

DANIEL HERBERT

MAVERICK MOVIES

NEW LINE CINEMA AND
THE TRANSFORMATION
OF AMERICAN FILM

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The publisher and the University of California Press Foundation also gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Kenneth Turan and Patricia Williams Endowment Fund in American Film.

Maverick Movies

*New Line Cinema and the Transformation
of American Film*



Daniel Herbert



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

University of California Press
Oakland, California

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Suggested citation: Herbert, D. *Maverick Movies: New Line Cinema and the Transformation of American Film*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.170>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Herbert, Daniel, 1974- author.

Title: Maverick movies : New Line Cinema and the transformation of American film / Daniel Herbert.

Description: Oakland, California : University of California Press, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023009885 (print) | LCCN 2023009886 (ebook) | ISBN 9780520382350 (paperback) | ISBN 9780520382367 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: New Line Cinema Corporation. | Motion picture studios—History—20th century. | Motion picture studios—History—21st century.

Classification: LCC PN1999.M326 H47 2024 (print) | LCC PN1999.M326 (ebook) | DDC 384.80979494—dc23/eng/20230424

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023009885>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023009886>

33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my mother, Susan Cogar, who taught me to love movies

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book wouldn't exist without Phillip Hallman, a true friend and the Film Studies Field Librarian at the University of Michigan. In 2010 Phil suggested I teach a class about New Line Cinema. "Who knows, maybe there's a book in there?" he said to my very dubious ears. More than a decade later, here we are. Thank you, Phil. Many thanks also to the students who participated in the various iterations of the New Line class and who helped me figure the whole thing out.

Robert Shaye, whom I am lucky enough to know as Bob, extended many generousities as I worked on this book: visiting my New Line class, fielding my emails, and hosting me for three unbelievable days of interviews, among other kindnesses. I am thankful for his flawless memory, his genuine bigheartedness, and the hospitality that he and Eva showed me. Likewise, Ira Deutchman was ceaselessly giving with his time, attention, and good energy. Ira embodies the spirit of independent cinema and I am proud to know him. Conversations with Liz Manne were extremely insightful and inspired several core elements of this book; I am grateful for her openness and wisdom. Thanks also to Stephen Abramson, who offered valuable information and funny stories about New Line Cinema's history.

I am indebted to the archivists and librarians who assisted me as I meandered. Mary Fessenden provided welcome and unfettered access to the trove of materials held at Cornell Cinema. Joan Miller at the Wesleyan Cinema Archives assisted me as I combed the John Waters Papers. Rebecca Jewett and Jolie Braun warmly helped me at the Thompson Library Special Collections at the Ohio State University. The staff at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library were characteristically helpful. I also relied on a handful of wonderful research assistants throughout this project's development. I am thankful for

the excellent support provided by Brinni Gentry, Abigail Kennedy, Jamie Lai, and Joshua Schulze. Josh, in particular, was ready for anything and did swift, meticulous work and helped especially with chapter 4. Emily Saidel, Dia Das, and Amy Dawson-Andoh sorted through the Ira Deutchman papers with me before they were fully cataloged by the University of Michigan Special Collections. Chloe Gilke kindly served as my Texas proxy at the Harry Ransom Center.

Numerous current and former colleagues at the University of Michigan helped me with critical conversations and feedback. Megan Ankerson, Sarah Murray, Aswin Punathambekar, and Katherine Sender were members of an astounding writing group that gave excellent feedback on early parts of this book, and they continue to provide good friendship. Caitlin Dyche, Sriram Mohan, Rae Moors, Annemarie Navar-Gill, and other member of the Media Studies Research Workshop also offered thoughtful commentary on preliminary elements. Jim Burnstein supported the book from the start and was helpful in getting me in touch with Shaye. Conversations with Colin Gunckel were instrumental in my thinking about how to analyze film distribution; they were a lot of fun, too. The always inspiring and ever-energetic Amanda Lotz asked all the right questions and offered sharp and supportive comments. All of my colleagues in the Department of Film, Television, and Media have also been excellent companions on this journey; I give thanks to Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Umayyah Cable, Hugh Cohen, Victor Fanucchi, Caryl Flinn, Yvette Granata, Hollis Griffin, Mark Kligerman, David Marek, Chris McNamara, Sheila Murphy, Matthew Noble-Olson, Markus Nornes, Melissa Phruksachart, Veerendra Prasad, Swapnil Rai, Robert Rayher, Yeidy Rivero, Terri Sarris, Dan Shere, Matthew Solomon, Oliver Thornton, and Johannes von Moltke. Likewise, the department's staff are always a pleasure to work with, and I am thankful for the years of affable support from Mary Lou Chlipala, Carrie Moore, Lisa Rohde, and Marga Schuhwerk-Hampel.

Many colleagues and friends outside Michigan helped shape this book directly and indirectly; apologies in advance to anyone whom I have forgotten to mention here. I began this project with Mary Francis's editorial support and guidance, and my excellent conversations with her impacted this book profoundly. I am indebted to Caetlin Benson-Allot and Michael Z. Newman, who served as the peer reviewers for the manuscript in all of its stages. The final result is profoundly improved as a result of their deep readings, their perceptive observations, and their constructive suggestions. Lucas Hilderbrand also read the entire manuscript and provided thoughtful feedback. Dana Polan continues to serve as an indispensable mentor, and I was deeply gratified by his kind response to the book. The ever-generous Leonard Maltin shared excellent materials and stories from his days working at New Line Presentations. Justin Wyatt was incredibly insightful in our conversations about New Line and kindly shared otherwise inaccessible market research documents. Matthew Connolly and I exchanged vital information about John Waters and the Waters collection at Wesleyan, while Nathan Koob was my "point

man” in advising me about working with that archive. I had impactful conversations about the research for this book with Miranda Banks, Nicholas Benson, Lisa Dombrowski, Tanya Goldman, Alex Kupfer, Caroline Leader, Kathleen Looock, Yannis Tzioumakis, Johnny Walker, and perhaps most vitally Alisa Perren. My interactions with Peter Alilunas, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Nitin Govil, Jonathan Gray, Erin Hanna, Tim Havens, Jennifer Holt, Eric Hoyt, Lee Marshall, Paul McDonald, Ross Melnick, and Jeremy Morris have informed my work as a scholar of film and media more broadly. I’ve learned so much about good argumentation and good friendship from Derek Johnson. I am always thankful for Society for Cinema and Media Studies reunions with Elizabeth Affuso, James Leo Cahill, Jenny Clark, Kate Fortmueller, Kristen Fuhs, Chris Hanson, Jorie Lagerwey, Dave Lerner, Taylor Nygaard, Paul Reinsch, Bella Honess Roe, Suzanne Scott, and the rest of the University of Southern California gang.

I am deeply grateful to the editorial staff at University of California Press. Raina Polivka understood perfectly what this book could be and was always a friendly, sharp, and helpful force in bringing it to life. Sam Warren was fast, effective, and friendly as he guided me through the submission and production process. I am deeply thankful to my indexer Victoria Baker, whose deeply thoughtful work always teaches me new things about my books. Research for this book was supported with a Michigan Humanities Award and the Associate Professor Support Fund, both generously provided by the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. Open Access publication was supported by a TOME Publishing Grant awarded by the University of Michigan Library; the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts; and the Office of the Vice President for Research. Sections of this book were first published elsewhere in reduced or altered form. Elements of chapter 2 appear in essays in two collections: *The Franchise Era: Managing Media in the Digital Economy*, edited by James Fleury, Brian Hikari Hartzheim, and Stephen Mamber (Edinburgh University Press, 2019); and *Film Reboots*, edited by me and Constantine Verevis (Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Portions of chapter 4 appear in my contribution to *Screening American Independent Film*, edited by Justin Wyatt and W. D. Phillips (Routledge, 2023). Many thanks to those presses and heartfelt thanks to the editors for their generative feedback, which is reflected in this book, too.

Friends and family far and wide have been boundlessly supportive as I worked on this book. Amy Sumerton discussed numerous aspects as we traveled to and from various concerts. Ben Rogerson road-tripped with me to Ithaca and Columbus and helped with my research at Cornell Cinema; he also gave me access to the Rogerson family jet skis at Lake Chautauqua. My friendship with Ben and my foundation in film studies began in Albuquerque. Among the strongest influences there were Gus Blaisdell, Bryan Konefsky, Jenny Debouzek, and Keif Henley; thank you all. Chris and Kate Hanson always bring the good times and the big laughs. I’ve been grateful for the love of Gary and Karla Sampson, fantastic in-laws

and grandparents, and I've had great times with John Sampson, Carmelita Parraz, Dylan, and Maddy. My Aunt Moira hosted me while doing research on the East Coast, and she and Rita, Eddie, Sile, and Bill made that visit fun fun fun. My brother Charlie turned the pandemic into a creative journey, and Larissa, Sebastian, and Donovan are springs of fun and joy. I have had great times and conversations with my brother Noel. My stepmother, Liz Buckner, astonishes me with her strength, intelligence, and kindness of heart. My mom, Susan Cogar, and my stepfather, Ron Cogar, have been wonderful to me, and I am so very thankful that she told me I could be whatever I wanted to be; I've gotten close. Anna Sampson holds my heart and is also the smartest person I know. This book benefited greatly from her careful readings, pointed questions, and astute suggestions, while I benefit every day from her love. Clara and Fiona make my world.

Introduction

New Line Cinema and the Shape of the Modern Movie Business

From its founding in 1967 to its manifest dismantling in 2008, New Line Cinema cut a remarkable path through the American film business and movie culture. Over this forty-year run, New Line achieved impressive and often surprising successes, explored odd detours, experienced massive setbacks, and mounted crazy comebacks. Subsisting at the fringes of the movie business from the late 1960s through the 1970s, serving the college campus market and the midnight movie circuit with second-string art films and the shock films of John Waters, New Line found reliable returns with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise in the 1980s. The company had a windfall with *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in 1990, a child-friendly oddity for this otherwise edgy company. But, indeed, through the 1990s New Line at once expanded in eclectic ways and attained more mainstream success with Hollywood-style hits like *The Mask* (1994), *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997), and *Blade* (1998). Eventually made part of the massive AOL Time Warner corporate empire, New Line reached global popularity with *The Lord of the Rings* franchise (2001–3) at the turn of the millennium.

Maverick Movies: New Line Cinema and the Transformation of American Film tells New Line Cinema's improbable story. It charts the company's rise in revenues and renown and also accounts for New Line's various disasters, including a string of flops in the fall of 1996, a damning public relations scandal about the company's internal culture in 1998, and its eventual disassembly by its corporate parent in 2008. As a movie company operating in the New Hollywood and Conglomerate Hollywood periods, New Line was unusual in many ways. Although it is common for film distributors to round out their slate with films from a variety of genres, few companies have been quite so eclectic in their offerings as New Line. This single

company made a small fortune running *Reefer Madness* at midnight screenings in the 1970s, churned out the cheap *Critters* monster movies in the 1980s, rode the rising popularity of hip-hop with *House Party* in 1990, struck a timely hit with the political satire *Wag the Dog* one month before the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1997, and made the modern-day Christmas classic *Elf* in 2003. At first glance, New Line appears to have had no discernable rationale, pattern, or logic behind the films it made and released.

Yet, upon further consideration, one can see how heterogeneity *was* the consistent element. New Line's eclecticism reflected an industrial strategy born of economic necessity, but over time this strategy accorded with Hollywood's growing interest in niche films and the targeting of distinct and diverse audiences. And indeed, the company's apparent variability largely worked for many years. New Line is extremely unusual in its long-term development and success, during a time when so many of its competitors either remained confined to their given areas of the industrial arena, dissolved into another media firm, or failed altogether. Independent film distribution was and remains a tough business, and one saw any number of startups and legacy independents come and go between the 1960s and the 2000s. American International Pictures, Allied Artists Pictures, Avco Embassy Pictures, Cannon Films, Carolco Pictures, Cinecom Pictures, the Hemdale Film Corporation, New World Pictures, and Vestron Pictures all ceased operation during the period that New Line flourished.¹ New Line's success was exceptional, and its story is important for this reason alone.

