarily create definitive narrative closure. Partly via a detailed discussion of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), I explore the process and implications of ending a film with a romantic beginning, arguing that while this film succeeds in making such an ending feel emphatically ‘closed’, other films (I look in detail at *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *The Graduate*) use different strategies to render the same convention comparatively ‘open’.

Chapter 3 examines the familiar assertion that the ‘happy ending’ is in some sense ‘unrealistic’. Firstly, I consider the traditionally close conceptual relationship between the final couple ‘happy ending’ and fictional narratives *tout court*, suggesting that this association has frequently motivated films (such as *Pretty Woman* [1990]) to cast doubt upon the plausibility of their own ‘happy endings’. Secondly, in part through a discussion of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), I probe the relationship of the disordered, ‘open’ nature of life to the necessarily finite and ‘closed’ nature of narrative – particularly as this matter relates to the convention of the final couple.

Chapter 4 approaches the issue of ideology and the final couple from three main angles. Firstly addressing the broad question of popular film’s potential for ideological influence, I discuss (with particular reference to *Before Sunrise* [1995]) the possibility that the cultural concept of the final couple might help structure viewers’ attitudes towards real-life romantic relationships. Secondly, I take up the question of the ideological implications of closure, particularly as they relate to the model of the implausible ‘happy ending’, made especially famous by critical work on the films of Douglas Sirk. The chapter concludes by addressing conclusions taken from different periods within romantic comedy, a genre that is often taken to be innately ‘conservative’ precisely because of its ‘happy endings’.

The films I will be analysing in detail have not usually been selected because I consider them typical, nor, for the most part, because they are somehow exceptional. Rather, they have been chosen because they dramatise certain key
features associated with the ‘happy ending’ in a particularly potent fashion, and in ways which allow us either to deepen or challenge traditional critical understandings of the convention. As such, rather than attempt an overview of what percentage of Hollywood endings seem to do certain things and what percentage do not, this book aims primarily to open up new theoretical terrain by testing the flexibility of the convention against the relative inflexibility of its reputation. I might say I wish to broaden our conception of what ‘happy endings’ clearly have the potential to do, and to explore some of the implications of that potential. While I do not in the least intend to imply that ‘happy endings’ never function in the ways they have so frequently been assumed to function, I am nevertheless keen to convince the reader that, at the very least, there is little in the convention that ensures they must always do so. Demonstrating this is the necessary first step towards a much-needed reconsideration of this most famous and maligned of conventions.

NOTES

1. The term ‘happy ending’ seems to have been present in discussions of American cinema since some of its earliest years; see, for instance, Woods’ (1910) citation of the concept in the course of making the point that critics should be concerned with ‘not what the public most unmistakably wants but what it ought to want’ (ibid.: 16); taking a contrasting view, an early screenwriting guide counsels, ‘Happy Endings Preferred’ (Sargent 1911: 613); see Bratu-Hansen (1991: 67).

2. I engage with scholarly assumptions about the ‘happy ending’ throughout this introduction and elsewhere. As for statements about the convention made by reviewers and filmmakers, we are spoilt for choice, since throughout Hollywood’s history it has been, and remains, extremely common to decry the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ on a variety of grounds. New York Times critic Mordaunt Hall, for instance, claimed in 1931 that ‘no muddle is beyond the motion picture producer when he desires to give the audiences a happy ending’ (1931: 1); reviewer Parker Tyler described the ‘happy ending’ as ‘purely conventional, formal, and often, like the charade, of an infantile logic’ (1970: 177); Fritz Lang lamented that ‘it has always been stated authoritatively by “authorities” that the motion-picture audience’s preference is for “happy endings”’ (1948: 23); the director Neil Labute more recently expressed his distaste for ‘the pat Hollywood happy ending [. . .] that big lie that they tell us over and over and that has no correlation in reality’ (O’Hagan 2001: 1), and so on. It will become clear throughout this book that there is considerable overlap between scholarly understandings of the convention and those employed outside the academy.
3. Of course, the reputation of the ‘happy ending’ is by no means confined to the cinema, and the convention’s existing critical status in other art forms doubtless laid the groundwork for the standing it would come to enjoy in film. In relation to drama, as early as 1818 Charles Lamb was using the term to criticise Nahum Tate’s notorious revision of King Lear (1818: 26), long before Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil notably mocked the convention in Happy End (1929). In fiction, we find Anthony Trollope in 1879 writing that the admiring reader of Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter momentarily ‘fears that he is again about to enjoy the satisfaction of a happy ending’ (1879: 212); meanwhile, in 1912 George Bernard Shaw famously lamented that ‘romance keeps its stock of “happy endings” to misfit all stories’ (1958: 140).

4. I think we may at least admit that, given kinds of endings regularly found in film noirs, melodramas, and ‘social problem films’ alone, the hypothesis that all classical Hollywood films share the ‘happy ending’ cannot be reasonably entertained – no matter what definition one uses.


7. Neupert’s approach to the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ seldom moves beyond the widespread assumptions that this book is dedicated to interrogating: that the convention is homogeneous (‘overly codified’ [ibid.: 35]), prevalent (‘a cliché’ [ibid.: 71]), and innately ideologically problematic (‘satisfies individual and social desires for moral authority’ [ibid.: 35]), yet potentially subversive if appearing ‘unmotivated’ (‘unmotivated happy ends [. . .] do not just make the real world more palatable by unwarranted cathartic endings, rather they foreground the artifice of narrative films’ [ibid.: 72–3]).

8. There are a few exceptions, including the aforementioned Neupert (1995) – to be addressed in Chapter 2 – though his book seldom engages the ‘happy ending’ itself (see previous note). Brylla (2004) largely concerns itself with confirming Neupert’s approach (though expands it through reference to socio–historical and reception contexts), and likewise does not address the ‘happy ending’. Russell’s Narrative Mortality (1995) establishes a self–professedly ‘idiosyncratic’ (ibid.: vii) approach to closure within various European ‘art’ cinemas, and as such does not address the concept of the ‘happy ending’ in any detail. In Italian there exists Veronesi (2005), though this study too operates generally according to very familiar assumptions about the ‘happy ending’. The recent edited collection Happy Endings and Films (2010), meanwhile, focuses exclusively on the ‘happy ending’, yet a number of its chapters still adopt the usual critical attitudes towards the convention’s homogeneity and need for subversion
(e.g. Tuhkunen [2010: 125], Ludot-Vlazak [2010: 70], Wells-Lassagne [2010: 92]). Nevertheless, the collection does contain innovative work, some of which I shall be touching on later (see Azcona [2010], Deleyto [2010], Ruiz Pardos [2010], Chauvin [2010], and Sipière [2010], plus my chapter, Does the Hollywood Happy Ending Exist?). Other individual articles on cinematic endings will be acknowledged in the course of the book, including Colwell (1981), Preis (1990), and Meyer (2008).

9. In its generalising and prescriptive nature, the conception of the ‘happy ending’ as an unchanging trope that requires subversion is indeed a perfect fit for the now near-universally abandoned category of the ‘classic realist text’ (see Wilson [1986: 192–200] for one convincing repudiation of the model in relation to film, Lodge [1990: 45–57] in relation to literature, and Britton [2009: 314–34] in relation to both). Yet, while film studies may have largely left the illusions of that model firmly behind, those surrounding the ‘happy ending’ continue unabated (see Chapter 4).

10. For academic references to these changes, see: Jacobs (1991: 80) for Baby Face, Bordwell (1982: 6) for Suspicion, Perkins (1999: 72) for The Magnificent Ambersons, Gibson (2006: 1) for Breakfast at Tiffany’s, and Leitch (2002: 57) for The Vanishing.


12. Acknowledgment must be given here to Carol Clover, who coined the term ‘Final Girl’ to refer to the heroine of the slasher film: a female character who survives the killer’s rampage, often dispatching him. While stemming from very different generic traditions, there are ways in which the conventions of the Final Girl and the final couple are suggestively related. (1) Referring to endings in its wording, the Final Girl also implies, in its own way, a type of ‘happy ending’: the killer’s threat eliminated or temporarily overcome, an indomitable character may go on living her life. (2) Just as we will usually be able to predict with certainty the putative outcome of a slasher film by quickly recognising who will likely become its Final Girl (1992: 39), so in most cases will we know in advance which characters will make up a final couple. This fact can have a similar significance for the hermeneutic drive of narratives in each genre; I will explore this in relation to closure in romantic comedy in Chapter 2.

13. For similar pronouncements about the convention’s uniformity across history, see also Burch (1990: 196), Gianos (1998: 4); Dowd/Pallotta (2000: 568), etc.

American Smart Cinema

by Claire Perkins

A Sample From: CHAPTER 1

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In 1999, screenwriter and film producer James Schamus delivered the keynote address at the Independent Spirit Awards in California, an event honouring achievement in the West Coast independent film scene. Subsequently reprinted with the title ‘A Rant’ in the collection, *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties*, Schamus’ address traced some of the consequences of what he saw as the gradual absorption of the independent filmmaking sector into the commercial system. Citing the exponential increase in the total box office monies earned by independent films over the previous thirteen years, and, further, the massive increase in the percentage of these returns that ultimately went back to the major studios, Schamus was at once applauding and lamenting the fact that films recognised at events like the Spirit Awards had overwhelmingly succeeded in breaking into the major system of commercial exploitation and finance. While positively attributing the increased production and visibility of films with ‘something to say’ to the enormous growth in the major media empires, Schamus also voiced a common concern that these empires would ultimately threaten the existence of such films. Schamus was here arguing for the preservation of what he saw as a tangible ‘civic space’ where ‘freedom of speech [was] the exercise of a fundamental right and not a privilege purchased with the promise of profit’ (2001: 256).

In the years since Schamus’ address, critical interest in the effect that he described has steadily developed into a range of differing contextualisations of contemporary American ‘commercial/independent’ filmmaking. Peter Biskind’s *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent*
AMERICAN SMART CINEMA

Film (2004), Sharon Waxman’s Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System (2006) and James Mottram’s The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood (2006) all take a specific interest in the simultaneously critical and popular success of directors including Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Paul Thomas Anderson, Spike Jonze, Sofia Coppola, Wes Anderson, Alexander Payne and David O. Russell. It is clear even from the titles of these works that the authors foreground the appearance of the hybrid field as a triumphant event. The cycle can be understood in more emergent terms by looking at the varying ways in which it is ‘named’ and described in other works: in Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider’s Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon (2002), Geoff King’s American Independent Cinema (2005), Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt’s Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream (2005), Jesse Fox Mayshark’s Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film (2007) and King’s Indiewood USA (2009).

All of these books signal the late twentieth century and early twenty-first as a site of cultural transition in American cinema. In Schamus’ evaluation, independent film is characterised as being in decline: the structural forces of media conglomeration mean the only transition being witnessed is from properly ‘independent’ film to properly ‘commercial’ film. For other commentators, this historical period is a site of genuine transition: the pure quality of certain systems may wane, but only to give way to new and different possibilities. Where the upshot of Schamus’ purist argument tends to be a critical search for ‘true’ independence based upon economic and/or thematic criteria, other positions frame commercial/independent cinema in terms of the dialogue that these films set up between their two terms.