At the same time, this book makes the case that New Line provides an unusually potent means by which to understand key aspects of the film industry and movie culture during this transformative period. Risking teleology, this book works from the premise that New Line's durability and zigzag of achievements make it a useful, if surprising, index of the changing film industry and popular tastes over a forty-year span. On one hand, New Line founder and CEO Robert Shaye and other decision makers at New Line were incredibly smart and shrewd businesspeople. Well known for its budget consciousness (often due to financial limitations, truth be told), New Line skillfully offset risk and squeezed profits from a range of films and genres. The company consistently made the most of what may have otherwise been iffy films and intellectual properties, regularly expanding a film's base audience to reach a wider range of viewers. Being calculating is not the same as being cautious.

On the other hand, neither Bob Shaye nor anyone else at New Line had a magical ability to predict cultural tastes and exploit them flawlessly. The company made too many mistakes for this to be the case, and too often New Line's successes were happy accidents or seemingly the result of dumb luck. Yet, surprisingly often, the company engaged cleverly with important aspects of movie culture and popular tastes, even if, more often than not, it could not afford to attain or to produce

the premium examples of whatever genre it was working with. As *Maverick Movies* shows, New Line was intensely opportunistic and in some crucial instances managed to seize chances that transformed the company. Thus, while I do not hold strictly to the idea that New Line developed over the years “merely” by responding to the industrial and cultural circumstances it found itself within, this book details how, in some critical moments, New Line’s films and business strategy accorded fortuitously and meaningfully with larger conditions of American cinema.

New Line was an oddball company, its development was often irregular, and its alignment with the film industry and movie culture was variable. In its earliest days, for instance, New Line distinguished itself among nontheatrical distributors of the 1970s by appealing especially to youthful audiences that sought counter-cultural edginess.² Although late to the teen slasher game, in 1984 it innovated impressively in that genre with Freddy Krueger, a transmedia figure with transgenerational appeal.³ In some cases New Line genuinely did lead the pack and helped transform Hollywood from the outside in, for instance helping to inaugurate the gross-out comedy cycle of the 1990s with *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and proving the global viability of the swords-and-sorcery genre with *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In these cases and others, New Line provides a new lens for looking at major trends and tendencies in modern film history even though the company did not always embody those trends perfectly or punctually. New Line was weird, to be sure, but the company’s story provides a new sense of the general weirdness of the movie business and its relation to culture.

This book offers two, related conceptual frames to describe and theorize the particular industrial-cultural logics and practices that New Line developed and deployed: *opportunistic eclecticism* and *incorporative heterogeneity*. From its earliest days onward, New Line made opportunistic, risk-averse deals to distribute unconventional, lesser, disregarded, or otherwise nonmainstream films that nevertheless had apparent exploitable qualities. Yet the range of what counted as unconventional was quite large, and the company assembled an eclectic catalog of dissimilar films in diverse genres. Over time, New Line grew in size and industrial stature. It was incorporated as a publicly traded company in 1986, then was folded into Ted Turner’s media empire in 1994, only to be enmeshed within the Time Warner corporation in 1996. During this period, New Line’s logic of opportunistic eclecticism shifted in style and scale into one of incorporative heterogeneity. As the company itself experienced different forms of institutional incorporation, it experimented with films in genres that were new to it, testing the waters. In the instances that proved fortuitous, New Line added that genre as a staple, incorporating new yet still-heterogeneous genres to its repertoire. New Line looked different year to year, but it also looked different week to week, film to film.

MATERIALS, METHODS, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

A wide variety of materials support this book's historical narrative, which is also a narrative about how media institutions like New Line Cinema *get narrated* over time. It makes use of numerous publicly available documents, including industry trade publications such as *Variety*; national, local, and college newspapers; and SEC filings, legal documents, and the like. The primary archival documents and records that this book brings to bear include items found in libraries, special collections, designated archives, informal archives (aka storage rooms), and even specific individuals' basements. I examined the holdings at multiple college film societies where New Line screened its films in the 1960s and 1970s; the plentiful materials at Cornell Cinema proved especially helpful. I also visited the John Waters collection at Wesleyan University, and this archive features copious material related to the making and marketing of the director's films and New Line's operations more generally. I gathered material related to New Line's lecture bureau business from the Norman Mailer collection and the John Crowley papers at the Ransom Center at the University of Texas, as well as from the William Burroughs collection at Ohio State University. I also accessed private collections of individuals who had New Line documents, including market research reports and company catalogs.

Treating New Line Cinema as something like the book's protagonist, *Maverick Movies* narrates an institutional history. My own institutional situation affected my research directly, and I want to be transparent and forthcoming in this regard. In addition to the sources listed above, this book relies on materials held in the Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers and the Ira Deutchman Papers, which are part of the Screen Arts Mavericks and Makers collections within the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Michigan Library. These collections were donated, respectively, by Robert Shaye, New Line's founder and influential CEO, and by Ira Deutchman, whose long career in independent cinema includes serving as president of Fine Line Features, New Line's specialty cinema division, from 1990 to 1995. While my location in Ann Arbor and appointment at the University of Michigan undoubtedly gave me geographic and logistical advantages in both learning about and taking advantage of these excellent resources, interested researchers have had access to these collections since they were processed; the Shaye Papers were processed in two batches in 2011 and then 2013, and processing the Deutchman Papers was completed in 2017.

Robert Shaye's donation was part of a broader engagement with the teaching and researching of cinema in Ann Arbor. Shaye graduated from the University of Michigan in 1960, and decades later, in the early 1990s, he served on the Advisory Committee for what became the Department of Film, Television, and Media (FTVM)—my institutional home since 2007—when it was still the Program in Film and Video Studies.⁴ Furthermore, in 1998, Shaye made a sizable financial donation to the University of Michigan to support the development of

a screenwriting program, which brought many material benefits to the FTVM Department. Around 2008, separately from the financial donation, Shaye gifted a considerable number of New Line film prints to the department. At that time, the library inquired about any documents Shaye might offer, it having already assembled the Orson Welles and Robert Altman papers within the Mavericks and Makers collections, and the materials he provided now constitute the library's Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema collection. Drawing on the donated film prints, I began teaching a class about New Line Cinema in 2011. After visiting this class in 2013 and 2015, Deutchman worked with the library to establish the Ira Deutchman Papers, entailing an immense amount of personal and professional materials from throughout his career in independent cinema.

The Shaye and Deutchman papers are significant elements of the Makers and Mavericks collection, which now also include the papers of Jonathan Demme, Alan Rudolph, Nancy Savoca, and John Sayles, and were essential to the research for this book. I was also fortunate to interview several New Line and Fine Line executives, most notably Shaye, Deutchman, and fellow former Fine Line executive Liz Manne. But neither they nor anyone else involved in the company had influence over what I wrote or how I wrote this book. Indeed, these and other interviews ultimately served as what journalists call “background,” orienting and supplementing the archival research that informs the bulk of this book.⁵ I heard amazing stories about all of New Line's strange eras and gathered many stunning, hilarious, and impressive details about various moments in the company's history. I heard lots of exciting and wonderful—and some terrible—things about what it was like to work at Fine Line. But the factual data I got from these and other interviews were almost always also available through something in the archive or the public record. These and other interviews enriched my understanding of New Line and Fine Line, and they enrich this book as well, even if that fact is not directly evident to readers.⁶

Maverick Movies draws from this wide array of sources to tell the story of New Line Cinema, and also examines how New Line participated in the telling of its own story. New Line endeavored to create a *legend* for itself, an institutional persona with particular characteristics, in the film industry and media culture. When researching for this book, sorting through the archive of internal and public-facing materials generated by and about New Line Cinema, it became clear that I was not simply looking at static information or “pure” data that could straightforwardly inform a historical narrative. Much of what I read was *being narrated* in those previous moments in memos and press releases from the company and by journalists and interviewers, sometimes in conjunction with New Line workers.⁷ With these considerations in mind, this book treats “New Line Cinema” both as the film distribution company that had an unusually dramatic and successful run over the course of forty years, and as a discursive entity, a legend, that the company itself took a hand in constructing.

Admittedly, general audiences and even avid cinephiles almost never choose a film because of the company that distributed it. With the exception of perhaps Disney, A24, or HBO, media companies rarely accrue a strong public profile or cultural identity. But New Line was conspicuous in asserting itself discursively. As a distributor, New Line advertised, marketed, and promoted its films; it circulated values and meanings as much as it did film prints. Likewise, the company distributed meanings about *itself* as a way of creating, maintaining, and developing a place in the American film industry. Memos, annual reports, marketing materials, and the like provide material evidence of New Line's historical development as well as paratextual evidence of the company's industrial and cultural strategies.⁸ But these materials and documents, along with reportage about the company, also serve to distinguish New Line as an industrial subject. They do the work of legend building.

Examining New Line as a legend helps address the role of the Hollywood trade publications in actively shaping perceptions about and within the industry and its culture, where "perception is reality."⁹ As Eric Hoyt explains in his history of the Hollywood press, "The trade papers communicated information, but they did much more, playing important gatekeeping and scorekeeping functions within the industry's culture."¹⁰ To the industry's press I would add interviews and reportage published in the national press about Hollywood and derived from Hollywood contacts. "New Line Cinema" is a legend that mattered most within the comparatively small world of film industry professionals and the journalists that cover the media business like a spectator sport. This was the world that mattered to New Line, thus making the company's legend building a significant part of its history.

Methodologically, *Maverick Movies* aligns with what Richard Maltby has identified as "an emerging international trend in research into cinema history," which he and others refer to as "new cinema history."¹¹ Such work, he states, "has shifted its focus away from the content of films to consider their circulation and consumption, and to examine cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange."¹² Likewise, this book is devoted to understanding the contexts and conditions within which films circulate and gain cultural meanings. This is not to say that *Maverick Movies* ignores the content and style of the films that New Line distributed or that it avoids analysis of texts. The form and content of a film mattered a great deal to New Line, as with any distribution company. Any movie's textual features weigh on a company's plans and expectations regarding anticipated audiences, marketability, advertising, and financial performance, as well as its larger slate, industrial position, and overall cultural identity.¹³ In a conversation nearly a decade ago, my colleague Markus Nornes said to me, "Texts *are* history." To this I would add, "Texts *are* industry."

Thus, I examine films to the extent that they mattered to New Line and contributed significantly to the very definition of that company. Further, much of the textual analysis found in this book takes an expansive view of what we might call

texts to include a range of industrial records, marketing and advertising materials, and public discourses made by and about the company. Whether we think of these as “paratexts,” as analyzed by Jonathan Gray, or as “deep texts,” as defined by John Thornton Caldwell, all this material both tells the story of New Line Cinema and contributed to its cultural identity, or legend.¹⁴ At the same time that I rely on such materials to establish a historical record, I also analyze them critically as sites of discourse and cultural enunciation. As with any good movie, novel, or other cultural text, industrial records, materials, and discourses are, as Roland Barthes would have it, intertextually networked, irreducibly plural, subject to play, and subject of play.¹⁵ This book continues that play.

As a work that analyzes business practices, *Maverick Movies* contributes to scholarship in media industry studies.¹⁶ Industrial histories of cinema have long been part of the larger, interdisciplinary effort to understand media industries and their effects on society.¹⁷ More specifically, this book adheres to a venerable genre within film studies that intersects with both new cinema history and media industry studies, namely the tradition of studio-based histories of American cinema.¹⁸ On one hand, this book offers readers the most thorough account of New Line Cinema to date, and those with a particular interest in the company will be rewarded with new insights and sustained consideration. On the other hand, by focusing specifically on New Line’s distinguishing practices and peculiar path through the film industry, *Maverick Movies* expands our understanding of how film companies work and provides a new perspective on the American media business more generally.

While New Line had many competitors at different phases and might be productively compared to a handful of other companies (Miramax perhaps being the most compelling of these; more on that below), no firm really conducted itself quite the way New Line did. In any given year, New Line looked like a different company than it once had. It sold schlock and sophistication, inspired scares and laughs, worked at the margins and in the mainstream. This study makes clear that it was precisely New Line’s generic irregularity that recurrently allowed it to respond unusually well to wide-ranging cultural tastes and to an evolving industrial landscape. Further, this book details how New Line’s marketing practices, distribution strategies, and other business endeavors changed over time, moving from small-scale and proximate marketing in college cinemas to becoming a multimedia distributor with theatrical, television, and home video divisions. In this respect, this book reveals a larger point about the modern movie industry whereby small, independent innovators like New Line impacted the larger movie business.

It may be a result of the company’s mutability over time that no one has written a book-length study of New Line Cinema before now. Justin Wyatt wrote a highly perceptive chapter about the company’s history, alongside that of Miramax, but his work was conducted some years ago and is condensed; this book is indebted to that essay.¹⁹ Scholars have written books and articles about specific New Line

films, many of which were vital resources when I taught the New Line Cinema class and as I continued to think about the company.²⁰ Other scholars have looked at individual directors who worked with New Line or examined specific aspects of the company.²¹ These works provide sharp analyses and key insights into New Line, but by focusing on specific films, directors, or select aspects of the company, they offer only partial understandings of its industrial and cultural importance.

In its focus on New Line Cinema, *Maverick Movies* prompts us to rethink the history and conceptualization of independent cinema, particularly regarding its relationship to Hollywood and American movie culture.²² Scholars working in this area have proposed a variety of ways of distinguishing “independent,” “indie,” and “Indiewood,” and they vary in the ways in which these terms refer to industrial or cultural categories.²³ The notion of independence was quite important to New Line itself. Consider, for instance, that in a 1990 memo, Shaye wrote, “In this era of consolidation, keep an eye on New Line. We intend to be the independent studio that could,” and that in 2001 another New Line executive referred to *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) as “the best of independent cinema.”²⁴ “Independent” was quite elastic, indeed.

For my part, I am not interested in tracking a genealogy of these phrases or in policing these and related terms. Consequently, some readers may find me a little slippery or inconsistent in my usage of various words. In general, though, I use the term “independent” to refer to a company’s independence from the Hollywood studios (MPAA signatories), with a particular emphasis on independence in the distribution sector. In the 1980s and 1990s especially, “specialty” could often be found to be interchangeable with “independent” as well as “indie” in the industrial trade press, and I also use that term frequently. I generally reserve the word “indie” to designate a certain style of American cinema and, adapting an idea from Michael Z. Newman, a cultural disposition that often entails a *sense* of industrial independence, an oppositional stance toward an imagined mainstream, and a sense of “fashionable cool,” “artistic authenticity,” and “sophistication.”²⁵ New Line invoked, evoked, and yet also confounded terms like “independence,” “specialty,” and “indie.” By looking concertedly at this company, *Maverick Movies* provides a complex story about independent movie companies and the complicated ways their production and distribution practices intersected with Hollywood, the “mainstream,” and a changing population of media audiences.

Although there are exceptions, much of the scholarship devoted to independent cinema fixates on the 1990s. There are important reasons for this, as the independent scene underwent something of a flowering at this time, making “indie” an established industrial and cultural category and prompting the Hollywood studios to forcefully engage with the specialty cinema sector. By taking a somewhat longer historical view, this book shows how New Line developed practices and strategies in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that persisted and were adapted through the company’s corporate ownership in the 1990s and 2000s. Further, a good portion

of independent film research focuses on the upper end of the cultural echelon of “indie” and the cinephile culture that sustains it. By contrast, New Line’s history makes it clear that “specialty” and “niche” cinema has taken on a wide variety of appearances, had drastically variable levels of cultural respectability, and aimed for a more diverse range of distinct audience groups. New Line released many artsy films, to be sure, but the company also released horror films, kids’ movies, hip-hop comedies, and milquetoast middlebrow dramas that smacked of Hollywood conventionality, more fully reflecting the diverse composition of modern movie culture.

Miramax is perhaps the company that most resembles New Line in these respects, and media scholar Alisa Perren’s excellent analysis of that company resonates strongly with many of the arguments I articulate about New Line. Specifically, she argues that Miramax’s success relied largely on “distributing niche-oriented films that appealed to demographic groups ranging from teenagers to baby boomers, African Americans to Latinos.” The company’s excellence in this regard is exactly what brought it to the attention of Hollywood and prompted Disney to purchase Miramax in 1993. “Subsequently,” Perren observes, “every other major media conglomerate emulated—and responded to—Miramax’s practices by launching their own specialty division or acquiring an existing independent distribution company.”²⁶ In this manner, Perren successfully shows how Miramax innovated Hollywood from the outside in and then from the inside out.

Like Miramax, New Line released a diverse slate of films aimed at niche audiences with occasional attempts to create breakout successes. As with Miramax, New Line’s ability to milk profits from marginal material made it attractive to Hollywood in the 1990s, and it was bought by a major firm, in this case Ted Turner’s media empire. As with Miramax, New Line’s scope and scale of operations grew after joining a major conglomerate, and it experienced tension with corporate leadership at various junctures. As with Miramax, New Line’s trajectory illustrates bigger changes in the media industry in the 1990s, particularly “the global media conglomerates’ increasing focus on producing and distributing niche products to specific demographic groups.”²⁷ In these ways and others, New Line and Miramax are both useful instruments for observing and understanding conditions of American media.

But there is much to distinguish New Line from Miramax, and tracking these differences helps complicate our understanding of cinema history. Whereas Miramax largely released films that claimed a certain level of cultural prestige, and marketed these films in sensational ways, New Line created Fine Line in 1990 to handle specialty cinema, and the division was consistently measured in its marketing and advertising. Whereas Miramax founded a genre division, Dimension Films, in 1992 to release horror films (like an inversion of Fine Line), New Line was *already* associated with horror and indeed was more consistent and successful than Miramax in the 1980s thanks to its work in that genre. Whereas Miramax

pursued cool, scandal, and prestige in nearly equal measure following its purchase by Disney, with films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Kids* (1995), and *Good Will Hunting* (1997), New Line aimed for broad popularity with more conventional material, like *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *Rush Hour* (1998). The fact that both Miramax and New Line had a hand in the development of *The Lord of the Rings*, but it was New Line that ultimately produced and distributed the films, should indicate how closely related but dissimilar these companies were. Both brought the margins into the mainstream, but in notably different ways.

Finally, *Maverick Movies* contributes to the study of “distribution” in film and media studies, a topic that has gained increasing attention.²⁸ Throughout its existence, New Line was centrally a *film distributor*. Taking a historical view, *Maverick Movies* offers nitty-gritty insights into how movie distribution was done in a pre-streaming era from the multiple arenas in which New Line operated at different moments. This includes nontheatrical distribution, midnight movie circuit distribution, and distribution to conventional commercial theaters and chains in a variety of patterns from platform releases, targeted limited releases, and wide releases all the way to the day-and-date global distribution of blockbusters. As Janet Wasco has described it, movie distribution was a complicated and a multifaceted process long before the advent of internet-distributed movies, entailing many activities beyond the simple shipping of film prints, including, among many other tasks, acquiring rights, setting up a release schedule, establishing relationships and making deals with exhibitors, collecting receipts, and—crucially—marketing and advertising.²⁹

In the 1980s and beyond, New Line benefited significantly from new opportunities in home video and cable; its incorporation into the Turner media empire demonstrates how the conventional movie business became increasingly enmeshed within a multimedia, multioutlet distribution landscape. In these multiple practices and activities, in multiple sectors of the media business, New Line demonstrates that movie distribution was never a single process. So, although New Line’s history might not force us to rethink contemporary digital circulation and delivery, as a case study it does provide ample evidence that movie distribution was complex and conceptually problematic long before Netflix came on the scene.

ON CHRONOLOGY, PERIODIZATION, AND ERAS: NEW LINE AS THROUGH LINE

When writing history, it can be difficult to devise rationales for when to begin and when to end, and perhaps even more challenging to make claims about distinct eras with features that clearly distinguish one period from another.³⁰ I am fortunate in this respect, as *Maverick Movies* specifically examines New Line Cinema from the moment Bob Shaye incorporated it in 1967 until he and the majority of its staff were let go from the company in 2008, when its corporate parent subsumed

New Line into the Warner Bros. studio. Movies continue to be released with the New Line logo to this day, but it has long ceased operating as an independent studio or autonomous division; as this book's conclusion discusses, New Line lives on as a ghost brand that largely peddles ghost stories.

The 1967–2008 timeline thus adheres to a rationale based on New Line's leadership and relative autonomy, but this chronology also coordinates with larger changes in American media. Founded in the same month that *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) first played in American theaters, and dismantled amidst the "great studio pullback" from specialty distribution in 2008, New Line's history coincides and coordinates with what scholars have called the "New Hollywood" through the "Conglomerate Hollywood" periods, each defined by particular industrial arrangements, representative business strategies, and characteristic aesthetic tendencies.³¹ The present book does not aim to challenge or substantially revise these established periodizations, or to prove their continuing validity as metanarratives. Rather, *Maverick Movies* uses New Line as a through line for deepening and nuancing our understanding of American cinema during these historical phases.

In broad strokes, scholars define "New Hollywood" as a post–World War II, post–Paramount Decrees configuration of the American film business, which has distinct subperiods from the 1950s through the 1980s.³² By the late 1960s in particular, Hollywood was characterized by a wave of takeovers and mergers among different corporations that often had no previous dealings in film or media.³³ Simultaneously, the industry stretched to address changing cinematic tastes, particularly the youth culture's taste for more artistically valid and "adult" material, through the MPAA's implementation of the rating system and by allowing a wave of self-styled auteurs to make personally expressive and stylistically distinctive films.³⁴ But, as Frederick Wasser has written, "distributors and marketers made New Hollywood as much as the directors."³⁵ Following the extraordinary success of *Jaws* (1975) from Universal Pictures and *Star Wars* (1977) from 20th Century Fox, Hollywood studios predominantly focused on blockbuster films characterized by extravagant special effects, franchising possibilities, and "high concept" marketability. In some accounts, the post-*Jaws* moment is truly when New Hollywood comes about.³⁶ The widespread adoption of cable, VCRs, and other home entertainment technologies in the 1980s propelled Hollywood's "blockbuster syndrome," but also created opportunities for smaller, independent distributors to do considerable business.³⁷

Hollywood experienced another wave of conglomeration in the 1980s, this one marked by the conjoining of firms operating in multiple media, with "synergy" serving as a common goal and buzzword, as well as the purchase of several studios by international corporations.³⁸ Following a series of deregulatory moves on the part of the US government in the 1980s and 1990s,³⁹ Hollywood became so enmeshed within a multimedia conglomerate system that, for film historian Thomas Schatz, it entered a new "Conglomerate Hollywood" phase around the

mid-1990s.⁴⁰ In addition to conglomeration that brought film, television, cable, print, music, and other media within one corporate empire, this period was shaped by globalization and digital technologies.⁴¹ While Hollywood has long produced films outside the United States and exploited international markets,⁴² from the 1990s onward it *relied* on foreign territories to recoup costs on its wildly expensive blockbusters; by the 2000s, it was common for Hollywood studios to earn around 70 percent of their theatrical revenues outside North America. Digital technologies significantly impacted the way films were made and the way they looked and sounded, as well, particularly with the use of nonlinear editing technologies, digital sound, and computer-generated imagery to create dynamically spectacular special effects.