This book approaches the field by way of the notion of ‘smart’ cinema, as a tendency that acknowledges the porosity of this dialogue. Coined by Jeffrey Sconce as a ‘sensibility’ at work in a disparate but ideologically sympathetic group of films that ‘are almost invariably placed by marketers, critics and audiences in symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of mainstream, commercial, Hollywood cinema’, the ‘smart’ quality exists ‘at the symbolic and material intersection of “Hollywood”, the “indie” scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call “art” films’ (2002: 351). Basing his analysis of smart cinema on the premise that these films mostly eschew the formal experimentation that typifies previous forms of ‘indie’ and ‘art’ cinema, Sconce’s take on the commercial/independent field consciously excludes the ‘underground’ work of directors such as Harmony Korine and John Waters. Delineating the smart sensibility as a nineties trend, Sconce instead focuses on a polished group of films that experiment by way of tone. Drawing on the comments of some LA film critics that lamented the release of Happiness (Todd
Solondz, 1998), Your Friends and Neighbors (Neil LaBute, 1998) and Very Bad Things (Peter Berg, 1998) as evidence of a ‘pointlessly and simplistically grim’ trend in American filmmaking, the smart sensibility is broadly characterised in terms of a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism and relativism that has many variations:

the arch emotional nihilism of Solondz in Storytelling (2001), Happiness and Welcome to the Dollhouse (1995), and of LaBute in Your Friends and Neighbors and In the Company of Men (1997); Alexander Payne’s ‘blank’ political satires Election (1999) and Citizen Ruth (1996); Hal Hartley’s postmodern screwball comedies The Unbelievable Truth (1990), Trust (1991) and Henry Fool (1998); post-Pulp Fiction black comedies of violence such as Very Bad Things, Go (Doug Liman, 1999) and 2 Days in the Valley (John Herzfeld, 1996); Wes Anderson’s bittersweet Bottle Rocket (1994), Rushmore (1998) and The Royal Tenenbaums (2001); P.T. Anderson’s operatic odes to the San Fernando valley Magnolia (1998) and Boogie Nights (1997); the ‘cold’ melodramas of The Ice Storm (Ang Lee, 1997), The Sweet Hereafter (Atom Egoyan, Canada, 1997) and Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995); and the ‘matter-of-fact’ surrealism of Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999) and Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001). (350)
This study aims to take the tendency named by Sconce and describe its function as a critical sensibility within contemporary American commercial/independent cinema. In seeking to make these films and the cycle itself intelligible in new ways, it aims to mobilise the sense of ineffability implied in Sconce’s use of the term ‘sensibility’ and illuminate how the smart film performs the contradictions at the heart of the notions of genre and genrification. In distinction to the dominant characterisation of the commercial/independent field as an industrial phenomenon, this book takes up the notion of the smart sensibility as a way of addressing some of these films at the level of their critical aesthetics. In line with a conceptualisation of smart cinema’s connection to both historical and international intertexts, this approach aims to demonstrate the idea not as a fixed type but as an affective force.

THE SMART TENDENCY

When set against the larger group of films and directors attended to across all the studies mentioned, Sconce’s group of films immediately indicates how the notion of smart cinema performs issues relating to genre. For Rick Altman, one hypothesis regarding the genrification process is that a genre remains a ‘cycle’ until it is consecrated by industry-wide recognition (1999: 82). It could be argued that the commercial/independent cycle as a whole is in the process of being consecrated in this way by the types of works cited here. Within this process, the smart film is perhaps best understood as a nebulous tendency. As something like ‘pre-genres’, both ‘cycle’ and ‘tendency’ prove Altman’s proposition that genre ‘is not permanently located in any single place, but may depend at different times on radically differing criteria’ (86). These films can be linked on the basis of characteristics pertaining to industry and production, textual properties and audience reception. As will be discussed further in Chapter 2, the works by Biskind, Waxman and Mottram favour an industrial approach that is broadly concerned with the studio system’s accommodation of innovative new American filmmaking via the establishment of ‘mini-major’ arms such as (Disney’s) Miramax, (Universal’s) Focus Features and (Fox Filmed Entertainment’s) Fox Searchlight (Mottram 2006: xxix). By contrast, and under the broader rubric of ‘American independent cinema’, an approach such as Geoff King’s skews textual, linking Magnolia and Short Cuts (Robert Altman, 1993) by way of their multi-strand narrative design, Bottle Rocket and Lost Highway (David Lynch, 1997) on account of the (varyingly) ‘quirky’ effects created by the use of a wide-angle lens, Happiness and Trust for their incongruous mixing of comic and non-comic modalities, and Safe and Spanking the Monkey (David O. Russell, 1994) in terms of their metaphorical ‘sense of queering’ (2005: 238–9).

An approach that favours issues of audience reception in its constitution
of the commercial/independent cycle is best articulated in the article from which the term itself is derived: R. Barton Palmer’s 1988 piece ‘Blood Simple: Defining the Commercial/Independent Text’. Here, Palmer suggests that the term ‘independent’ has, throughout the history of the American cinema, been used to characterise two forms of film practice: that which is unwillingly marginalised by market forces, and that which deliberately seeks the ground of creative freedom (1988: 5). Palmer classifies the first type of ‘independents’ as those who struggle to make and distribute commercial films outside of the established procedures of ‘doing business’, and the second as those who exploit their marginal position to create texts that resolutely avoid being converted into objects of exchange. Palmer draws on the Coen brothers’ first feature Blood Simple (1985) to describe how independent filmmakers will often negotiate between these two notions of independence to create ‘a text that appeals,complexly and simultaneously, to both’ (6). By attending to a number of reviewers’ reactions to Blood Simple, Palmer delineates the commercial/independent text ‘not only as a semiotic structure, but as a special form of cultural production/consumption’. In an effect partly attributable to its textual appropriation of film noir as both a conventional Hollywood film type and an important element in discourse about Hollywood films, Palmer suggests that Blood Simple ‘issues a successful, multi-levelled call to be read’ by advertising both the cinematic sophistication and commercial knowledgeable of its makers (8).

Sconce evokes this reception-based model of commercial/independence by noting the typical exhibition forum for the smart films he identifies, admitting that they may ‘have little more in common than their shared target market of younger, more educated, “bohemian” audiences who frequent the artplexes now central to every European and North American city’ (2002: 351). Further, he uses the deliberately vague term ‘sensibility’ to indicate his reliance upon the ideas of ‘tone’ in narrative poetics and ‘structure of feeling’ in cultural theory. Both these notions are determined by a certain ineffability that means their objects cannot be reduced to finite stylistic or sociological terms but, rather, are ‘only fully realised within a narrow historical moment’ (352). Naming smart cinema as a ‘sensibility’ thus opens the way for Sconce to consider both ‘the sociocultural formation informing the circulation of these films (a “smart” set) and a shared set of stylistic and thematic practices (a “smart” aesthetic)’.

Central to this analysis of smart cinema is the idea that these practices are informed by a strategy of ironic disengagement. Smart cinema is an example of a type of ironic art that is the result of ‘a coalition of cultural producers and consumers who find this to be the most compelling voice through which to intervene in the contemporary cultural, artistic or political terrain’ (353). Naming the tendency as ‘drama born of ironic distance’, Sconce finds this
sociocultural position expressed in a shared set of stylistic, narrative and thematic elements that are employed in differing configurations by individual films:

1) the cultivation of ‘blank’ style and incongruous narration; 2) a fascination with ‘synchronicity’ as a principle of narrative organization; 3) a related thematic interest in random fate; 4) a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. (358)

While for the most part indicating the smart film’s reliance on classical narrative strategies, these elements also express a common tone that is mobilised as a means of critiquing bourgeois taste and culture. The move can be contextualised historically, politically and generationally. As Sconce characterises it, ‘American smart cinema has displaced the more activist emphasis on the “social politics” of power, institutions, representations and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its “political” wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the “personal politics” of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture’ (352).

**Generation X**

As the cultural category of youth that Sconce notes many of the directors at the heart of the smart cinema debates were born into, this displacement from ‘social’ to ‘personal’ accords with a number of the central tenets of Generation X. For cultural theorist Tara Brabazon, this generation is the first ‘post youth’ culture, where the 1980s represents a fundamental break in the narrative of ‘revolutionary potential’ advanced by the events and ideas of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (2005: 11). In the popular imagination, the story of Generation X relies on the idea that the youth of the 1980s and 90s made no political or cultural statement comparable to the Jazz of the 1920s, the Beats of the 1950s, or the ‘Protest’ generation of the 1960s. Against these ‘active’ and ‘authentic’ moments, Generation X is located as an atomised, introspective culture, aiming for the political outcome of ‘consciousness – not class struggle’ (11). In early interpretations, the attitude is cast in overtly negative terms, with Generation X described as apathetic consumers whose contribution as twenty-somethings was to sneer at or quote from that which preceded and surrounded them. As Jonathon Oake has noted, such coverage sought to define the character of Generation X in a ‘quasi-anthropological approach’ (2004: 84). Focused largely within the pages of American news magazines, observations that this
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youth culture had ‘few heroes, no anthems, no style to call their own’ (Scott 1990: 56) became the prevailing evaluation of a generation perceived to be over-educated, under-employed, and over-invested in popular culture.

In other, later commentaries, the orientation toward ‘consciousness’ and ‘revelation’ is presented in more rounded terms through attention to the social, cultural and economic factors impacting upon the youth of the 1980s and 90s. Demographer Tamara Erickson gives a good summary of these aspects in her career-oriented book What’s Next, Generation X? – tracing a cycle of events including economic stagnation, adult unemployment, the Challenger disaster, the rise of Microsoft and MTV, the birth of the first test-tube baby, advances in women’s and gay rights, and a spike in divorce and abortion rates (2010: 3–20). With a pragmatic agenda, Erickson draws out what she sees as the positive consequences of these experiences, making a case for the resourceful, self-reliant, divergent and tolerant character of Generation X. In this analysis, the popular charge of apathy is cast as an attitude of scepticism that is skilful in its ability to see through political and institutional rhetoric that channels traditional values concerning power, morality and success.

Historically focused media analyses of Generation X foreground this constructively sceptical attitude as an element central to the representation of its youth. In The Cinema of Generation X, Peter Hanson observes how the forces of social change that characterised the period in which Generation X grew up, especially the ‘anticlimactic’ conclusion and aftermath of the Vietnam War, occurred such that ‘even the youngest Gen Xers were born too late to participate in the historical social unrest that reaches its twilight in the mid-1970s, so all Gen Xers grew up in the aftermath of a beautiful but unrealized dream’ (2002: 9). With this observation, Hanson contests the simplification of the Generation X mentality as one of negativity and indifference, demonstrating how the disenfranchised ‘slacker’ stereotype is rooted not in (pseudo) existentialism but in cynicism, frustration, uncertainty and paralysis. He demonstrates his point in analyses of several of the best-known Generation X films, showing in one interpretation how Richard Linklater’s treatment of the Jesse character in Before Sunrise (1995) – played by Ethan Hawke whose performance in Reality Bites (Ben Stiller, 1994) made him the popular face of Gen X apathy – elevates slackerdom to poetry: ‘the combination of the brevity of Jesse’s affair with Céline, their over-intellectualized discourse, and the hesitancy that they both exhibit about becoming grown-ups brands the characters as youths on the verge of joining a society they don’t understand’ (67).

In these historical approaches to Generation X, the logic of a ‘post youth’ culture with no insurgent agenda is found in the drifting characters of films that resonate closely with smart cinema: Slacker (Richard Linklater, 1991), sex, lies and videotape (Steven Soderbergh, 1989), Clerks (Kevin Smith, 1994), Kids (Larry Clark, 1995), My Own Private Idaho (Gus van Sant, 1991) and Natural
Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994). Such films are approached as portraits of alienated, exploitative lives which – in the face of a disappointing youth economy – are leading nowhere (Erickson 2010: 13). The pervasive force of media as a dimension that has surrounded this generation its entire life is interpreted as one factor contributing to a conversant, sceptical outlook. In film and cultural studies approaches, the place and function of media is considered differently. For theorists such as Brabazon, media literacy is not a characteristic of Generation X identity; Generation X is itself a constructed and mediated category. The force of media means that popular culture creates the sensibility, rather than offering a ‘statement’ of the ‘authentic baby buster mentalitae’ (2005: 19). Oake extends the point when he says that ‘the term Generation X designates not an authentic subculture that pre-exists its media representations but an identity that is always already performed within mediated space’ (2004: 85). In this way, he argues, ‘cinema was singularly influential in the production and dissemination of the idea of Generation X’.