Over this period, the suburban multiplexes that came to prominence in the 1970s, often attached to shopping malls, gave way to megaplexes in the 1990s and 2000s.⁴³ These massive, standalone theaters featured as many as twenty-four screens under one roof, boasted digital sound, excellent sightlines, and added attractions such as cafés. Although the chains that ran these theaters claimed that the multitude of screens would support a diversity of films, megaplexes in fact helped solidify the place of Hollywood blockbusters in the theatrical window. In home video, the invention of DVD in the late 1990s brought a surplus of new revenues to Hollywood as well, as consumers largely purchased and collected, rather than rented, these commodities, supplanting the VHS as a technology and allowing Hollywood to resell many old movies all over again.⁴⁴

Yet not all of the American media industry was oriented toward blockbuster films and television programs that aimed for “mass” or global audiences. The rise of cable television is especially notable in this regard, supported as it was by multiple changes in the regulatory landscape from the 1970s through the 1990s. More than fifty million Americans subscribed to cable by the end of the 1980s, and the number of cable stations increased dramatically over the 1990s. Amanda Lotz refers to this period as “the multi-channel transition,” during which the hold of the three national broadcast networks eroded. This phase altered the cultural and industrial logic of television, broadly conceived. As Lotz writes, “Television has been reconfigured in recent decades as a medium that most commonly addresses fragmented and specialized audience groups.”⁴⁵ Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc similarly observe that “American TV shifted from the network era into the multi-channel [cable] era,” and consequently “TV culture has moved from being a mass medium that a nation consumed as a whole to one catering to a series of increasingly specialized interests.”⁴⁶ Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Fuchs, and Anthony Freitas add that narrowcasting can entail themes, “such as animals or food,” or aim to entice “particular audiences, such as African Americans, children, or Latinos.”⁴⁷

Analogous dynamics occurred in the movie business. Looking at cinema from 1967 to 1990, Timothy Corrigan noted: “The shifting and often uncertain identities of . . . audiences (in age, gender, economics, and race, for instance) have . . .

become much more difficult for a single movie to address, . . . and movies have had to follow those audiences from theatrical settings into homes and onto videocassette recorders and cable screens.⁴⁸

Independent cinema was especially directed toward distinct audience groups organized by taste cultures, social identity, and other distinguishing characteristics. Thomas Schatz writes that by the 2000s, the American movie business was stratified into (1) blockbuster films made by the studios and, occasionally, by a “minimajor” like New Line; (2) specialty cinema produced and distributed by studios’ indie divisions; and (3) genre and specialty cinema produced and distributed by small, truly independent companies.⁴⁹

Thus, as New Hollywood transitioned into Conglomerate Hollywood, companies operating in multiple media followed several contrasting logics. Driven simultaneously by blockbusters aimed at diverse global audiences and by movies, television programs, and marketing practices that targeted consumers with distinct tastes, modern media culture has been defined by incorporative (and corporatized) heterogeneity. From the late 1960s through the 2000s, New Line Cinema threaded itself through this complex industrial fabric and, in fact, was emblematic of its complexity and apparent variations.

The following pages are organized into five chapters and a conclusion, each of which examines New Line’s operations over the course of a decade, more or less, with some overlap and blurriness at the edges. From its humble beginnings in the 1960s, through its extraordinary growth in the 1980s and 1990s, to its billion-dollar success at the dawn of the new millennium, to its institutional dismantling in 2008, New Line’s history is both highly distinctive and yet illustrative of the modern movie business. And although the post-2008 New Line is a shell of its former self, films still carry the New Line Cinema logo as a subdivision of Warner Bros. Perhaps more important, the company’s long-standing industrial and cultural logics continue to reverberate; New Line’s ability to cultivate niche audiences and edge into mainstream markets can be seen everywhere in the individualized, digital media culture of today, from Lionsgate to A24 to Amazon Video. Blurring boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, between independent film and Hollywood, and between the margins and the mainstream, New Line Cinema offers a clear and compelling roadmap of the heterogeneity of modern cinema. Today we are accustomed to narrowcasting, to franchises that cut across media platforms, and to media that are more socially diverse. But we got here through a tumultuous period when Hollywood reinvented the rules of its own success. *Maverick Movies* tells that story.

“Take a Film Where It Will Be Most Appreciated”

The First Decade of New Line Cinema

It started small. Robert Shaye founded New Line Cinema in August 1967. The following month, the company got its first public notice in a blurb, buried deep on a page of *Variety*, stating simply that “New Line Cinema Corp. registered to do business in New York.”¹ At this moment, the company was more of an aspiration than an organization dedicated to distributing films. By 1978, however, New Line would be a strong force in both the college cinema and midnight movie scenes, with a catalog of more than one hundred films, a small but dedicated team of employees, and an Academy Award for the film *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* (1978).

This chapter charts New Line Cinema’s development during the 1960s and 1970s, a trajectory that appears haphazard but ultimately demonstrates nuance and strategy. During this time, New Line functioned primarily as a nontheatrical distributor of films to college campuses, an area of the film industry that was small compared to Hollywood. Yet this was a heyday for viewing films on college campuses, as the study of cinema began to enter the academy in an organized, robust way, supported by the cinephilic and politicized youth culture centered on college campuses. The campus culture of this time was energized by all manner of issues, such as the antiwar movement and civil rights activism, and New Line’s programming was similarly diverse, eclectic, and energetic.

New Line displayed notable opportunism throughout this time, distributing a diverse selection of films that proved successful enough on campuses to allow the company to grow. In addition to art films, rock documentaries, and experimental shorts, New Line branched out into the midnight movie realm, serving an urban counterculture that rejected mainstream culture and values. New Line’s opportunism derived from economic necessity; the company remained financially

marginal throughout the period. This combination of opportunism and eclecticism, this *opportunistic eclecticism*, allowed New Line to flourish. Not only did New Line respond with unusual savvy to the highly varied taste cultures found on college campuses and in midnight movie theaters during the 1960s and 1970s, programming films and genres that resonated with dedicated fan communities; but it also nurtured and contributed to the sense of eclectic fragmentation within this cultural field. As later chapters make more apparent, New Line's experience with the college campus and midnight movie cultures proved to be key to the company's long-term strategy and identity. It was during this time and in these cultural realms that New Line developed the tactic of identifying, exploiting, and cultivating small, dedicated audience communities and, further, attempted to expand a "niche" film's audience beyond that expected community. College campuses and midnight movie theaters served as a training ground in how important social identity was to the formation of cinematic tastes and, further, how such tastes could be hailed and nurtured for economic gain. These were training grounds in the power of demographics, a lesson that New Line would take with it all the way from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

THE "NEW" IN NEW LINE

It would be difficult to describe the beginnings of New Line Cinema without also describing that of New Line founder Robert Shaye; indeed, New Line was a one-man operation for its first year of operation.² Shaye grew up in Detroit, where his father owned a wholesale grocery business. Although Shaye was interested in being an actor or filmmaker, his father strongly encouraged him to go into business. Shaye attended the University of Michigan in the late 1950s, where he studied business administration. Ann Arbor was fertile with philosophical, artistic, and political energy. In 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society, led by Tom Hayden, whose time at Michigan overlapped with Shaye's, wrote the Port Huron Statement. The Ann Arbor Film Festival, dedicated to avant-garde film, was founded in 1963 and initially screened its films on campus.

Shaye studied law at Columbia University and graduated in 1964. During this time, he made a short, experimental film titled *Images* and entered it into festivals and contests. The film received an enthusiastic response from the judges of a contest organized by the Society of Cinematologists, the precursor organization of today's Society for Cinema and Media Studies. The award was established in 1962 with the aim of "the encouragement of young American talent in the art of the moving image."³ Through this film and the award, Shaye connected with an alternative intellectual cinema culture that brought together aspects of the youth culture of the moment, the academy, and the experimental film scene. And while Shaye made only one other film before founding New Line—a short documentary

about witchcraft that he made while on a Fulbright in Sweden—the award from the Society of Cinematologists encouraged him to continue working in cinema.

Following his time in Sweden, Shaye returned to New York, where he worked in the photo stills department at the Museum of Modern Art, a job that brought him squarely within the city's intellectual film community. As Haidee Wasson has explained, MoMA was instrumental in the creation of a film culture in the United States that celebrated film as an *art*.⁴ Specifically, the museum's film library circulated films widely throughout North America and helped to shape the film culture at many universities that used the library as a resource.⁵ It helped cinema become part of a public intellectual discourse. However small his job at MoMA was, Shaye thus lived at one of the major centers for specialized film culture in the time leading up to the founding of New Line.

In fact, MoMA helped shape New Line's trajectory. New Line struck its first deal in 1967, to distribute two Czech films, *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* (1967) and *Martyrs of Love* (1967).⁶ The first film had played as part of the "Festival of New Czechoslovak Cinema" at Lincoln Center, presented by the Film Department of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art.⁷ This series, which played in June 1967, featured such films as *Daisies* (1966) and *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), among others. The festival brought Shaye into contact with foreign film producers who sought distribution for their pictures in the United States. Because of Shaye's position at MoMA, and because of the festival's presentation by the museum in a venue associated with an intellectual film culture, it made sense that Shaye would take foreign films onto college campuses and other sites that valued nonmainstream cinema. Further, this festival accorded with the recognition within the United States of what has become known as the Czech New Wave. This festival helped solidify these films into a coherent corpus for American viewers, in the wake of other "new waves" from various international locations.

The "newness" promoted in this festival partook of a larger celebration of "the new" in cinema culture of the 1960s. The French "Nouvelle Vague" was identified in 1959, so clearly distinguished that an article in *Variety* declared: "The so-called 'new wave' of filmmaking, which brought a flock of newcomers into the directorial setup . . . looks to be building into a tidal wave here."⁸ At this same time, Jonas Mekas wrote, "The 'new American wave' is not yet as accomplished a body of film-makers as its equivalent in France; but it is undeniably on its way."⁹ Over the next few years, Mekas published "The First Statement of the New Cinema Group" and "Notes on the New American Cinema," among other articles that sought to distinguish a "New American Cinema."¹⁰ Newness was a value to be sought after in filmmaking.

As yet another indication of a celebration of the "new" in 1960s film culture, MoMA ran a screening series titled "New Cinema: An International Selection" in January 1967, when Shaye was working there.¹¹ In addition to *Black God, White Devil* (Glauber Rocha, 1964), *Man Is Not a Bird* (Dušan Makavejev, 1965), and

Unreconciled (Jean-Marie Straub, 1965), the artist documentary *Vali: The Witch of Positano* (Sheldon Rochlin, 1965) was screened as part of this series, a film that New Line distributed shortly thereafter. Further, the series was accompanied by a symposium titled “Is There a New Cinema?” the panelists of which included Mekas, Amos Vogel, and Annette Michelson.¹² This series represented still another indication of a larger youth culture that sought the creation of a “new cinema” that better accorded with contemporary culture of the 1960s. In this swirl of an energetic cinema culture, Shaye hoped to name his company “New Wave Films” but found the name was taken. Years later, he wrote, “So New Line [was] as close as I could get. Added Cinema to get some respect.”¹³ A second choice, perhaps, the name New Line Cinema might be seen nevertheless as one answer to the MoMA symposium’s central question, “Is There a New Cinema?”