**Post Youth**

It is in line with this perspective that smart cinema accords historically with a generational position. The films that will be discussed in the chapters that follow are not obviously ‘portraits’ of a disaffected youth culture, but their common situations and character types inform – and are informed by – the mediated sensibility of Generation X as a category conceptualised in terms of social changes of the 1970s, 80s and 90s. In many smart films, the resonance with the ideas popularised by the take-up of films such as those listed above is strong. The diverse examinations of identity and dysfunction foreground characters whose atomised existence within their home, work and social environments give rise to an overwhelmingly sceptical outlook. The recurrent interest in morally provocative issues around sexuality and violence can be read in terms of what Hanson calls the ‘fuzzy parameters of the new morality’ that Generation X were born into after Vietnam, Watergate and the civil-rights conflicts of the 1960s and 70s (2002: 9). The highly intertextual nature of the films demonstrates a comprehensive ease and familiarity with both ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture as points of reference. And – perhaps most persuasively – the signature blankness of the smart film is a compelling illustration of a generation with ‘nothing’ to say.

As Sconce’s observation on smart cinema’s fundamental shift from social to personal politics makes clear, though, the broader accordance that this mode of filmmaking demonstrates with generational politics lies in its concentration on the emotional problems of white, middle-class society. Central to this focus is the smart film’s articulation of situations and conflicts stemming from the rapid reconceptualisation of ageing and life cycles in Western culture in
the years in which Generation X was born and grew up. As the ‘baby buster’ label proves, the perspective that this generation holds on the passage of life is fundamentally different to that of its parents and predecessors. For Brabazon, this distinction is the key outcome of other aspects of social and economic change that impacted upon young people in the 1980s and 90s. As she writes, ‘this group first confronted post-Fordism, underemployment and media(ted) identity. The desire to impose 1960s life paths and trajectories – of birth, school, marriage, family, death – over all of society was becoming inadequate, inappropriate and politically misguided’ (2005: 20). ‘Post youth’ is here understood as a term that can describe Generation X not only in their departure from traditional youth activity such as protest, but in their transcendence of the categories of a traditional life cycle that proceeds smoothly from youth to adulthood. In the face of rising unemployment and divorce rates, and falling birth rates, the markers of adulthood were transforming as this generation grew up. The ‘drifting’ character of Generation X is thus cast as a particularly unclassifiable quality: ‘without steady employment, a mortgage and family responsibilities (post)youth never made it into adulthood as defined by the standards of preceding decades’ (Brabazon 2005: 11).

Many commentaries on media representations of Generation X find that these changing conceptions of adulthood are illustrated in film and television images of eternal adolescents with ‘families’ of friends – in the sitcoms *thirtysomething* (1987–91) and *Friends* (1994–2004), and in *Reality Bites* (Cameron Crowe, 1992) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996). Other critics look beyond such representations to identify images that signal the transformation of youth and ageing more broadly. Oake, for instance, suggests that the ‘first inklings’ of Generation X on-screen came with the changing representations of children in the 1980s and 1990s, where films like *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990) and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (John Hughes, 1986) pit savvy kids against dim-witted authority figures who are metonymically associated with the world of ‘grown-ups’. As Oake observes, ‘it is implicit here that youth is not understood as a primarily developmental or biological concept but as a social formation that stands in resistance toward grown-up society’ (2004: 85).

Smart cinema takes an overwhelming interest in this concept of youth as a socially inscribed category. While many of the most enduring images of the cycle as elaborated in this study do depict Generation X-age characters in search of their place in the world – the three adult Tenenbaum children in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, the naïve Barry Egan (Adam Sandler) in *Punch Drunk Love* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2002), the young graduates of *The Last Days of Disco* (Whit Stillman, 1998), the brothers in pursuit of their father in *Simple Men* (Hal Hartley, 1993) – the films as a group are all more broadly interested in the passage of life as lived in a culture where ‘adulthood’ is not
automatically achieved with age. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, this is represented in varying ways across the cycle: in the squabbling adult siblings of Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach’s family dramas, the disillusioned professionals of Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) and The Safety of Objects (Rose Troche, 2001), and the uncannily mature attitudes and desires of the teenagers in Rushmore, Election and Palindromes (Todd Solondz, 2004). The strongest sense of this generational shift in smart cinema, though, lies in its overall impression of damaged individuals, whose dysfunction is rooted in a general lack of ‘adult’ perspective. Within the cycle’s central concern with the context of the family, this state is – in turn – implicitly linked to a host of forces traditionally associated with childhood and youth: namely to those family relationships, experiences and patterns of behaviour that impact on personal development. In this way, smart cinema is a post youth cinema insofar as it accords with Brabazon’s observation that ‘youth is not a halfway house between childhood and adulthood . . . adults do not cannibalize their past, nor do they arrive at the age of twenty five as an ideological clean skin’ (2005: 13).

Therapy Culture

Situating smart cinema in this way emphasises how the cycle can be historically contextualised in terms of another key cultural development that was occurring as this generation of directors grew up. The smart film’s focus on the psychological state of middle-class America resonates closely with the tendency in contemporary culture to make sense of the world through the prism of emotion. Conceptualising this tendency as a ‘therapeutic turn’ traceable to the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, sociologists such as Christopher Lasch, Eva Moskowitz and Frank Furedi show that the vocabulary of therapies has infiltrated politics, popular culture, and work and school contexts such that ‘terms like stress, anxiety, addiction, compulsion, trauma, negative emotions, healing, syndrome, mid-life crisis or counselling refer to the normal episodes of daily life’ (Furedi 2004: 1). For these theorists, ‘therapy culture’ does not represent a particular interest in therapy as a clinical technique, but the cultural phenomenon where the form of thinking that characterises the relationship between individual and therapist becomes an instrument for shaping public perception on a variety of issues and social institutions. Furedi argues that this perspective constitutes a distinct view on the nature of human beings, whereby a person’s emotional state is regarded as a problematic condition that defines their identity (2004: 22). By making the dysfunction of middle-class individuals and families a central narrative focus, the smart film strongly reflects this perspective. The ‘therapeutic turn’ thus provides a broad cultural frame for smart cinema’s own shift in politics.

Sociological attention to the rise of therapy culture contextualises its
development in terms of other changes in modern Anglo-American society. For Moskowitz, ‘the story of the therapeutic gospel is the story of modern America. Its history is intimately bound up with the major developments of the twentieth century – the rise of the welfare state, the transformation of the public and private realms, the emergence of the military-industrial complex, and the increasing influence of television in American culture’ (2001: 6). Many commentaries cast the shift to the interior as a moral problem, seeing that the singular focus on private life and an objective of self-realisation overwhelms attention to the larger public good by fostering the impression that the two are continuous. Furedi understands that the boundaries between public and private have been redrawn in a manner particularly relevant to the institution of the family. He identifies how the disapproval of the right to privacy that lies at the heart of the new emotionalism – where ‘self’ help typically implies helping oneself through external support and the public display of emotion – gives rise to a climate that is deeply suspicious about private behaviour.

At one level this creates a culturally derisive outlook on attitudes of stoicism and self-restraint, which are likely to be interpreted as repression. At a second, related level it creates strong pressure to open the private sphere up to public scrutiny. Amplifying and focusing the broad influence of psychoanalysis on modern Western culture, the contemporary therapeutic imagination is ‘haunted by the belief that damage to the emotions is systematically inflicted on the individual within the family and during the course of day-to-day interpersonal relations’ (Furedi 2004: 66). With this focus, these sociological analyses dispel the myth that therapeutic logic promotes closeness and connection between individuals, showing instead that it crystallises patterns of individualisation and fragmentation by stigmatising relations of dependence. Furedi argues that the main accomplishment of therapeutic culture is this disorganisation of the private sphere, where the site that was once perceived as inviolate is now typically associated with repression, family violence and toxic relationships (2004: 68).

In this way, Furedi argues that the contemporary concern with the self is underpinned by anxiety and hesitation. Where a theorist like Moskowitz focuses on therapy culture as the ‘worship of the psyche’ that grounds contemporary Western society’s belief in the centrality of self-esteem and happiness, Furedi concludes that it has constructed a diminished, emotionally deficit self with a permanent sense of vulnerability (2001: 21). It is arguably this sense of self that underpins the characters and situations of smart cinema. It is something indicated directly in casual references to therapeutic contact – in Roger Greenberg’s (Ben Stiller) descriptions of advice received in the past from various therapists in Greenberg (Noah Baumbach, 2009), or Wendy Savage’s (Laura Linney) awkward joke in The Savages (Tamara Jenkins, 2007) that she sometimes takes the medication – Xanax – that is advertised on the pen of the
administrator who is admitting her father to a nursing home. For the most part, though, the films are not interested in dramatising the specific issues and treatment that arise from this collective vulnerability. Instead, they share a concern with figures whose limitations are (ostensibly) amenable to therapeutic intervention. Characters are – often hyperbolically – depressed, repressed, anxious, addicted, phobic, narcissistic, dissociative, regressive and emotionally detached, and the cycle is in this way an effective fictional, cinematic expression of the genre of writing that Joyce Carol Oates once termed ‘pathography’ for its focus on ‘dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pitfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct’ (Oates 1988).

As will be discussed from various perspectives in Chapters 2, 3 and 5, it is the family that is largely represented as the source and site of these vulnerabilities. The figures of parents, siblings and other relatives are presented directly or implicitly as forces with enormous capacity to inflict emotional distress through attitudes of detachment, self-absorption, jealousy, tactlessness and derision. At a formal level, the family milieu itself is a force that expresses aversion by impacting significantly on character and narrative actualisation: from the monumental histories that curtail character maturity in Anderson’s films (The Royal Tenenbaums, The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou [2004], The Darjeeling Limited [2007]), to the anomic and repression that give rise to obsession, violence and absurdity in the suburban smart film (The Safety of Objects, Donnie Darko, The Chumscrubber [Arie Posin, 2005]), to the open depiction of ‘toxic’ patterns of influence between spouses, parents and children, and siblings (Happiness, Your Friends and Neighbors, Margot at the Wedding [Noah Baumbach, 2007]). In this way the concern with the transmuted categories of youth and adulthood in smart cinema expresses itself in terms of the vulnerabilities and aversions that anchor the notion of contemporary therapeutic culture. What this contextualisation makes clear is that the shift toward the ‘personal’ in the cycle is a move with thoroughly ‘social’ reflections and effects.

Irony’s Edge

For Sconce, the socio-cultural effects of smart cinema are achieved at the level of tone. As described above, he identifies the method by which the cycle critiques bourgeois taste and culture in the specific terms of irony: ‘central to my analysis of the ‘structure of feeling’ informing this cinema and its audience . . . is the idea that irony, beyond existing as some ineffable cultural condition, is also a strategic gesture’ (2002: 352). In this way, Sconce is primarily interested in Generation X in terms of its connection to a sensibility that bifurcates audiences into those who ‘get it’ and those who don’t. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu,
he describes this strategy as a form of ‘position-taking’ by way of which the smart film distinguishes itself in relation to a larger aesthetic and cultural field of production. As the product of directors born as late boomers or part of Generation X proper, Sconce thus classifies smart cinema as an expression of a generational shift in taste and prestige, and of the attendant tensions between older and younger cultural producers and critics.