CAMPUS FILM CULTURE

By the time Shaye secured a contract to distribute the two Czech films, the company’s name and activities lined up with a larger discourse of “the new” in film culture, carrying with it associations with youth, artistic innovation, and the hint of an oppositional politics. At this early stage in the company’s history, its marketing materials featured the slogan “New Line Cinema: Film Distribution of the New Generation.”¹⁴ From the start, New Line attempted to establish a legend for itself, an identifiable set of characteristics and meanings that might enhance its business by way of its perceived cultural value. New Line distributed films in a manner that similarly fit within the cultural register of newness and youthfulness. Operating as a “nontheatrical” distributor, New Line programed these and later films for college campuses. The nontheatrical distribution sector catered to many types of settings and venues. The major nontheatrical distributor Films Incorporated, for example, listed schools, colleges and universities, social service centers, boys’ clubs, neighborhood houses, summer camps, churches, and a number of so-called “shut-in institutions,” including hospitals, prisons, and reformatories, as among the clients it might serve.¹⁵

College campuses were among the most important of these venues in the 1960s. Although this was the period when film studies became institutionalized more broadly in American universities, surprisingly little has been written about film societies, campus film culture, or the industry that serviced that culture during the 1960s.¹⁶ As media scholar Andrea Comisky writes, “In the 1960s and 1970s, movies saturated campus life,” and “campus film exhibition is fundamentally tied not just to the development of cinephilic culture (epitomized by the film society), but also to another marginal domain of film culture . . . ‘useful cinema.’”¹⁷

The nontheatrical film distribution industry that fostered this culture was strong and lucrative. Smaller than the conventional, Hollywood industry, nontheatrical distribution was rich and dynamic during the 1960s and 1970s. As Comisky

writes, “Students of the 1960s and 1970s were bombarded with opportunities to watch movies,” and “virtually every imaginable kind of film appeared on campuses in the period.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the nontheatrical business sector that served college campuses entailed a range of companies, both small and large, that distributed a wide selection of movies, including “classic” Hollywood films, foreign art films, documentaries, and other genres not appearing contemporaneously in commercial theaters. An article from 1966 in *Billboard* stated, “An active business in renting entertainment films to college campuses and their students is in full swing,” a business “primarily built around several major companies, with scores of small local companies offering supplemental libraries.”¹⁹

Films Incorporated was the largest of these companies. Headquartered in Chicago, Films Inc. began operation in 1927 as a distributor of Hollywood films to nontheatrical venues.²⁰ By the mid-1960s, the company was distributing educational programming and handling nontheatrical engagements for multiple Hollywood studios, including 20th Century Fox and Paramount.²¹ The company’s catalog from 1962 is over 160 pages long and lists more than 1,500 films for rent, organized into broad, generic categories like “Comedy” and “War Themes” and then subdivided by more precise criteria, including the names of certain performers or subgeneric labels, such as “Backstage” musicals.

Among the “scores” of other companies that *Billboard* noted, a number specialized in foreign films and art cinema, the most notable among these being Audio Film Center Inc., Brandon Films, Contemporary Films, and Janus Films.²² Audio Brandon, which resulted from the merger of two of the aforementioned companies, offered an incredibly large and diverse selection of films in the 1970s. The company also offered a separate catalog, “International Film Classics,” which included “outstanding foreign language and English language 16mm sound features gathered from all corners of the globe.”²³ The company aimed this catalog at “the more mature viewer—the language student, the college student, film societies . . . and the more discriminating social or church groups.”²⁴ In this fashion, Audio Brandon targeted an intellectual, cinephilic population that could properly appreciate “quality” films. Similarly, Contemporary Films offered such movies as *Children of Paradise* (1945), *Boudou Saved from Drowning* (1932), and *Woman of the Dunes* (1964), as well as a number of pictures by Jean-Luc Godard.²⁵ Janus Films stood as a particularly distinguished company in this field because, first, it successfully distributed foreign art films to commercial theaters and, second, because its catalog featured some of the most celebrated art films of the time, including *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Rashomon* (1950), and *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

Such distributors of “quality cinema” commonly addressed and appealed to college-based audiences that sought a form of intellectual, “difficult” entertainment considered artistically and culturally superior to mainstream or exploitation cinema (though the audiences for all these types of films commonly overlapped).

That is, these specialty film distributors offered a cinephilic, intellectual cinema that combined entertainment with prestige and edification. Of course, companies like Films Incorporated and others *did* distribute “educational” films, too. Indeed, this odd mixture of edification, entertainment, artistic pretension, and politics characterizes campus film culture during this period.

New Line navigated and contributed to this campus film culture after entering the small but dynamic nontheatrical distribution sector. The company’s promotional and marketing materials from the time indicate how it sought to distinguish itself and its films in the late 1960s and early 1970s; in doing so, these materials point toward an active and heterogeneous movie culture on US college campuses. As film historian Haidee Wasson has explained, one of the ways MoMA framed cinema as “serious” was through the publication and circulation of program notes that provided information about the films.²⁶ The program notes that New Line produced and circulated for its films served both as promotional devices and as tools to educate college programmers and audiences. These newsprint newsletters were titled “Seymour: Program Notes for New Line Cinema.” “Seymour” was nothing more than a homophone for “see more,” as in “See more New Line movies.”

The notes for *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* demonstrate the dual promotional and educational function of these texts. On the first page appears a still image from the film, of a woman walking with a white horse, along with a description of the film, as well as an interview with director Jan Schmidt and quotes from reviews of the film.²⁷ Alongside this material, the notes situate the film as an important and acclaimed work that viewers will find accessible and intellectually engaging. The description of this postapocalyptic film states that the director’s method is “unpretentious” and that “it would be a mistake to take this film as a ‘parable.’” Instead, the document advises, “like the very best of science fiction and fantasy, its energy is directed toward an intense vision of what it really would be like—in the details, in the smallest details, in the texture and feel of the possible world it envisions.” Here, the notes promise viewers a film that combines formal brilliance and generic accessibility, following a logic of refinement and populism that would characterize much of New Line’s programming and promotional materials through the 1960s and 1970s.

This description, the interview with Schmidt, and the review quotes continue for the next several pages of the newsletter and are followed by smaller sections devoted to two short films, *Summer War* (1965) and *Dodge City* (c. 1967). At the very end of the notes, advertisements appear for two other New Line films, *Vali: The Witch of Positano* and *Martyrs of Love*. The “Seymour” notes for *Martyrs of Love* resemble those for *Hotel Ozone*, though the tone of the document appears to seek an even greater air of significance and artistic refinement. The description of the film states that the film “epitomizes a genre of stylized cinema—‘film of the

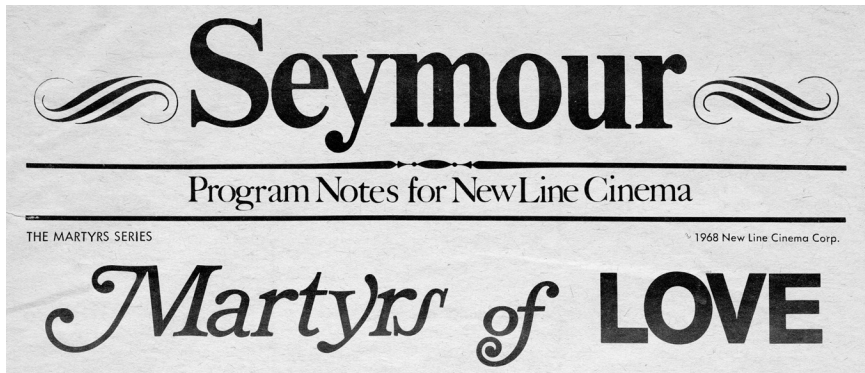


FIGURE 1. New Line distributed “Seymour” program notes in its newsletter to promote its films on college campuses, as well as to educate audiences about obscure films. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.

author’—which as an essence of personal vision, might be traced as far back as the film classics of Dali, René Clair, or Jean Cocteau.”²⁸ The subsequent pages are again filled with quotes from reviews and an interview with *Martyrs of Love* director Jan Nêmec, accompanied by images from the film. This edition of “Seymour” notes provides a short but informative description of the history of the Czech film school and film faculty at the Academy of Music Art. New Line sought to educate its college audience regarding the film, providing multiple aspects of a “preferred reading” of *Martyrs of Love*. It aimed to situate the film as formally innovative, reflecting an auteur’s personal vision, and as socially and historically significant due to its connection to the renowned film school. Clearly a promotional tool, the “Seymour” program notes point toward New Line’s early ambition to engage with a thoughtful and curious cinema audience.

New Line promoted its films to college audiences with additional materials, for instance sending programmers glossy production stills and promotional photographs related to *Martyrs*, likely intended to help the societies promote the film in their different locations. One picture taken from the film, for example, announces “A new CZECH comedy” following the title, while others have typed notes attached to contextualize them for programmers. One, for example, reads: “ANASTASIA’S DREAM is part of a trilogy called MARTYRS OF LOVE, a feature film from the New Czech Cinema to be sneak previewed . . . in association with New Line Cinema Corporation.”²⁹

In its attempt to entice and cultivate positive relationships with programmers on college campuses around the country, New Line advertised directly to them and, further, helped these programmers advertise themselves with materials related to the films. Because New Line handled offbeat fare, including comparatively

obscure, black-and-white, subtitled films from Czechoslovakia, promotion for the company consistently looked like educational material.

New Line's early films played at a number of noteworthy locations, and local and student newspapers reveal how college programmers appealed to audiences with New Line titles. One ad in the *Cornell Daily Sun* advertised *Martyrs of Love* in September 1969, playing at Ithaca College. The ad announces, "EUB presents New Line Cinema's 'The Martyrs of Love,' and indicates that the film will be playing in a room in the Union at nearby Ithaca College.³⁰ Similarly, an ad from 1968 in the *Michigan Daily* at the University of Michigan advertises that "CINEMA II presents WORLD WAR III in three award-winning films," consisting of *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* and the attached shorts.³¹ Both of these cases show how campus-based groups promoted themselves, the distributor, and the films. New Line worked to appeal not just to college audiences but also to the people and groups on the local level that sought those audiences. Further, the note in the *Michigan Daily* ad regarding "WORLD WAR III" indicates that these groups had some power over the ways New Line and its films were promoted. It was important for New Line to guide these programmers toward preferred understandings of the films through educational advertising materials.

One can get an even deeper sense of New Line's complex relationship with college film groups by looking at Columbia University, where there was a student group called the Board of Managers. The group's 1968 winter program included such art cinema standards as *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), *Masculin-Feminin* (1966), and *The Virgin Spring* (1960).³² At the end of the term, the group presented *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone*, which it advertised multiple times. Although most of these ads were small notices including only the title, date, location, and occasionally the price, the paper featured a full-page advertisement for the film on April 17.³³ This ad featured a sizable black-and-white image from the film, of a woman leaping onto a moving horse, which took up more than half the page, as well as a substantial excerpt from the film's review in *Time*, a review excerpt from *Newsday*, show time and price information, and the titles of the two accompanying short films. Even for a student newspaper, it is a bold advertisement. The ad declares, "ONLY PREVIOUS NEW YORK SHOWING: SELL-OUT AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART," attempting to create a sense of exclusivity and prestige.

Although it is unknown how many people attended this screening, *Late August at the Hotel Ozone* made enough of an impact that it earned a review in the *Daily Spectator* on the day it opened. Largely positive, the review relies heavily on New Line's marketing materials, with passages that closely paraphrase and even copy elements of the "Seymour" notes.³⁴ Thus, not only was New Line effective at working with campus groups to promote the company and its films, but its advertising and marketing materials at times influenced the reception of those films. These were early, small steps in legend building.

COUNTERPROGRAMMING AND COUNTERCULTURE

In its first several years of operation New Line quickly established a distribution presence on many college campuses. By May 1969, the company had distributed films to such schools as Penn State, Harvard, Pratt Institute of Art, University of Rochester, University of Washington, University of Buffalo, Hofstra University, University of New Hampshire, University of Windsor, Indiana University, and Princeton, along with the schools already mentioned.³⁵ In addition, the company occasionally programmed films at repertory and midnight movie venues, including the Elgin Theater in New York. Nevertheless, its catalog remained quite small, entailing short films, odd foreign films, and the occasional American independent or underground feature. In his review of *Martyrs of Love*, Vincent Canby noted, “The picture is the first release of New Line Cinema, a small independent company whose aim is to handle movies that other distributors wouldn’t touch with a pole of any imaginable length.”³⁶

This was a pivotal moment of change in movie culture that ultimately benefited New Line and its slightly haphazard approach to cinema. Within Hollywood, this moment was defined by the continued corporate conglomeration and the rise of new auteur-minded directors that would define the emerging “New Hollywood Cinema.”³⁷ The financial success of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Easy Rider* (1969) represents a dedicated shift toward youth culture and the counterculture on the part of the studios, at the same time that these studios became part of new, diversified corporations that often had no previous dealings in film or media. As Jon Lewis has discussed, Hollywood engaged with the counterculture to varying degrees of success between 1967 and 1976, particularly as a number of Hollywood figures and aspirants lived counterculture lifestyles and also tried to forge careers in the movie business.³⁸ Some films that embodied countercultural values did well, perplexing studio bosses: *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) were all “timely, hip, and political.”³⁹ Even so, Hollywood struggled to consistently engage with or represent the youth culture of the moment, opening cracks at the edges of film culture that small companies like New Line could enter and exploit.