Irony is here understood as a ‘semiotic chasm’ dividing a ‘structure of feeling that sees everything, from Scooby Doo to paedophilia, in giant quotation marks’ from ‘a structure of feeling . . . that still looks for art to equal sincerity, positivity, commitment, action and responsibility’ (358). Where critics such as Kenneth Turan perceive moral and political apathy in the trend and lament a time when audiences were given more than ‘the horrific choice of getting things dark or getting them dumb’ (Turan 1998), Sconce champions the ironic tone of the smart film as evidence of a transition in political cinema. In a careful extrapolation of the ‘slacker’ philosophy, he argues that the blank aesthetic should be read not as a disengagement from belief and commitment, but as a retreat from the ‘moral map’ of the social formation that judges ironic art as an illegitimate practice. Sconce thus identifies the smart film’s semiotic intervention as a comment on ‘the futility of pure politics or absolute morality’ (2002: 368).

This book builds upon the observations made by Sconce to consider how the tone of smart cinema is achieved and the effects it gives rise to. Specifically, it is interested in how the phenomena of reference, quotation and blankness defines the sensibility not in terms of empty disaffection, but in terms of a strategic positioning in relation to the history of cinema and popular culture. Irony is investigated as a mark of distinction that classifies the smart sensibility as something that is not reducible to story, style or authorial disposition alone, foregrounding how the ‘mark’ of any generic sensibility is constructed discursively, as the perception of shareable elements appearing in differing assemblages.

If the notion of genre is conceived as a limit or law by which one recognises membership in a class, Jacques Derrida argues that the condition for the possibility of this law is the a priori of a counter-law (1992: 225). If a text or event is identified as belonging to a certain class on the basis of a set of identifiable traits or marks, then this counter-law is the re-mark that the text makes on the distinctive trait within itself. Derrida’s argument on genre rests on the understanding that this supplementary mark does not itself pertain to any genre or class and that, therefore, genre-designations cannot be part of the corpus that they designate. As such, he formulates the hypothesis that a text would not belong to any genre: every text participates in one or more genres, but the mark by which it indicates this participation ‘unmarks’ it. The counter-law of genre gathers together the corpus but simultaneously keeps it from closing,
thus both including and excluding it from an identifiable class. Derrida calls
this inclusion and exclusion the \textit{genre-clause}: ‘a clause stating at once the
juridical utterance, the designation that makes precedent and law-text, but also
the closure, the closing that excludes itself from what it includes’ (231).

Derrida’s argument can elucidate the particular quality and potential of
the smart sensibility. In Sconce’s proposal, the ‘smart’ designation is a way of
marking out a group of tonally similar films. At the same time, though, his very
reliance on tone as a structuring element is a form of unmarking. By character-
ising ‘smartness’ in terms of a quality that is necessarily ineffable – and dou-
bling this by characterising the tone itself in terms of the elusive notion of \textit{irony}
– Sconce effectively identifies the smart sensibility as a condition that cannot be
identified with itself. Individual films ‘participate’ in this class discursively, and
this placement is itself qualified by a shareable element that is highly unstable.
Derrida’s comments on the specific forms that the ‘remark of belonging’ may
take are also instructive. The smart sensibility is characterised in terms of irony
and reflexivity on the basis of the films’ awareness of film history and their own
place as cultural objects. As Chapters 1 and 3 will describe in detail, one of the
distinctive \textit{marks} of the smart film is the reflective stance it takes toward genre
and authorship as classificatory discourses conditioned by semantic and syn-
tactic laws. In this sense, the perceivable marks of genre or authorship in these
films are also always re-marks on the designation that delineates membership
in a generic or auteurist canon. This effect is an explicit thematisation of the
‘remark of belonging’ that prevents the smart film from fully identifying with
the discourse(s) to which it ‘belongs’.

A specific effect that this book seeks to describe, then, is how this ‘remark
of belonging’ is enacted in the smart cycle. The concept has obvious resonance
with the techniques of pastiche and quotation that are central to a postmodern
aesthetic that distrusts ultimate positions of truth or reason. The chapters aim
not to rehearse this position, though, but to describe how the smart film – as a
particular tendency within the commercial/independent field – might compi-
lcate such a designation. By examining how smart cinema recognises the contin-
gency of its own terms as grounded in discourses such as authorship, classical
narrative and genre, the book seeks to demonstrate the power of ironic expres-
sion as a positioning statement. It addresses what Linda Hutcheon describes as
irony’s ‘edge’: the affective dimension by which irony acts as a contextualising
force that brings discourses into conflict. Hutcheon understands ironic art as a
\textit{perlocutionary} act that may create a distance from the discourse that it quotes,
but that necessarily generates its own utterance in doing so. Rather than
characterising irony as a detached position, she describes how its charge or
‘cutting edge’ produces a speaking position that is conditioned by relations of
power. With a particular focus on the ethical implications of irony as a mode
of presentation that \textit{repeats} the discourse it ironises, she thus emphasises how
the strategy has a discursive range of functions – from benign reinforcement to provocative aggregation – that are intuited differently in each interpretation (1995: 45). As such, Hutcheon concludes that the communicative space set up by irony is highly unstable, or even dangerous.\(^5\)

Where Hutcheon is for the most part interested in the negative force of irony’s power of repetition, the chapters that follow seek to describe some of the positive, aesthetic consequences that might arise in the process of quotation or ‘remarking’. At one level this description acknowledges that the films oppose the traditions and practices that preceded them. Sconce, for example, cites the often hostile reaction that many of the smart directors had to film school as an experience opposing that of the ‘movie brats’ and, more explicitly, defines the narrative structure of the smart film as a direct departure from the European derived paradigm of art cinema, describing a shift from ‘the modernist protagonist’s search for meaning to the postmodern ensemble “fucked by fate”’ (2002: 363). At another level, the study describes the stance taken toward these and other cinematic traditions in terms that are less oppositional, acknowledging how the smart film’s tendency to ‘stage’ traditions may put these discourses at a distance, but also works to keep them in place. The films in which the smart sensibility can be perceived rely upon tonal detachment as a way of demonstrating their recognition of their own contingency. Beyond this, though, they also demonstrate their awareness of this recognition as their own utterance, and therefore of the contradiction at the heart of an ironic position. The following chapters aim to demonstrate how, rather than withdrawing from what it says, the smart film acknowledges the dual force of ironic expression.

When the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are drawn upon, it is in an attempt to describe the multiple effects and relations that this utterance gives rise to. Deleuze criticises irony for its movement of ‘ascent’ toward a unified principle or position of judgement. His poststructuralist philosophy is founded upon a rejection of the ironic logic that understands language as a system for representing the truth of a world that lies outside of it. Ideas, for Deleuze, do not exist above life as ideal forms but come from life as a flow of forces and desires. By abolishing the logic of height and depth, Deleuze conceives of Ideas as ‘multiplicities’, where ‘multiplicity must not designate a combination of the many and the one, but rather an organisation belonging to the many as such, which has no need whatsoever of unity in order to form a system’ (2004: 230). All of Deleuze’s concepts – including irony itself – are founded upon multiplicity in this way: ‘it is, perhaps, ironic to say that everything is multiplicity, even the one, even the many. However, irony itself is a multiplicity – or rather, the art of multiplicities: the art of grasping the Ideas and the problems they incarnate in things, and of grasping things as incarnations, as cases of solution for the problems of Ideas.’ Against a pragmatic
conception of irony as direct withdrawal, it is the multiplicity and creativity of Deleuze’s ‘superior irony’ that this book seeks to mobilise in its discussion of the smart sensibility. It approaches the ‘remark’ of the smart film not as an expression of judgement or disengagement but as a pluralising, affective force.

American Smart Cinema

The book is divided into five chapters, each of which seeks to describe the sensibility of the smart film as a site of competing meanings from the perspective of one defining aspect – authorship, narrative, melodrama, music and suburbia. Importantly, the films discussed here are not intended to form a definitive group. A consequence of understanding smart cinema as something in which films ‘participate without membership’ is that the designation ‘smart’ can never be exact. Some of the films considered here come from Sconce’s original group and some have appeared either after or alongside the films in that group. All demonstrate some evidence of the smart aesthetic in combinations that give rise to a formally and thematically self-conscious tone. As suggested above, though, this tone is principally understood not as a semantic end in itself but as evidence of the conflicted stance these films take toward cinema history. As such, each chapter discusses smart cinema in terms of the address it makes to a particular cinematic tradition or discourse. The films considered are designed not to define but to demonstrate the sensibility, and ultimately to suggest where else it may be perceived.

The first chapter explores where smart cinema might fit in contemporary debates around film authorship. Books such as those by Mottram, Mayshark and Waxman all focus on commercial/independent filmmaking as a field of contemporary American auteurs. This chapter considers how the directors’ awareness of this discursive construction manifests in the films themselves. Drawing on the trilogy form as an important prop in the construction of historical auteur cinema, it considers how serialisation is formalised in the films of ‘adjunct’ smart directors Whit Stillman and Hal Hartley as a way of staging an auteur vision. A similarly dissimulative effect is then identified in the films of the auteurist ‘unit’ of Charlie Kaufman, Spike Jonze and Michel Gondry: Being John Malkovich, Human Nature (Michel Gondry, 2001), Adaptation (Spike Jonze, 2002) and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004). This latter section addresses how, in smart cinema as a type, the specific serialised forms of Stillman and Hartley open onto a broader self-consciousness around issues of synchronicity and repetition. This chapter seeks to provide an argument against the classification of these films as evidence of a contemporary climate of ‘eclectic irony’ (Collins 1993: 242) that puts itself at a remove from discourses of genre and authorship. Instead, it approaches the self-reflexive quality of films by Stillman, Hartley and
Kaufman as an *interrogation* of this climate: as a site of negotiation between ironic and sincere assertions that at once continues and narrates the tradition of auteurism.

Chapter 2 takes up Sconce’s claim that smart cinema re-embraces classical narrative strategies by examining the structure of family dramas including *The Squid and the Whale* (Noah Baumbach, 2007), *Palindromes* and *The Safety of Objects* in relation to the models of classical and New Hollywood. These two narrative modes are approached by way of the *action-image* defined by Deleuze in *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. The concern with issues of serialisation established in Chapter 1 is continued here in a discussion that posits smart cinema as a ‘sequel’ to the New Hollywood movement of 1967–75. Building on the links already established between New Hollywood and the contemporary commercial/independent field by Biskind and Mottram, the chapter argues that the *crisis* of action identified in the former era by both Deleuze and Thomas Elsaesser reappears in an inverted narrative format in the smart film. Linking smart cinema’s own distortion of the classical three-part model (Situation, Action, Modified Situation) to the force of the ‘toxic’ family relations described above, this section describes how the episodic structure of the films transforms American film form by promoting an anti-causal conception of life as a random, continuing series of events.

The third chapter sustains this thematic focus to describe how the smart film can be read to take a revisionist stance toward the classical Hollywood genre of the domestic melodrama. Wes Anderson’s ‘augmented’ family forms are discussed for the way that they rework both the narrative formula and tonal address of the ‘aristocratic’ variation of the family melodrama. Here, the ‘blank’ style of the smart film is referred back to the stylistic ironies found in the films of Douglas Sirk and, beyond that, to earlier examples of tableau presentation as a mode where ‘telling’ is subordinated to ‘showing’. This chapter is concerned to specifically address the tensions that arise in smart cinema between self-conscious cultural knowledge and affect. By identifying these different scopic regimes in the address of smart film, it seeks to characterise the typical blankness of the sensibility in terms of a notion of critical pathos.

Chapter 4 examines the role that music plays in inflecting certain commercial/independent films with this melodramatic sensibility. This chapter discusses the peculiar ‘musicality’ of many smart films as a quality that exceeds the classical functions of popular music in film. In place of strategies of emotional expression and narrative commentary, evidence of a ‘music-image’ is identified in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and in *Magnolia, Simple Men* and Terry Zwigoff’s *Ghost World* (2001). Music is mobilised in these films as an excessive element that unbalances narrative flow by emphasising the plasticity of the image, but simultaneously re-directs the film itself into moments of revelation. This
Chapter describes how, bounded by their pop songs, these set-pieces mediate the cinephiliac discourse of ‘privileged moments’ in figural models in which affect is at once felt and qualified. This pluralising effect is described through reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s work on music, where it is suggested that the force of the music-image is to transform the individuated structures internal to both image and song.

Chapter 5 turns once more to the narrative situation of smart cinema as drama couched in the minutiae of everyday family life. The identification of the ‘suburban smart film’ sub-cycle allows this final section to consider the wider cultural concerns of the smart sensibility by examining the position that it generates in relation to the literary and cinematic tradition of utopia/dystopia. Many of the films referenced in this book articulate the popular myth of suburbia as a typically inverted utopia: a depersonalised world that, extrapolated from consumer capital, is dominated by attitudes of despair, anxiety and violence. With reference to Happiness, Your Friends and Neighbors, Magnolia, The Safety of Objects and The Chumscrubber, this chapter describes the suburban smart film as a specific anti-utopian type concerned with the exposition of social fact. The implicitly conservative nature of this position is then challenged in a discussion of Donnie Darko. As a suburban smart science-fiction film, Kelly’s feature mobilises a discourse on becoming that can be understood to animate a properly utopian dialectic. Donnie Darko harnesses all the conditions attended to in the study to demonstrate a radical smart film that indicates where the sensibility can be taken, and what it can do.

By seeking to release the notion of smart cinema from a fixed textual type to a constellation of forces and affects, this book necessarily implies that the sensibility can be felt in texts other than those addressed here. This project focuses closely on a small group of films in which a pluralising tone and a thematic concern with the family is particularly emphatic. While attending for the most part to Tamara Jenkins’ film The Savages (2007) as a production in which the smart treatment of both aspects is crystallised, the Conclusion to the study also indicates how the sensibility might be felt in television texts. The rise of American post-network television has magnified the medium’s perennial concern with the family in programs where a cinematic mode of address that favours its own type of blank performance and stylisation is evident. In this way, programs like Arrested Development (2003–6), The Sopranos (1999–2007), Six Feet Under (2001–5), Weeds (2005–) and Big Love (2006–) demonstrate a certain degree of overlap between the genre of ‘quality TV’ and smart cinema at the levels of both form and theme. Although a detailed consideration of this correlation is beyond the scope of this project, the comparison is drawn to indicate where further research may turn in a search for ongoing evidence of the smart sensibility.
Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of these industry developments see Justin Wyatt’s ‘The Formation of the “Major Independent” – Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood’. Warner Bros’ own specialty division – Warner Independent Pictures – closed in May 2008. One news report attributes the closure to the fact that Warner was ‘too late to the game . . . by the time Warner Independent was founded in 2003, every other major studio had already established a specialty division’ (Barnes 2008).

2. King’s American Independent Cinema is especially valuable for its broad contextualisation of the independent field in terms of the historical avant-garde, the 1980s independent movement and individual filmmakers including Mark Rappaport and John McNaughton.

3. This is a task left to the emergent ‘treatment genre’ of television as demonstrated in ‘quality’ series such as In Treatment (2008–), Tell Me You Love Me (2007), Huff (2004–6) and – in a comedic vein – Head Case (2007–9).

4. King presents a similar contextualisation in Indiewood: USA when he draws on Bourdieu to identify how the ‘distinction’ of Indiewood cinema is partially constructed by techniques of niche-marketing: ‘by choosing to view specialty rather than mainstream films . . . consumers are associating themselves (consciously or unconsciously) with a particular socio-cultural domain based on varying degrees of differentiation from mainstream cinema, culture and society’ (King 2009: 12).

5. This conception of irony is taken up as an aesthetic and political strategy in Hutcheon’s specific work on postmodernism: A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction and The Politics of Postmodernism.
Hollywood’s Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and American Independent Cinema

by Yannis Tzioumakis

A Sample From: CHAPTER 1
Introduction

THE COMPLICATIONS OF ‘INDEPENDENCE’

Arguably the most defining, and at the same time controversial, characteristic of independent film as a category of filmmaking within the context of US cinema is that it has existed historically both outside the Hollywood film industry and within it. On the one hand, there have been commercial feature film productions that were financed, produced, distributed and exhibited away from the major film studios (in all their incarnations) and their subsidiary companies and divisions, which have firmly controlled American cinema since the 1910s. On the other hand, there have also been countless feature films in which one or more aspects of their finance, production and distribution history took place outside the Hollywood studios, and therefore also claimed the label ‘independent’, even though other aspects were determined by a wide array of arrangements with the dominant players in the Hollywood industry, to the extent that the label ‘independent’ has often been strongly questioned. In this respect, filmmakers, film critics, film scholars, the trade press – all the institutions that are authorised to contribute to the definitions of American independent cinema – have always been aware of this distinction and therefore have utilised the label ‘independence’ with provisos. Indeed, they have habitually talked about ‘independence within the industry’, ‘true independence’, ‘semi-independence’ and, more recently, ‘indie’ and ‘indiewood’ filmmaking.

This seemingly fundamental distinction in the field of US independent filmmaking becomes even more complicated when one moves beyond questions of industrial location and examines questions of aesthetics and of political and ideological disposition, which, according to Geoff King, constitute the three key points of orientation in any effort to define independent film. While a large number of films made outside the Hollywood industry avoid utilising the formal strategies associated with Hollywood films and embrace political
views firmly removed from the dominant ideological positions that have tra-
ditionally been represented in Hollywood films (individualism, capitalism,
patriarchy, racism and so on), other ‘genuinely independent’ films make no
effort to engage with alternative aesthetic practices or ideological standpoints.
For instance, films produced and distributed by independent companies for
the substantial Christian audience or for narrower religious market niches
are normally characterised by simplistic narratives and conservative political
values that always tend to support the status quo. Conversely, despite being
made within the boundaries of the industry and often with resources provided
directly by the majors, a number of ‘independent’ films have made radical
aesthetic choices and assumed alternative political perspectives, even though
certain key principles that have been a staple of American cinema, such as
representation and narrative, remained untouched. For example, a film like
Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989), which was financed and distributed by
Universal, expresses a clear anger towards American society about the predica-
ment of black people, while also utilising two distinct visual styles and sounds
that highlight the incompatibility of the assimilationist and separatist political
positions that historically have driven race politics in the US.

Not surprisingly, these complications have resulted in intense disagree-
ments among filmmakers, critics, scholars, the press and the cinema-going
public about the criteria according to which one could define independent
filmmaking in the US. This disagreement took place primarily within the
context of a distinct body of independent film production and distribution
that sprang up in the late 1970s / early 1980s and, arguably, continues to date.
Often labelled as ‘contemporary American independent cinema’, this body of
work was perceived from the beginning as a ‘movement’, and as a concerted
effort to create a sustained alternative paradigm to Hollywood cinema. As
such, it was expected to support alternative aesthetic, cultural and political
ideologies (in other words, to exist outside the Hollywood film industry and
its players), and, importantly, to exclude in the process all other forms of
independent filmmaking that had points of contact with Hollywood and its
practices. This view can be seen clearly in Annette Insdorf’s scene-setting
account of the early years of contemporary US independent cinema. Writing
for *American Film* in 1981, she argued that what distinguished then-current
releases, such as *Northern Lights* (J. Hanson and R. Nilsson, 1981 [1978]),
*Heartland* (R. Pearce, 1980) and *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (J. Sayles, 1980) –
all films financed, produced and distributed away from the Hollywood studios
– were:

- casting, pace, cinematic style and social and moral vision. Countering big
  stars with fresh faces, big deals with intimate canvasses and big studios
  with regional authenticity, these filmmakers treat[ed] inherently American
concerns with a primarily European style. Geographically rooted directors resisted Hollywood’s priorities and potential absorption.9

These films, Insdorf continued, were also separate from other independent productions that mobilised conventions and characteristics associated with Hollywood practices. For instance, despite being produced and distributed by companies other than the majors, films by directors such as George Romero, John Carpenter, Tobe Hooper and David Cronenberg demonstrate a propensity for ‘Grand Guignol, violence and sex’ and therefore were in a position to attract (and they did attract) ‘commercial money’.10

The type of film that Insdorf highlighted as a representative example of contemporary American independent cinema, and which the independent film companies themselves dubbed as ‘quality film’ to convey ‘the requisite upscale tone without precluding substantial commercial success’,11 was quickly confirmed as the dominant expression of independent filmmaking in the 1980s. This resulted in the production and distribution outside the major studios of many canonical titles such as *Chan is Missing* (W. Wang, 1982), *El Norte* (G. Nava, 1983), *Stranger than Paradise* (J. Jarmusch, 1984), *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* (H. Babenco, 1985) and *She’s Gotta Have It* (S. Lee, 1986). With early titles such as *Return of the Secaucus Seven* registering over $2 million at the US box office, *My Dinner with André* (L. Malle, 1981) grossing $1.9 million, and *Chan is Missing* recording $1 million against extremely low budget and advertising costs,12 this type of filmmaking seemed to have a solid commercial basis from which it could expand and become a sustained alternative to Hollywood.

The commercial success not only of these films but also of many world cinema arthouse titles, which were also handled in the US theatrical market primarily by the same stand-alone distributors that released many of the independently produced titles mentioned above (New Yorker Films, the Samuel Goldwyn Company, New World Pictures, First Run Features, Pickman Films and many others), inevitably attracted the attention of the major studios to these, until recently marginal, markets. The first company to stake its claim was United Artists. After rebranding an existing generic division, specialising in non-theatrical releases of films from the company’s huge library of titles, as a theatrical distributor for ‘special markets’,13 United Artists Classics became the first studio division to compete against those independent distributors. Its ‘special markets’ consisted of the foreign arthouse and homegrown independent film markets, as well as the film reissue market, which in the pre-video era had also proved to be a significant contributor of revenues for the division.

The entry of United Artists (and almost immediately afterwards, Columbia, Twentieth Century Fox and Universal) into the US independent film market was met with mixed reactions. For independent producers, their arrival in the sector was great news, as it meant the presence of several new theatrical
distributors who could acquire their product. Furthermore, and compared to the existing independent distributors whose buying and marketing power was limited, the studio divisions had the backing of vast, diversified conglomerates and had established relationships with exhibitors and access to a national distribution network (should a film prove a crossover success), which potentially made for a more commercially promising distribution process. Finally, a distribution contract with one of these companies could also mean a film’s exploitation in the nascent cable and home video markets (and therefore better remuneration for the producer and/or filmmaker), even though these deals were still rare for independent or arthouse films in the early 1980s.