The protests of May 1968 in France and the other student and public uprisings in various parts of the world that year politicized a good portion of the cinephilic youth culture of the moment.⁴⁰ This newly energized, politically motivated movie culture inspired journals and magazines, including *Cahiers du Cinema*, to claim a new revolutionary stance toward cinema. Likewise, a number of filmmakers became overly political in their filmmaking, or more so, with Jean Luc-Godard standing as one of the most prominent examples. New Line Cinema gained some of its first financial success and public attention in 1970 when it distributed the first film that Godard directed following May 1968, *1 + 1*, or *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968). The film was supposed to premier at the 1968 New York Film Festival,

along with *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1967) and *Weekend* (1967). However, it was pulled at the last minute due to processing delays.⁴¹ New Line acquired the nontheatrical rights to *Sympathy for the Devil* after it played at several other festivals.

The ostensible main attraction of *Sympathy* is the Rolling Stones, and it features long takes of the Rolling Stones in the studio recording the song “Sympathy for the Devil.” Many of these passages suggest the tedium of the recording process, as long moments pass before anyone sings, plays an instrument, or interacts with someone else. Further, the quality of the music performed during these scenes often indicates how highly manufactured rock ’n’ roll music actually is. While these passages undermine the myth of the raw genius and intuitive brilliance of the Rolling Stones, and by implication rock ’n’ roll music more generally, the film’s other segments take the form of leftist agitprop through speechifying and parable. The juxtaposition of these scenes with those featuring the Rolling Stones asks viewers to connect contemporary radical politics with contemporary pop culture in dialectical fashion.

Upon its commercial release in April 1970, the film got a middling review in the *New York Times*.⁴² Yet Craig Fisher has indicated that this film, along with Godard’s other “late,” more political films, had more difficulty finding commercial distribution and exhibition than his earlier films of “personal expression and romantic ambiguity.”⁴³ And, indeed, it appears that the film played for only a limited time at a single movie theater in New York.⁴⁴ What Fisher overlooks, however, is that New Line distributed the film primarily to college campuses and the film played extensively in these venues. Indeed, before the film played at the commercial theater, New Line programmed it to play multiple nights at Hunter College in New York City. Afterward, New Line continued to show the film at colleges and universities around the country continuously for a number of years.

Although *Sympathy*’s didactic political messages might have stymied its exhibition in commercial theaters, its combination of leftist politics and the appearance of the Rolling Stones appears to have made it a good match for exhibition at colleges, which at the time were scenes of student political engagement and activism. As the film’s distributor, New Line drew on the film’s dialectical form and marketed the film according to two distinct premises: first, the appearance of the hugely popular Rolling Stones and, second, an appeal to viewers with a taste for ideological and political filmmaking.

The company distributed multiple posters, fliers, and advertising proofs to the colleges that showed the film, each of which played up one of these marketing angles—or offered them both in juxtaposition. Cornell Cinema, which appears to have played the film in 1972, had a flier for the film, one side of which reads “Jean-Luc Godard on Black Power, Rape, Murder, Fascism, Acid, Pornography, Sex, Gore, Brutality . . . and all the other things that make life worth living.”⁴⁵ This list of otherwise unconnected topics addressed viewers with a taste for provocative and political cinema; by invoking drugs, violence, and sex as keywords, the flier

even suggests an exploitation model of advertising. The bottom of the page reads, “Starring the Rolling Stones.”

The flier’s reverse side features a picture of singer Mick Jagger that takes up most of the space. The remainder is filled with quotes from reviews of the film in national magazines and newspapers. In making such prominent use of Jagger’s image, this side of the flier sells *Sympathy for the Devil* as a Rolling Stones movie. The quotes from the published reviews establish the film’s artistic legitimacy as well as its “revolutionary” position, as most of the blurbs discuss the film’s political content. Through this promotional flier, New Line framed the film as simultaneously politically radical, artistically innovative, and popularly accessible through its connection to the Rolling Stones.

New Line maintained this set of associations through the marketing materials sent to university film groups to “assist” them in their own efforts to promote screenings of the movie, as can be seen in an advertising proof sheet the company sent to Cornell Cinema.⁴⁶ This proof similarly features a large image of Jagger beneath big block letters that declare, “Godard. The Rolling Stones. ‘*Sympathy for the Devil (1 + 1)*.’” Multiple quotes from critics appear next to the image, announcing the film’s artistic and political significance. Instructions for college groups appear on the edge of the proof, giving technical advice about different kinds of print reproduction in print ads or leaflets. Not once but twice, the instructions state that the ads or fliers need to “to include information on time, place and date for your showing” at the bottom of the ad. This document demonstrates how New Line sought to promote its films and shape the ways people and groups promoted and exhibited these films.

Such materials indicate that New Line imagined a college film audience that would respond to the combined attractions of oppositional politics, artistic experimentation, and a rebellious hipness. That is, these ads suggest how New Line imagined, constructed, and even responded to a cinematic counterculture that sought resonant entertainment. Some evidence shows that this is precisely the audience that the film found. In his review of the film, Vincent Canby discusses not just the film’s form and content but the audience at Hunter College as well, where he evidently saw the film during its premier run. Canby noted, “From the amount of sweet, grassy effluvia wafting about the hall, it was apparent the audience was fairly hip, and one that was intent on being turned on, even if without the help of Godard’s ascetic, non-Head images.”⁴⁷ Canby’s comments suggest that the film served as a vehicle for people to get stoned in addition to, or instead of, engaging in serious art and political thought. We may surmise that this audience took the movie’s advertising to mean that it combined politics and rock ’n’ roll and chose to declare their own opposition to traditional values by getting high en masse.

A review of the film from a screening at Wayne State University in Detroit noted that “nearly one-third” of the audience walked out of the film. “If one plans

on an entertaining evening ogling over the Rolling Stones, ala the Beatles productions,” the critic wrote, “one might as well stay home.”⁴⁸ Yet the reviewer actually praised the film, suggesting that a considerable portion of the audience did not understand or chose to ignore the film’s double-inflected advertising. Thus, while the film may have sought a politically charged, counterculture audience, a portion of this audience appeared to prefer more conventional entertainment.

Nevertheless, the film’s advertisements in both major and college newspapers maintain the film’s double appeal—politics and rock ’n’ roll. Many of these ads indicated some slippage regarding the film’s title, including both the film’s original title, *1 + 1*, and the title given to it later by one of its producers, *Sympathy for the Devil*. Yet these different names actually represent two versions of the film. *1 + 1* is the film originally directed by Godard. Notoriously, however, one of the film’s producers, Iain Quarrier, added the fully mixed, complete version of the song “Sympathy for the Devil” at the end, providing audiences with the final product of the recording sessions they witness during the film. Yet Godard famously protested this addition, disowning it and, in fact, punching Quarrier in the face and stomach at the (modified) film’s London premier.⁴⁹

New Line split the difference and distributed *both* versions of the film to many venues.⁵⁰ This is perhaps unsurprising, given New Line’s position as a profit-seeking company. Although it might appeal to audiences with a taste for leftist, even Marxist politics, it did not discriminate as to how this audience might articulate their politics in terms of ticket purchases. That is, New Line’s business may have catered to the college-based counterculture, but this was business nevertheless; ideological rigidity appeared to serve no real purpose. Opportunism did.

The film appears to have been a modest hit for New Line and helped the company gain some prominence. Following its premiere at Hunter College and its run at the Murray Hill Theater, *Sympathy for the Devil* did play at some commercial theaters in 1970–72 and appears to have done quite well in those venues.⁵¹ Yet the film played primarily at college venues and found considerable financial success there. As one story put it, “New Line Cinema is bypassing theatrical distribution completely with Godard’s ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ and amassing impressive grosses at university screenings across the country.”⁵² This story highlights how the film was held up as a financial success early in its nontheatrical run, consequently positioning New Line as a small but successful company.

Although the film combined radical politics and pop culture icons in a way that appeared logical to some audiences but confusing to others, *Sympathy for the Devil* helped define New Line within the field of nontheatrical distribution and college movie culture more generally. Shaye and others at New Line used this film’s success to distinguish the company as “political” in its own right. “Exhibitors that cry for youth-oriented product,” *Variety* observed, “very often don’t recognize potential blockbusters when they see them, and as a result are forcing at least one indie distributor to seek whole new channels of exhibition. That is the opinion of

Bob Shaye, president of New Line Cinema Corp.⁵³ In this characterization, New Line comes off as responsive to hip movie audiences. The company's marginality appears here as an unwanted but nevertheless strategic asset, allowing it to define itself as opposed to Hollywood and connected to youth culture.

Seth Williamson, New Line's director of marketing at the time, took the point even further, according to a story in *Billboard*. In his characterization, New Line's objective was to connect to existing student groups and have them build excitement for New Line's films as a kind of viral marketing: "Supporting the groups that develop an audience, creates a sure-fire promotion for a motion picture."⁵⁴ The story displays New Line's strategy of harnessing existing cultural energies and turning them toward ticket sales. Williamson elaborated: "The audience [for *Sympathy for the Devil*] was there because a film based on revolutionary ideals and the Rolling Stones would, we felt, receive the most response from a campus audience. Our philosophy is to take a film where it will be most appreciated. This brings a built-in promotion by word of mouth."⁵⁵

The implication is that New Line would latch on to the political, artistic, and cinematic energies of campus culture and turn this into profit. Just as important, however, Williamson implies that New Line is actually providing a service to college campuses, distributing to these venues not simply because it can't book conventional theaters but because this is the social field that has the most desire for New Line's films. A chain of associations appears: *Sympathy for the Devil* is political, artistic, and hip, and so is New Line Cinema. College film cultures are political, artistic, and hip, and so is New Line Cinema.

New Line's roster of films continued to grow during the early 1970s, and the company largely maintained its specialization in foreign art films and American independent and underground films. By the time the company organized its first official catalog in 1973, it boasted dozens of movies from all over the world. It included films from European auteurs like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Robert Bresson, and Werner Herzog, as well as pictures from American literary figures Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut. Many New Line films at this time upheld an interest in politics or artistic distinction, or both, though perhaps none brought these issues together as closely as *Sympathy for the Devil*.

New Line's first catalog also made clear that the company aimed at college audiences: "Films in the 70s offers an unprecedented variety of styles and influences which should be an important part of any campus entertainment and cultural program."⁵⁶ Here, the catalog acknowledges the heterogeneity of movie culture at this historical moment, a diversity it tries to align with the heterogeneity of films found within the catalog itself. But it celebrates this multiplicity of film styles and genres as a cultural good. The catalog asserts that cinema is both a form of entertainment and culture, and that this blend of interests in fun and enrichment is especially important on college campuses. Appealing directly to campus programmers, the catalog declares: "As film programmers, you have the opportunity to go beyond

standard film exhibition routine. Hollywood and traditional classics are no doubt an important part of a program, but film today goes further than these tried and true narrow limits. A campus film program should be more than just another movie theater in your community.”⁵⁷

Conventional cinema may be fine, the catalog argues, but college audiences should push themselves beyond such fare and “graduate” to a more advanced cinema that New Line can provide. “College is the only time when students will have the opportunity to be exposed to the important variety of independent film programming,” it asserts. “These are films that inform, entertain and fascinate on a broad level.”