For the stand-alone distributors, however, the studios’ excursion into the ‘special markets’ was certainly undesirable. After more than a decade of controlling the arthouse market and competing only against each other, stand-alone distributors suddenly found themselves in a position where they had to compete with companies that had the financial backing of entertainment corporations and access to their resources. With a number of key arthouse and independent producers and filmmakers keen to try the studio divisions in an effort to secure the best possible deal for their films, independent distributors started facing cut-throat competition, especially for the most commercially promising titles. For instance, as Ira Deutchman, Head of Distribution and Marketing at Cinecom between 1982 and 1990, and before that one of the key creative executives at United Artists Classics (1981 to 1982), admitted, Cinecom bid for many of the early US independent films, such as Lianna (J. Sayles, 1983) and Streamers (R. Altman, 1983), but lost them to UA Classics.14

Irrespective of whether one adopts the perspective of the independent producers or the distributors, what is clear is that, right from the very beginning of the American independent cinema movement of the early 1980s, there was a group of films that had direct links with the major studios. Films like Streamers and Lianna might have been financed and produced outside the industry, but they were acquired and distributed in the theatres by the classics divisions of the main studios. This meant that their ‘independence’ was necessarily reconfigured from one ‘outside’ Hollywood to one ‘within’ it.

This initial blurring of lines in terms of what constitutes independent film in contemporary American cinema, caused by the studio divisions’ entry into the independent film market, was, arguably, a continuation of a well-established trend that had made its presence felt for over a decade before critics started talking about contemporary American independent cinema in the early 1980s. The trend involved the habitual acquisition and distribution of genre and exploitation films by the majority of the stand-alone companies, which, in the 1980s, became part of the institutional apparatus that supported the type of ‘alternative’ independent filmmaking that Insdorf identified in her article. For instance, Pickman Films, which distributed one of the key early examples
of contemporary American independent cinema, Richard Pearce’s *Heartland*, had also distributed (as Levitt–Pickman) *Death Game* (P. S. Traynor, 1977), a thriller characterised by the elements of ‘Grand Guignol, violence and sex’ that contributors to the definition of independent cinema in the 1980s wanted excised from the canon. Levitt–Pickman also distributed the blaxploitation film *Super Spook* (Anthony B. Major, 1975) and the softcore feature *Gymslip Lovers* (J.-P. Scardino, 1975), while also releasing the Merchant Ivory production *The Europeans* (J. Ivory, 1979), another ‘quality’ title. This trend, of course, reveals yet again the pitfalls involved in efforts towards defining independent cinema. If it is not considered problematic for those early definitions of contemporary American independent cinema that stand-alone distributors were in the business of distributing exploitation films alongside their ‘quality’ independent titles, then why should the majors’ entry into the independent film market be objected to? After all, it seems that both the studios and the independents were in the business of releasing primarily ‘commercial’ titles before ‘quality films’ started showing clear signs of commercial success.

The complications of what constitutes independent filmmaking took a new and decisive turn later in the decade, when both studio divisions and successful stand-alone companies branched out into film production. Such arrangements in the ‘quality’ independent sector remained rare, especially for the 1980s classics divisions, which participated in the finance of only a handful of productions (such as *Under the Volcano* [J. Huston, 1985; Universal Classics]), and often in partnership with other investors (*End of the Line* [J. Russell, 1987; Orion Classics]);

nevertheless, they signalled the beginning of an American independent cinema that was also financed, produced and distributed by companies with corporate ties to the Hollywood majors. And if the affinities with Hollywood of a film by Orion Classics could be questioned, given that that division’s parent company was a successful stand-alone producer–distributor itself and not a major studio or a branch of an entertainment conglomerate,

*Under the Volcano* stands as an interesting example of why the classics divisions have been treated with suspicion as ambassadors of independent film. As I discuss in Chapter 2, despite being nurtured and overseen by Universal Classics, the film was produced during a change of management regime in the division and was later ‘taken over’ by big sister Universal, which was responsible for its release.

These complications are even more noticeable in the 1990s and 2000s, when ‘quality’ independent cinema reached great heights in terms of popularisation and commercial success. As a result, it became progressively more difficult for critics to discern markers of independence, especially within the Hollywood industry. For accounts of American independent cinema of the 1980s, however, these complications were largely ignored by critics and scholars, for a number of reasons. First, the extent to which United Artists Classics and the
rest of the 1980s classics divisions traded in US independent film was relatively low and the number of their film releases of such designation was small. Specifically, the five classics divisions that are discussed in the first three chapters of this study distributed approximately twenty US independent features in total in the 1980s, with Orion Classics releasing a few more in the 1990s. In this respect, complications around a definition of the independent label, which had arisen because of the involvement of these divisions in the independent sector, were not deemed noteworthy.

Second, the role of these early divisions in the finance, production and distribution of those twenty or so independent films has not been examined in any detail by studies of the independent cinema of the period (despite critical interest in some of their titles). In fact, with the exception of Off-Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films, which offers a detailed examination of the role of the classics divisions in three of these US independent film productions, the rest of the studies make only passing reference to these divisions. But even the welcome detail of Off-Hollywood raises no questions about those divisions’ position in the independent sector or about the nature of their relationship with their respective parent organisation and mainstream cinema. Commissioned by the Sundance Film Institute and the Independent Feature Project, and written by industry executives and consultants, this study focused on the history of a set of films with the intention of acting as an ‘educational tool for filmmakers, producers and professionals’ and without the kind of critical perspective that characterises more scholarly works.

Third, and as an extension to the above point, critics and scholars have failed to register a more general interest in these studio divisions as an industry phenomenon. Arguably, the main reason behind this lack of interest has to do with the fact that, for the majority of researchers, the main focus of American independent cinema has been what was labelled in retrospect the ‘Sundance–Miramax era’, a period in the history of contemporary American independent cinema that commenced with the astonishing success of sex, lies, and videotape (S. Soderbergh, 1989). Indeed, despite great activity in the independent film sector throughout the 1980s, book-length studies in the field (all of which were published post-1990) tend to concentrate on more recent independent filmmaking. In this respect, the period before that time has often been perceived as a sort of ‘prehistory’ of independent cinema, before filmmakers like Soderbergh, Tarantino and Linklater, and companies like Miramax, Fox Searchlight and Focus Features wrote (and some are still writing) its ‘history’. Finally, with the exception of Orion Classics, all the other 1980s classics divisions were short-lived companies that lasted between three and five years, which contributed further to perceptions that they were ‘insignificant’ forces in the shaping of contemporary American independent cinema.

The neglect in terms of a critical examination of the first classics divisions
has been largely responsible for a common misconception. Specifically, it allowed the cultivation of a widespread belief in critical and academic circles that contemporary American independent cinema in the 1980s, before the sex, lies, and videotape ‘revolution’ and the emergence of the ‘Sundance–Miramax era’, was easy (or perhaps easier, compared to later periods) to discern and define, at least when it came to questions of industrial location: it was situated outside the Hollywood studios. And yet, the ‘complications’ I described above, and which I discuss in detail in Section I (Chapters 1 to 3), tell a different story. Additionally, many practices associated with the better-known studio divisions of the 1990s and 2000s and their relationship to independent cinema also had their origins in the 1980s and in the approaches to US independent filmmaking taken by the first wave of classics divisions.

‘INDEPENDENT’, ‘INDIE’ AND ‘INDIEWOOD’

In 1990, stand-alone distributor New Line Cinema, which had found significant commercial success in the 1980s with the Nightmare on Elm Street horror franchise and was enjoying its most profitable year following the runaway success of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (S. Barron, 1990), established the first new specialty division in seven years, Fine Line Features. Unlike the earlier divisions, Fine Line set out to focus on ‘specialised, hard-to-market films’, albeit ones with ‘more crossover potential than classics-oriented films’. This meant an almost exclusive emphasis on English-language films, with the lion’s share coming from the booming US independent film sector. Furthermore, some of these films would have much higher budgets compared to the low-budget pictures of the previous decade. As Ira Deutchman, Fine Line’s first senior executive, admitted, his vision for the company was to concentrate on American films that:

normally would have been the studios’ types of films if you went back 10 years, but were not getting those kinds of releases any more. And the people who I had in my mind were directors like Jonathan Demme and people who at that time were working with Orion. Not Orion Classics, but Orion. And Orion was actually on the rocks at that point . . . and I just kept thinking that was the kind of thing that would really interest me, getting to the next level of slightly more commercially oriented movies but films that were not big-audience types of films . . . At that time, nobody was really doing those kind of mid-level films.22

Although Fine Line was involved in only a handful of films like the ones Deutchman describes above – most notably My Own Private Idaho (G. Van
Sant, 1991), *The Player* (R. Altman, 1992) and *Short Cuts* (R. Altman, 1993) – what becomes evident in this phase of American independent cinema is the emergence of a particular type of film that often has only a few points of contact with the ‘quality’ independent films of the 1980s. Indeed, while Miramax, Fine Line and a number of other distributors (and producer–distributors) continued, in the first half of the 1990s, to release low-budget US films that often had difficult subject matter or utilised unusual formal codes, they also ensured that many of these titles were also characterised by a number of commercial elements that could be exploited by these companies’ marketing departments. These elements included but were not limited to:

- the presence of recognisable stars, even if stardom was meaningful only within a narrow demographic (the rebranded Matt Dillon in *Drugstore Cowboy* [G. Van Sant, 1989]; James Spader in *sex, lies, and videotape*)
- the use of much stronger generic frameworks than the films of 1980s, which would allow the distributor to sell the movie as a genre picture (the use of obvious con artist and film noir frameworks in *The Grifters* [S. Frears, 1990]; the heist movie in *Reservoir Dogs* [Q. Tarantino, 1992])
- an emphasis on well-defined niche audiences, such as African Americans (*A Rage in Harlem* [B. Duke, 1991])
- the deployment of authorship, once several filmmakers started gaining critical and audience recognition (Hal Hartley, Quentin Tarantino and so on).

More controversially, arguably, the main point of departure for the post-1989 independent film was the inclusion of the themes of sex and / or violence, suspenseful plots and all sorts of other commercial ‘content’ elements that were treated as anathema in the quality independent films of the previous era. However, in including these elements, the independents of the 1990s did not try to replicate the aesthetics of Romero, Carpenter or Cronenberg. Instead, the elements were reconfigured within a package of hip, filmmaker-driven, quality cinema upon which the industry, the press and the film–going public almost immediately agreed to impress the label ‘indie’, the ‘hip offspring’ of independence, as Alisa Perren put it.23

Despite this dramatic transformation of independent films on a textual level, the key players in the early years of the 1990s were Miramax and Fine Line, both companies without corporate ties to a Hollywood major. These were followed by smaller independent outfits, such as the Samuel Goldwyn Company and October Films, and Orion Classics, the only 1980s classics arm to have survived to the ‘indie era’, which was also a division of a company with no corporate links to a major studio. In this respect, questions of industrial location seemed still to provide relatively clear answers about who practised independent filmmaking, despite the fact that the actual independent product
had started reaching out towards Hollywood in other obvious (that is, commercial) ways. Furthermore, both Fine Line and the independent companies it competed against did not hesitate to invest in finance and production, especially as this practice would allow them to control the commercial elements of their films more fully and right from the beginning.

In this climate, the Hollywood majors started once again to warm to the idea of establishing specialty film divisions. Within a two-year period, Sony (which had taken over Columbia in 1989) started Sony Pictures Classics in 1992; Turner Broadcasting System (TBS), a cable broadcaster, took over New Line Cinema (and Fine Line) in 1994; and perhaps more importantly, Disney took over market leader Miramax in 1993. Besides complicating anew questions of how to define the ‘independent filmmaking’ label, these corporate moves highlighted a number of differences in the ways in which this second wave of classics divisions were conceived of by their parent companies, which reflect the polyphonic character of US indie cinema at the time. For instance, unlike Fine Line Features, Sony Pictures Classics retained substantial points of contact with the classics arms of the 1980s, including a focus on world arthouse cinema; a slow and cautious system of platform release that was supported by frugal spending in terms of marketing; and a much larger number of releases (compared to the earlier classics divisions and Fine Line) that emphasised profits from distribution volume rather than from one big hit that could offset losses from the rest of the releases. Furthermore, Sony’s division was managed by the trio of executives that had previously been running Orion Classics, which suggests very clear continuity with that particular company. And yet, despite all these points of contact, Sony Pictures Classics released a much higher number of US independent films than Orion Classics, becoming one of the most important suppliers of films of that designation; twenty-five such releases appeared in the first seven years of operations, including such canonical titles as Safe (T. Haynes, 1995), Living in Oblivion (T. DiCillo, 1995) and Welcome to the Dollhouse (T. Solondz, 1996).

While Fine Line’s ‘relocation’ in TBS did not affect its status or philosophy in any substantial way, Miramax’s takeover by Disney had far-reaching repercussions. Specifically, the Hollywood major provided its new subsidiary with serious funding and resources, which helped it accelerate an aggressive growth plan that had already been in place before the takeover, and which had helped the company distinguish itself in both the American indie cinema and the world arthouse film markets. This plan included a large annual release schedule, which by 1992 had reached over twenty titles (the highest number of titles of all other divisions and independents in the market); an increasing emphasis on finance and production; a well-executed plan for film acquisitions from the world’s most important festivals; two specialty labels within the company – one for genre pictures (Dimension Films) and one for higher
quality productions, in the 1980s mould (Prestige); and extremely aggressive marketing practices that always ensured maximum visibility for Miramax titles. With Disney’s financial backing, Miramax’s domination of these markets reached such an extent that, by the mid-1990s and only a couple of years after the takeover, it had become incredibly difficult to justify the ‘specialty division’ label that all other studio divisions were carrying. This was also because Miramax had adopted practices that created yet another expression of independent filmmaking, which has been labelled ‘indiewood’. This mode of filmmaking had very few similarities with the quality independent cinema of the 1980s, and in many ways enhanced several of the characteristics associated with indie cinema while also depending on increasingly large budgets.

The progenitor of this move to indiewood was *Pulp Fiction* (Q. Tarantino, 1994), a film that, according to Jim Hillier, ‘repositioned the goalposts of American cinema blurring the boundary between mainstream Hollywood product and the independent fringe’.

Indeed, with the exception of addressing primarily a niche audience, *Pulp Fiction* played up all the other characteristics of ‘indie’ cinema: stars (much more ‘household names’ than the norm at the time); genre (very clearly stated in its title and the suggestive pose of Uma Thurman in the poster for the film); authorship (at the time, Tarantino was emerging as one of the most celebrated young filmmakers, firmly associated with independent cinema and Miramax); and, of course, the inclusion of sex and often extreme violence in the several interconnected storylines that comprise the film. Equally importantly, *Pulp Fiction* was distributed using mass release methods, strongly associated with the practices of the Hollywood majors, as the independent distributors (and the rest of the studio labels at that time) could not afford to spend on a nationwide marketing campaign.

This enhanced ‘convergence’ with Hollywood – complete with box-office grosses on a level also associated with studio films – signalled a further wave of classics divisions that took place progressively during the decade between 1995 and 2005. Twentieth Century Fox, Paramount, Universal and Warner Bros. took their places next to Disney and Columbia through the establishment of Fox Searchlight, Paramount Classics (later Paramount Vantage), Universal Classics (later Focus Features), Warner Independent and Picturehouse (a second Warner label that was instigated by Warner’s major divisions HBO and New Line Cinema, and which replaced Fine Line in 2005), respectively. By that time, of course, the label ‘classics’, which carried connotations of films targeting narrow markets and niche audiences, had become dated. With the exception of Paramount Classics, which a few years later was also rebranded as a non-classics division, all the new studio arms opted for names that did not utilise the classics label. Additionally, with the exception of Warner Independent, none of these new companies’ names specified a marketing identity clearly associated with independent filmmaking. Finally, these divi-
sions were accompanied by several new stand-alone companies and subsidiar-
ies of other entertainment corporations that bore little resemblance to older
independent distributors such as October Films and the Samuel Goldwyn
Company. Backed by investors and hedge funds from around the world,
producer–distributors such as Lions Gate (later Lionsgate), USA Films,
Artisan, Newmarket Films and a few others were well-capitalised companies
in a position to compete for the most commercial properties in the acquisitions
market, while also producing their own commercially strong titles.

This particular environment, which started taking shape in the late 1990s,
seemingly had very few points of contact with the independent fi lm sector of
the previous decade. On the level of industrial location, all major studios had
now established subsidiaries to acquire, produce and distribute fi lms for this
expanding and reconfigured ‘independent’ sector. Furthermore, and more
controversially, some of the major studios themselves ‘experimented’ with the
finance, production and distribution of a small number of fi lms that seemed
to share a large number of characteristics with the key titles handled by their
divisions. According to Geoff King, a number of fi lms that were released in
1999, including Three Kings (D. O. Russell; Warner Bros.), Election (A. Payne;
Paramount) and Fight Club (D. Fincher; Twentieth Century Fox), were prime
examples of ‘indiewood’ as practised by the Hollywood majors. And while
low-budget quality and less obviously commercial ‘indie’ fi lms continued to
be acquired, produced and distributed both by stand-alone distributors and
by the studio divisions, these titles found it increasingly diffi cult to compete
against the more clearly indiewood titles for playdates, marketing support,
critical notice and, more importantly, audience attention. This was especially
the case as the existence of so many new distributors had started clogging the
available release dates to the extent that numerous fi lms from the independent
sector were often put out on the same date.

On the level of aesthetics, the dominant indiewood mode of fi lmmaking
bridged conventions associated with Hollywood fi lms with an extensive array
of stylistic, narrative and thematic approaches that were originally developed
in diff erent cinematic traditions (exploitation, art cinema, earlier expressions
of independent cinema and so on) and which, according to King, functioned
as ‘markers of “distinction” designed to appeal to more particular, niche
audience constituencies’. This allowed for the production of a number of
fi lms that could cross over more easily to the mainstream, compared to other
categories of independent fi lmmaking, as they would normally be more acces-
sible in terms of narrative construction, visual style and / or thematic preoc-
cupation. As a result, and a few years after the Pulp Fiction phenomenon, the
sector saw an increasing number of $100 million hit fi lms, including Good Will
Hunting (G. Van Sant, 1997; Miramax), Shakespeare in Love (J. Madden, 1998;
Miramax), Traffic (S. Soderbergh, 2000; USA Films) and, more recently,
Inglourious Basterds (Q. Tarantino, 2008; the Weinstein Company) and Juno (J. Reitman, 2007; Fox Searchlight). Equally, on an ideological level, indiewood films often engaged with alternative political ideas (anti-corporate capitalism in Fight Club) or conveyed clearly pessimistic messages (the futility of action in the war against drugs in Traffic); however, these alternative views were often buried under the films’ slick production values, star cast, genre expectations and high-quality entertainment.

FROM INDEPENDENT TO SPECIALTY FILM

At some point in the long voyage from the ‘European-style’ independent films of the 1980s to the indiewood blockbusters of the late 1990s and 2000s, from the quality films of the pre-Sundance–Miramax era to the infinitely more commercial films of the third wave of the studios’ specialty divisions, the notion of ‘independence’ as a real alternative to Hollywood cinema lost both its appeal and its exegetic power. Although politically and aesthetically daring independent films continued to be made and released outside and within the industry, filmmakers, critics and audiences simply stopped being interested in their status as independent films. In recent research on the ways Internet Movie Database users discuss the films in the IMDb Top 50 independent film chart, which consists of the fifty highest-rated films ‘not produced by a major studio’ (the Big Six and MGM / UA in this case), Hayley Trowbridge notes that, in 350 reviews of these films by the users of the database, only 1.4 per cent mention the word ‘independent’ as a useful way to discuss the films in question. Instead, labels such as ‘original’ (10.3 per cent), ‘complex’ (7.1 per cent), ‘beautiful’ (6.8 per cent), ‘intelligent’ (6 per cent) and a few others take precedence, suggesting that the ‘independent’ label is of very little significance to the specific online film-fan community that uses this high-web-presence film database.28

The reasons for this decline in interest in the concept of ‘independence’ are varied. First, despite a long history of independent filmmaking in the US, film critics and scholars turned their attention to the subject only from the 1980s onwards, when the body of work that became known as ‘contemporary American independent cinema’ emerged.29 This, of course, meant that the definitions that were provided and the agenda that was set were very much determined by the cultural and political landscape of the time. With the New Right having become a major force in American culture and politics by 1978 and with a ‘new conservative spirit’ permeating many aspects of American popular culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including Hollywood cinema,30 it was clear that independent film was perceived as a vehicle for the articulation of progressive and even radical ideas. It was expected that it would be ‘anything
Hollywood was not’ and engage with issues and concerns that Hollywood films would eschew. However, when this conservative cycle reached its end in the early 1990s with the election of a Democrat president (Bill Clinton) and with the major studios already releasing aesthetically and thematically daring films that were also questioning the status quo (for instance, the deconstruction of potent American myths in *Unforgiven* [C. Eastwood, 1991] and the exposition of official history as corrupt in *JFK* [O. Stone, 1991]), the type of independent cinema that defined the 1980s inevitably started to lose its rationale. In this sense, irrespective of questions of industrial location and aesthetics, the ideological basis of independence was not fixed but very much time-specific.

Second, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hollywood cinema underwent significant changes that would also affect independent film. Although, by the 1980s, all Hollywood studios had become divisions of diversified entertainment conglomerates or had diversified themselves by branching out into other media industries, the seven years between 1989 and 1996 saw a new wave of corporate mergers and takeovers that involved five of the big Hollywood powers: Warner, Columbia, Universal, Paramount and Disney. When the dust settled, all the studios found themselves part of even larger global entertainment corporations with a mandate to develop franchises that could bring profits from multiple sources. The studios’ increased emphasis on ultra-expensive event films created a space for smaller pictures, as the excessive production and marketing costs of the studio blockbusters meant that only a few of them could be made every year. With the studios’ global distribution pipelines in need of a constant flow of product and with the studios supplying only a fraction of it, smaller films became essential for the healthy operation of the industry. This realisation came at a time when American independent cinema was increasing in popularity following the strong commercial performance of *sex, lies, and videotape* and also of *Wild at Heart* (D. Lynch, 1990), *The Player* and, of course, *Pulp Fiction*. In this respect, what seemed to be important was not so much an opposition between (mainstream) Hollywood and independent cinema but a distinction between expensive franchise and smaller specialised films, irrespective of whether the latter were coming from studios and their subsidiaries or from companies without corporate ties to them.

Finally, public and critical interest in questions of independence declined once the label itself started being utilised for marketing purposes. Indeed, following the popularisation of independent cinema in the early 1990s, studio divisions and stand-alone distributors alike started using the concept of independence (and the hipper ‘indie’ label) as a marketing hook in an effort to position specific films in the marketplace. For instance, Sony Pictures Classics utilised the participation of *The Spanish Prisoner* (D. Mamet, 1998) in the Sundance Film Festival as a key marketing strategy in both the trailer and the poster for the film in order to position it as an indie title. The *Spanish*
Prisoner became the most commercially successful film that Mamet had yet released and still ranks at the time of writing as one of Sony Pictures Classics’ most successful titles. However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, this form of marketing and advertising had lost its cachet. After so much appropriation, overuse and abuse, the label was inevitably rendered meaningless for critics and the cinema-going public alike.