Like the marketing materials discussed above, the New Line catalog also discussed ways the company could assist film societies and other campus groups with whatever they needed to screen a film. The catalog states that the company can send a variety of promotional materials to be used on campus, including trailers, posters, “advertising design sets,” production stills, one-sheets, and recordings to be used as prepared radio advertisements.⁵⁸ Here we see again how New Line sought to overcome the possible variations among film groups and local institutional conditions by providing materials to be used in promoting the films, much in the way a traditional theatrical distributor might promote its products. More interesting, perhaps, the catalog claims that New Line “has a trained staff of recent college graduates whose job is to work with you and your film program.”⁵⁹ With this, the company seeks to distinguish itself as organically connected to youth culture and tastes. The catalog implies that New Line literally *embodies* college film culture.

In addition to narrative features, New Line distributed a collection of experimental films and documentaries that the catalog placed in a section called “New Line, New Wave.” The catalog touts such films as representing important cinematic innovations comparable to recent work made “in major studio productions such as ‘Easy Rider’ or the NEW AMERICAN CINEMA of Jonas Mekas.”⁶⁰ The catalog points out that such short, underground films have had difficulty finding distribution, thereby positioning New Line as providing an important cultural service. Although some of the films in this section are more straightforward documentaries or experimental works, many of the films in the “New Wave” section connect directly to the oppositional politics of the counterculture at the time. For instance, New Line distributed Morley Markson’s feature-length documentary *Breathing Together: Revolution of the Electric Family* (1971), which features interviews regarding culture and politics by such figures as R. Buckminster Fuller, Allen Ginsberg, and Abbie Hoffman. Likewise, this section of the catalog offered *Paradise Now* (1970), a film of the play by the radical leftist, experimental theater troupe the Living Theater.

Some of the films distributed by New Line to college campuses actually reflect the political and cultural life on those campuses. One notable example is

Confrontation at Kent State (1970), a documentary made during the week following the shooting of students at Kent State by members of the Ohio National Guard during an antiwar protest on May 4, 1970. Directed by filmmaker and Kent State faculty member Richard Myers and produced with help from students, the film includes interviews with students, local citizens, and members of the National Guard. It also includes footage of the campus both before and following the tragedy.

In the negotiations with the filmmakers, New Line attempted to set aside some of *Confrontation's* rental revenue to support an award for other "politically oriented" films, though it is unclear if this plan ever came about.⁶¹ New Line apparently secured nonexclusive rights to distribute the film, to the chagrin of Robert Shaye as indicated in his correspondence with the filmmaker.⁶² Nevertheless, a deal was set for a fifty-fifty revenue-sharing agreement between New Line and the filmmakers, with the producers putting their share of the revenue into a fund that would support "worthwhile organizations, mainly medical and legal student aid groups."⁶³ According to the New Line catalog entry for the film, "After the initial cost of the film is paid, the rentals will be put in a memorial fund for the victims of the shooting. New Line is distributing the film as a public service."⁶⁴

Here, New Line gets caught in a *mise en abyme* of 1970s university culture. What began as an organic manifestation of the antiwar movement on the Kent State campus got transformed into a cinematic rendering of particular aspects of that same, local cultural scene. But the antiwar movement was a political and cultural phenomenon that shaped colleges and other institutions internationally. Ledgers show that New Line was able to book *Confrontation at Kent State* at colleges across the United States.⁶⁵ Many of these screenings were themselves articulations of the antiwar movement and the counterculture, making the film a medium of exchange of oppositional politics and, through its role as distributor, positioning New Line as the mediator of this political and cultural exchange.⁶⁶ The company facilitated the circulation of a politics of civic protest as a matter of business.

Another film within New Line's "New Wave" program was *Branches*, which also aligned New Line Cinema with the desires and ideals of college film culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The film was directed by illustrator and experimental filmmaker Ed Emshwiller and produced by "Cornell University Cinema," the same film society that exhibited numerous New Line offerings. Emshwiller took the opportunity of his residency at Cornell during the summer of 1970 to make a film about contemporary college culture with students themselves.⁶⁷

The film is picaresque, drifting from vignette to vignette, and follows a young man, Number One, who wanders through the film. It works in a highly conceptual, symbolic register, with Number One encountering people who represent different psychological, social, and political positions. A considerable number of scenes involve his sexual pursuit of a young woman, and indeed, the film appears very much invested in an exploration of the libidinal energies of college cultures. Other scenes depict Number One engaging in conversations regarding social issues and



FIGURE 2. Ed Emshwiller directing *Branches* on the campus of Cornell University, 1970. New Line distributed this film to colleges around the country. Cornell Cinema.

politics, including organic farming and Black politics. *Branches* thus offers a creative interpretation of college life in the early 1970s, generated from within that culture. The film brings together an admixture of values that Cornell students held regarding politics, social life, and cinema itself, channeled through Emshwiller.

EXPANDING TASTES, EXPANDING BUSINESS

In 1972, *Billboard* magazine referred to New Line as “one of the major non-theatrical distributors operating in the U.S. college market.”⁶⁸ The company had contacts at around a thousand universities and colleges in the United States.⁶⁹ By 1973, it had multiple employees and the apparatus necessary to handle distribution to colleges and some commercial venues across the country.

The company also expanded into new genres and cinematic registers during this period, following a logic of opportunistic eclecticism at once commercial and cultural. As indicated by the company’s first catalog from 1973, New Line was already defined by a wide range of films and genres, all of which differed from the commercial cinema of the time, including the auteur works of the Hollywood Renaissance. Indeed, even while playing an important role in college film distribution, New Line remained decidedly marginal within the larger movie business in the mid-1970s. But part of its expansion at this moment also involved expanding

FIGURE 3. Shaye obtained a print of *Reefer Madness*, which was in the public domain. Playing on numerous college campuses and at midnight movie screenings, the film was an early hit for New Line Cinema. Cornell Cinema.



into films *intentionally* aimed at marginal audiences. This was clear when in 1972 New Line ventured into the area of exploitation and camp cinema, first with *Reefer Madness* (1936) and the following year with John Waters's *Pink Flamingos*.

Reefer Madness is an anti-marijuana melodrama that tells the story of a handful of teenagers who get corrupted by a group of drug dealers, and features several hyperbolic sequences in which the characters act wildly under the drug's influence. Eventually the police arrest the dealers, and the teenagers are safe once more. Despite the film's original aim to serve as anti-drug propaganda, the head of the pro-legalization National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), Keith Stroup, screened it at fund-raising events in 1972.⁷⁰ Later that year, the film was also screened as a midnight movie at the Elgin and Olympia theaters in New York.⁷¹

The film was in the public domain, allowing anyone who had a physical print of the film to screen it for money, and multiple companies offered the film simultaneously in the early and mid-1970s. Having studied intellectual property law at Columbia University, Shaye knew well that controlling intellectual property was central to the business of film distribution; he even earned second prize in Columbia's Nathan Burkan Memorial Competition, which acknowledges academic studies about copyright law.⁷² For its part, New Line acquired a physical copy of the film from a private party and quickly placed the film in commercial theaters and college screenings across the country.⁷³ The company's first catalog paired the film with *Martian Space Party* (1972), by the Firesign Theater comedy troupe, as "a complete package."⁷⁴ *Reefer Madness* was a success for New Line, and in 1973 the company acquired additional exploitation films aimed at camp audiences with which it might be paired. New Line released the similar anti-drug film

The Cocaine Fiends (1935, originally titled *The Pace That Kills*) and the anti-VD film *Sex Madness* (1938).

Now boasting a slate of camp films and finding success with them in midnight movie theaters and college campuses alike, New Line forged an even clearer “renegade” industrial and cultural identity. On one hand, moving into exploitation cinema and the midnight movie scene put New Line into a fairly crowded market, with companies like Crown Pictures, New World Pictures, Dimension Pictures, and American International Pictures all finding success supplying low-budget films to drive-ins and midnight movie venues.⁷⁵ On the other hand, New Line proved successful amid this competition, helping to shape the landscape of exploitation cinema. John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* was crucial in this regard.

Indeed, it would be hard to disentangle New Line Cinema’s legend in the 1970s from that of director John Waters.⁷⁶ As is well established, Waters began his career making short absurdist films in Baltimore and worked diligently to publicize and screen them. Waters went on to produce two feature-length films of similar strangeness, *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Multiple Maniacs* (1970). At this point, Waters sought broader distribution for his films, but when he initially approached New Line cinema with his work, the company declined.⁷⁷ Fatefully, New Line did acquire *Pink Flamingos* after it had screened at several venues in Baltimore and elsewhere. Matt Connolly argues that New Line initially mishandled the distribution of the film, placing it in a gay porn theater; it took some time before the company booked it as a midnight movie at the Orpheum and then the Elgin Theater in February 1973.⁷⁸ The film was a success at the Elgin, and the theater programmed it for multiple midnight screenings per week during the spring of 1973.⁷⁹

Placing the film at the Elgin helped to give some cultural resonance and definition to *Pink Flamingos*. The Elgin had developed the practice of screening offbeat movies at midnight for audiences interested in nonmainstream, esoteric cinema. Before *Pink Flamingos*, the Elgin had screened the psychedelic Western *El Topo* (1970) continuously for over half a year in 1971.⁸⁰ This film’s extended run helped inaugurate “midnight movies” as a distinct element of alternative film culture. In the early 1970s, this practice entailed an alignment of certain kinds of offbeat films, specific theaters with reputations for programming such fare at midnight, and audiences that sought cultural distinction by demonstrating a taste for films that rejected Hollywood’s visual aesthetics and narrative standards. Midnight movies ranged greatly in technical skill and style, and their audiences treated them with a combination of aesthetic appreciation and ironic superiority. In many cases, the scene at midnight screenings was as much about participating in group intoxication as it was about watching a movie.

Pink Flamingos was poised well to succeed in this milieu. The film stars the drag queen Divine as Babs Johnson, who prides herself on being the “filthiest person alive.” The film follows Babs in her efforts to maintain her position when she is challenged by the Marbles, a couple that wishes to be known as the filthiest

people alive, who kidnap and impregnate women and sell the babies to lesbians. With this competition providing the plot, the film otherwise has a loose, somewhat picaresque structure, with numerous non sequitur vignettes that feature nonnormative sexual or social behavior. The film depicts incest, bestiality, public flashing, and perhaps most infamously, coprophagia. *Pink Flamingos* intends to challenge norms of social and sexual behavior, always coloring its scenes of deviance with a comic sensibility through exaggerated affect or goofy playfulness.

New Line broadened its identity when it acquired *Pink Flamingos*. In 1972, the company also made a deal to distribute a collection of films that had screened at the New York Erotic Film Festival.⁸¹ Around this same time, New Line created a new label: “Saliva Films.” This was precisely the same moment that *Deep Throat* brought sexually explicit films into the wider movie culture, having premiered in New York in the summer of 1972 and subsequently earning record revenues playing in conventional theaters. New Line’s Distribution of *The Best of the New York Erotic Film Fest* thus positioned the company as taking a small part in the temporary mainstreaming of pornography during the 1970s. And yet, through the Saliva label, New Line appeared somewhat ambivalent about this position.

New Line’s first catalog gives Saliva Films its own designated section. The films featured in this section include sexually oriented movies such as *Bizarre* (aka *Secrets of Sex*, 1970) by Anthony Balch and *Together* (1971). *Pink Flamingos* is the first film in this section, suggesting that New Line associated the film with sexploitation pictures. Indeed, this catalog section works to differentiate these films from the others. A page announces “Films of Terror and Delight” and then provides a long, convoluted description of the Saliva films and New Line’s approach to promoting them:

Films of Terror and Delight.