Given the problems that surround the use of term ‘independent’ and its later derivatives, some film industry scholars have often opted for the less controversial ‘speciality’ or ‘specialised’ film label. In his classic study The Hollywood Studio System (1986), Douglas Gomery distinguishes between the major studios and the specialised companies. The former involved large producing–distributing and producing–distributing–exhibiting organisations that consistently controlled the film industry from the 1920s till the 1950s. Specialised companies, on the other hand, included United Artists, a distributing organisation servicing independent producers; its programme of releases therefore did not resemble the programmes of the studios. The label also included the Poverty Row companies Monogram and Republic, much smaller than the studios, which, despite also being organised as producers–distributors, were not able to compete with the industry leaders. For that reason, they had to concentrate their business on the ‘specialised markets’, areas in which the studios had little or no interest as they were not deemed particularly profitable. In the 1930s, these ‘specialised markets’ for the Poverty Row companies included primarily the markets for western films and for serials.

Besides providing a neat distinction, Gomery’s approach allows for the great flexibility that is essential for understanding the often-murky terrain of the US film industry. First, the categorisation of United Artists as a specialised company does not negate its status as one of the eight corporations that exerted an oligopolistic control over the American film industry in the studio era. It is both a member of the Little Three (alongside Columbia and Universal) and therefore operates within the industry, and a specialised entity that released a particular type of product. On the other hand, Monogram and Republic share a number of organisational and structural similarities with the major studios (especially being producer–distributors) but that does not mean that they are in the same league as them because the films they produced and distributed were decisively different from studio films. In other words, Monogram and Republic not only operate outside the majors but also are specialised outfits. The one common element linking these specialised companies is that they command modest profits, which puts them in a separate category from the major players.

The application of the concept of specialised (or specialty) companies and films to the field of contemporary American independent cinema removes the ideological and political implications and meanings that have been attached
by various institutions to the label ‘independent’ and its derivatives over the years. More importantly, it enables the examination of a small number of companies that have had a corporate relationship with the major Hollywood studios but which became key participants in a relatively distinct body of work in post-1980 American cinema; this body of work commenced outside the studios’ orbit but almost immediately found its way into it, and has consistently been discussed as ‘independent’.

In becoming yet another book dedicated to the study of American independent cinema, then, *Hollywood’s Indies* tells the story of ‘US specialised film’ as this was shaped by a particular group of studio ‘specialty’ film divisions from the early 1980s to date. Divided into three sections, the book proposes that there were three distinct waves, which broadly coincide with the emergence of each of the three dominant expressions of specialty filmmaking in the US: the independent, the indie and indiewood. More specifically, Section I (Chapters 1 to 3) looks at the five classics divisions of the 1980s (United Artists Classics, Triumph Films, Twentieth Century Fox International Classics, Universal Classics and Orion Classics), all of which were formed within a period of three years and played a relatively small, but still significant, role in supporting independent cinema. Section II (Chapters 4 to 5) looks at the two divisions that were formed in the early 1990s (Fine Line Features and Sony Pictures Classics) and the way they participated in and helped shape the vastly modified terrain of American ‘indie’ cinema during the boom years of the 1990s; it also explores how they evolved in later years when specialty filmmaking started converging with the mainstream in more obvious ways. Finally, Section III (Chapters 6 to 9) examines the specialty labels in the age of indiewood (Fox Searchlight, Paramount Classics [Vantage], Focus Features, Warner Independent Pictures and Picturehouse), a time when ‘independence’ had become almost impossible to defend – partly because of practices adopted by these divisions – and labels such as ‘specialty’ and ‘niche’ were increasingly becoming fashionable. Of course, the above periodisation is far from absolute, as divisions from different waves demonstrated a number of similarities with each other (Sony Picture Classics with Orion Classics; Paramount Classics with Sony Picture Classics and so on); independent, indie and indiewood titles have co-existed; and low-budget independent films made completely outside the Hollywood industry continued to be made throughout the period from the 1980s to date. However, each of these three expressions of filmmaking did become dominant (or at least more visible than the other two) at particular times, and the book proposes that it was during those times that each of the studio division waves started to take shape.

In examining all these divisions, the book is interested in understanding the conditions and rationale behind the establishment of such companies by the majors; their business practices and the ways in which these differed
from the practices of the stand-alone ‘independent’ companies against which they competed; the often-shifting relationship between parent and subsidiary company, especially during the course of management changes in both outfits; the specialty labels’ position within the often-labyrinthine structure of their conglomerate parents and the extent to which they adopted practices associated with the studios themselves; and the reasons behind their growth or stagnation and the factors that contributed both to the solidification of some of these divisions’ position in the specialty film marketplace and to the closure of others. Discussion of all of these issues will allow for a better understanding of the films they acquired, produced and distributed, a large number of which found their way into the canon of contemporary American independent cinema. To that end, each chapter carries a brief case study that offers a discussion of a representative US film for each of these divisions, with the exception of the chapter on Sony Pictures Classics, in which I decided, for two reasons, to use a non-US film, *Nine Queens* (F. Bielinsky, 2002) as a case study. First, it is a non-US film that none the less mobilises a number of characteristics that are close to the US indiewood films of the time. Second, it was remade by Warner Independent as *Criminal* (G. Jacobs, 2004), only two years after the original film’s US release; this film is also examined as a case study in this book.

As is clear from this brief introduction of the book’s content, Miramax Films does not form part of this study, and this is for a number of reasons. First, Miramax is the only specialised studio division that had a long history (fifteen years) as a stand-alone company before becoming Disney’s studio division in 1993. As a result, almost half of its history lies beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, in the second part of its history, and despite often being at the epicentre of developments in indie and indiewood filmmaking, Miramax quickly moved to studio turf when it co-financed, produced and distributed $100 million films such as *Gangs of New York* (M. Scorsese, 2003) and *Cold Mountain* (A. Minghella, 2003), prompting the head of Focus Features to declare that the company was involved in a different market from the other specialty labels. Indeed, even the trade press refused to discuss the division as a specialty producer-distributor, opting instead for labels such as a ‘mini major’ or ‘a production driven quasi studio’. Second, partly because of their ability to transcend the specialty market, Miramax and New Line Cinema have been christened ‘major independents’ rather than specialty divisions. According to Justin Wyatt, who introduced this label, the takeovers of the two formerly independent companies created ‘a curious hybrid’ that was far removed from both the classics divisions of the 1980s and the new studio labels of the early 1990s. In this respect, despite the fact that most of the second and third wave of specialty labels tried to compete with Miramax, to all intents and purposes Disney’s division was a very important participant in US spe-
cialised film but from a markedly different industrial and institutional place. Finally, because of its importance in independent film, Miramax has been the only company to have been examined in great detail in scholarly accounts, including in a book-length study aptly entitled *Indie, Inc.*. Given all this work and the extremely large output of the company (over 400 releases in its post-takeover history), I opted not to make it a chapter of the specialty divisions’ story, even though I make numerous references to it throughout the book.

**A WORD ON METHOD**

In her 2004 essay on the ways in which the popular press constructed *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (J. Zwick, 2002) as an independent film, Alisa Perren fleshed out the key details of an emerging methodological approach in the study of contemporary media industries. Given that, in the vast majority of cases, the researcher has little or no access to contemporary corporate records, he or she must necessarily depend on a range of secondary sources for the collection of data. In the case of the film industry, the sources include the trade and popular press, specialised periodicals and magazines, more general economics publications, and interviews with industry personnel, which could both verify the validity of the data and reveal details or issues that might have been missed or have not been covered by the written sources. These data, then, can be placed within the long-established body of work on ‘the structure, conduct and performance of the entertainment industries’, which derives from scholarly accounts of media industries’ economics, as well as from trade books and manuals that illuminate dominant industry methods and practices.

Perren’s work is situated within in a recent body of methodological, historical and theoretical work that has been labelled ‘media industry studies’ and which aims to bring together previously disparate (and, arguably, artificially created) theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of media, such as political economy and cultural studies, and even broader disciplines such as humanities and social sciences. Such a convergence of previously distinct subject areas and disciplinary approaches, the argument goes, would dovetail with the well-documented media convergence that has become the dominant characteristic of the contemporary media environment and which is very much driven by the global media conglomerates that control entertainment and the technology via which it is delivered to audiences.

Although the jury is still out on the reception of media industry studies by the broader scholarly community, as the approach is still being shaped and the book-length studies that have adopted it are still few, it nevertheless opens the way to carrying out research on particular media organisations and subjects that, until recently, could have been methodologically questionable. A case in
point is the subject of this book, the specialty divisions of the major studios. With corporate records not open to the researcher and with other archival material extremely limited, the options available are, first, not to undertake a study of the subject, in which case one of the most visible and important aspects of contemporary US cinema would remain virtually unexamined; or, second, to undertake research following the kind of process that Perren outlined in her essay on *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and which she further elaborated in her study of Miramax.42

In this respect, *Hollywood’s Indies* adopts such an approach to the study of US specialised film by the studio divisions. Specifically, I draw on a large number of articles from trade publications such as *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter* and *Screen International*; specialty industry publications such as *Indiewire* and *Filmmaker Magazine*; the mainstream press; key economics magazines such as the *Los Angeles Business Journal* and *The Wall Street Journal*; publicity material produced by the companies, such as press releases; and a number of interviews I conducted over a period of time with industry personnel involved with these companies in a variety of capacities, such as Ira Deutchman, former executive at United Artists Classics and former President of Fine Line Features. These data have been situated within a considerable body of scholarly work on American independent cinema, which has been a ‘hot’ topic in film studies since the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, as well as within a framework of studies on media economics which allows me to carry out what Thomas Schatz calls analysis on a ‘micro-industrial level’. Unlike work on the macro-industrial level which examines (in this case) ‘the film industry at large’, analysis on a micro-industrial level shifts the focus to individual production companies and to distinct market sectors and ‘classes’ of producers – in this case, the studio divisions and the US specialised film market – and concerns primarily ‘the authority over production rather than the filmmaking process per se’.43 My discussion examines in detail the ways in which specialised film evolved as a result of these companies’ practices, with their entry into production marking a major turning point in their history (and a major theme in my examination of the sector). Finally, given that the object of study operates within larger organisations and structures and is influenced by certain ‘macro-industrial dimensions’, such as the role of adjacent industries and new technologies, I often bring these into my examination of these companies.

NOTES


2. For instance, for ‘independence within the industry’ see David E. James, *Allegories of...*


5. See, for instance, the Christian apocalyptic film The Omega Code (R. Marcarelli, 1999). There was also a number of filmmakers who turned to low budget independent production not because they were motivated by political or aesthetic concerns but simply because they were not successful in convincing any of the majors to finance the films they wanted to make or because they wanted to retain control of their films and of the potential profits. I would like to thank Ira Deutchman for pointing out this aspect of independent filmmaking.


14. Deutchman, Ira (former executive at United Artists Classics and former President of Fine Line Features), phone interview with the author, 2 June 2011, 1 hour and 15 minutes.

15. Studio divisions were much more active in the financing of non-US films in exchange for North American theatrical distribution rights (see Chapter 3, in particular).


18. For instance, King dedicates only one paragraph to these divisions in the ‘Industry’ chapter of his book, American Independent Cinema (King, American Independent Cinema, 21).


22. Deutchman, interview, 2 June 2011.
34. James Schamus, President of Focus Features, was quoted in Tom Roston, ‘Life After Miramax’, *Premiere* (March 2005), 51.
42. Perren, *Indie, Inc.*