Sex! Sensation! Violence! Not all films are interesting or worthwhile only because of artistic merit or because of critical acclaim. New Line has established the Saliva Collection to be representative of films that reflect other factors in the society. In the last few years we have seen sensationalism increase not only in the content of films, but in the whole approach to marketing them as well. We feel that films that exploit these tastes and needs represent an important part of American culture today. We’re not making a value judgment on the merit of our Saliva Films, but we think that they’re part of the culture and can be a new concept in film programming.⁸²

The way the catalog emphasizes sex and violence clearly connects Saliva films to more conventional exploitation films. It also makes an appeal (likely disingenuous) to the *cultural* validity or “pedagogical appeal” of sexploitation films, another long-standing tactic of exploitation film marketing and promotion.⁸³

For all that *Pink Flamingos* depicts an array of nonnormative sexual identities and practices, John Waters did not intend the film as sexploitation, nor would the film get understood that way as it circulated through culture. New Line’s eventual

promotion of the film positioned it as an intentionally campy avant-garde film designed to appeal to cult film aficionados. Matt Connolly argues convincingly that the advertising and marketing materials put out by New Line for Waters's films of the 1970s represent, to varying degrees, a mixture of the impulses of the director and of the distributor. Connolly suggests that New Line intended to connect Waters with pornography or graphic salaciousness more directly, whereas Waters aimed to create simpler, more playful advertising materials, even if they still challenged conventional standards of good taste.

I am less interested, however, in sorting out who had the agency in promoting Waters and his films than in assessing the tone the eventual marketing materials took, which served as the basis for the larger cultural impressions that both Waters and New Line Cinema made. In this respect, *Pink Flamingos* was strongly positioned as a deliberate assault on conventional norms and morality. Even if the film reveled in sensational depictions of nonnormative sexualities and behaviors, its advertising positioned it as a goofy but impressive piece of alternative cinema.

This strategy can be seen in advertising materials from its run at the Biograph Theater in Washington, DC, as the film expanded beyond New York to midnight screenings around the country through the early 1970s. One ad features the Saliva Films logo at the top and announces "Pink Flamingos" above a picture of Divine with a gun in her hand. A large text bubble emitting from her mouth contains quotes from reviews that attest to the film's depraved intensity. The bottom of the ad promises audience members will receive a "Free Pink Phlegm-ingo Barf Bag with each admission." Accompanying this advertisement is a "Poor Taste Quiz" that asks, "Do you know what the longest running midnite movie in the history of Washington, D.C. is? (*HINT*: Over 20 weeks)," as well as "Do you know what movie theater gives you a barf bag with each admission to its midnight show?"⁸⁴

With the now-classic image of Divine with the gun, this ad resembles many other advertisements and posters for the film, though it does not feature the tagline "an exercise in bad taste" that so many other posters had. A pull quote from one of the reviews lists many of the film's distinct attractions, including Divine, a "transvestite," and "bestiality." At the same time, the pull quote compares the film to *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) in an effort to signal the film's shock value and cultural legitimacy. This ad, then, and all the promotional materials like it created an identity for *Pink Flamingos* that rested on cultural value *through* the qualities that would otherwise mark the film as valueless, namely shock, violence, and anti-heteronormative sexualities. *Pink Flamingos* was not porn; it was counterculture art.

The film was successful as it played at theaters across the country on a rolling basis, and some of these runs were incredibly long. *Variety* noted that the film was booked to play at Walter Reade theaters in multiple cities around the country, including New York, New Orleans, Brookline (Massachusetts), and Portland (Oregon).⁸⁵ In addition to midnight movie theaters, New Line distributed *Pink*

Pink Flamingos

Directed by John Waters
Color, 95 minutes.

PINK FLAMINGOS stars Divine, Edy the Egg Lady, David Lochary and Mink Stole. Divine, living in a pink trailer outside Baltimore, holds the title of “The World’s Filthiest Person.” Connie and Raymond Marble are out to “outfilthy” Divine and take the title for themselves. The Marble’s main claim to fame is their business of kidnapping hippie girls, impregnating them, and selling the babies to lesbian couples. In a series of hilarious and disgusting adventures, Divine and her family finally capture the Marbles and execute them in front of the tabloid press.

THE CRITICS:

“Ten times more interesting than ‘Last Tango in Paris’.” —Village Voice

“Goes beyond pornography...The nearest American film to Bunuel’s ‘Andalusian Dog’.” —New York Magazine

“A cheap, bizarre comedy that represents a totally different response to an unsatisfactory world...PINK FLAMINGOS presents a bizarre but enjoyable world. It affirms the joy of living.” —The Pennsylvania Voice

FIGURE 4. The New Line Cinema catalog positioned *Pink Flamingos* as a shocking piece of art by highlighting film critics who compared it to established works of art cinema. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.

Flamingos to college campuses. Records show that the film screened, for instance, at the University of New Mexico for three nights in October 1974 and sold the two hundred-seat theater out for the first two of those screenings.⁸⁶ The film also played at Syracuse University in September 1974 to even larger crowds.⁸⁷

Although far eclipsed by Hollywood hits of the era, like *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Sting* (1973), *Pink Flamingos* did considerable business within the comparatively minor realm of midnight movies. New Line reported that *Pink Flamingos* had made \$500,000 by early 1974.⁸⁸ According to Waters’s own documents, however, the movie earned around \$50,000 in 1974, nearly \$38,000 in 1975, and over \$50,000 in 1976, which was split between Waters and New Line. Although these numbers come nowhere near the \$500,000 publicly reported by New Line, they are respectable revenues considering the film’s budget of \$10,000–\$12,000. Other documents indicate that the overall theatrical gross for *Pink Flamingos* stood at around \$1 million as of March 1976.⁸⁹ For New Line, *Flamingos* represented not merely an alignment with exploitation cinema but also a consistent source of revenue *through* its association with this genre.

In fact, the success of *Flamingos* coincided with New Line’s internal growth and a more concerted effort to increase exhibition in commercial theaters for its films. An important part of this expansion involved hiring Stanley Dudleson, who had worked at such companies as Cannon, Screen Gems, and RKO.⁹⁰ Dudleson

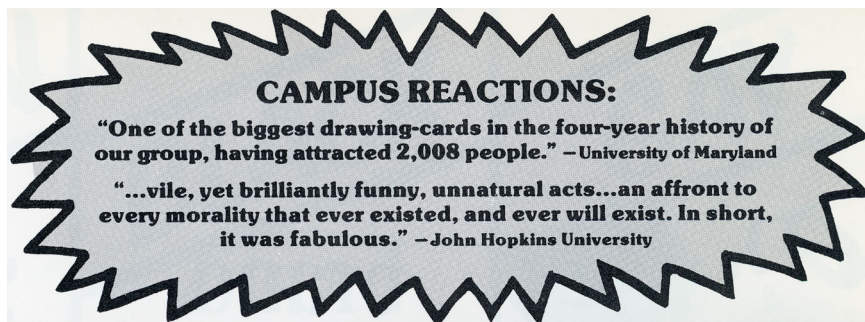


FIGURE 5. The catalog also showcased testimonials of *Pink Flamingos*' popularity on college campuses. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.

had also worked at American International Pictures (AIP) TV and credited AIP producer Sam Arkoff for training him in the independent film business.⁹¹ Soon after Dudleson's appointment, it was reported that the company would create a new subdivision to handle exploitation films, which would replace Saliva, called Gross National Pictures, or GNP.⁹² Here, the double meaning of “gross” is clear. New Line would continue to distribute movies with outlandish content and rely on the revenues garnered through supplying such movies.

Although the Saliva label would persist in New Line marketing materials for some time longer, and although the company refrained from greatly expanding its distribution of exploitation films during the mid-1970s, the company did maintain its relationship with Waters and distributed his subsequent films through the decade. The first of these was *Female Trouble* (1974), which Waters produced for \$25,000.⁹³ The film stars Divine as the protagonist Dawn Davenport and features many of the John Waters troupe, including Mink Stole, Cookie Mueller, and Edith Massey. The film tracks Davenport as she progresses through life, first quitting school and running away from home, then engaging in a life of depravity and crime, until she is executed in an electric chair after many misadventures.

As another film about outrageous characters who flaunt their social nonconformity and criminality, *Female Trouble* appeared to New Line like a natural follow-up to *Pink Flamingos*, and the company promoted and distributed it in a similar fashion. In addition to highlighting the film's shock value, advertisements for *Female Trouble* connected the film overtly to Waters and *Pink Flamingos*. For example, an advertisement from a screening at San Francisco's Presidio Theater in 1976 announced, “Divine Returns!” and pictured her along with Susan Walsh and Cookie Mueller.⁹⁴ The ad promised “the whole ‘Pink Flamingos’ gang, in JOHN WATERS’ *Female Trouble*.” By emphasizing Waters's name, the ad situated him as an auteur. For Connolly, this makes an important point regarding New Line's marketing tactics for Waters: “Ever conscious of film-marketing appeals, Waters likely did not object to this, but it underscores the extent to which New Line saw the film

thursday	friday	saturday
22 UNIVERSITY REGISTRATION, new and rejoining students: Welcome to Cornell, in the grand Barton Hall style. (Continuing students' registration is Friday.)	23 DIVINE and the whole "Pink Flamingos" gang in JOHN WATERS Stoller	24 7/9:30 Female Trouble She has a lot of problems \$1.25 OPEN TO THE PUBLIC (X)
 SEXTOONS: Oris hall 7/9:15/11:30 AN EROTIC KARTOON KARNIVAL \$1.50 INCLUDING THE EROTIC VERSION OF SNOW WHITE AND THE 7 DWARFS!! OPEN TO THE PUBLIC (X)		

FIGURE 6. This snippet from the Cornell Cinema calendar from January 1975 shows how New Line connected *Female Trouble* to *Pink Flamingos*. It also shows that the college film society programmed the film in relation to other sexually charged movies. Cornell Cinema.

as an expansion of a pre-established directorial brand and not anything distinctly different.⁹⁵

In addition to these attractions, the *Female Trouble* ad features a bold letter X, like a rating, and reads: "About this X. Preview audiences have indicated that 'Female Trouble' includes scenes of extraordinary perversity. The distributor therefore wishes to caution the potential viewer that 'Female Trouble' may be seen as sexually and morally offensive."⁹⁶ Here, New Line uses the strategy common to exploitation movie advertising of appealing to viewers' desire for salacious movie content through a disingenuous warning about such material. *Female Trouble* gets framed as a film of sexual and social deviance, and New Line presents itself as the winking purveyor of such deviancy. Further, the explanation about "this X" indicates that New Line wished to differentiate the film from other films with that rating, namely pornography and other conventional sexploitation movies.

Aside from midnight screenings, New Line attempted to book the film as a conventional theatrical release throughout 1975. Yet, as Connolly has detailed, *Female Trouble* did not have the staying power that *Pink Flamingos* did, and revenues dropped quickly after the film opened in cities across the country.⁹⁷ In fact, the midnight screening at the Presidio in 1976 paired the film with *Pink Flamingos*, demonstrating a kind of retreat to the release formula so successful for that earlier film.

As with *Pink Flamingos*, New Line distributed *Female Trouble* on college campuses. When strategizing about how to market *Female Trouble* to universities, the nontheatrical division at New Line worked in tandem with New Line Presentations to have Waters appear at opening screenings of the film in various cities across the

country.⁹⁸ Having Waters, and occasionally the players from his films, appear on campuses had become a consistent promotional practice by this point. The revenue from these appearances significantly boosted those from programming the film. While the film rental was set at “\$200 or higher,” Waters’s rate was around \$500.⁹⁹ New Line planned to target universities in sixteen different cities, including large ones like Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Minneapolis as well as college towns like Ann Arbor, Boulder, and Iowa City.¹⁰⁰ Closer to home for Waters, it played at the University of Maryland in November 1978.¹⁰¹

New Line found even less success when it distributed Waters’s next film, *Desperate Living*. Once again, the company supplemented the film’s theatrical release with a nontheatrical run at universities. The film played on November 7, 1977, at the University of South Florida, for instance, which served as the film’s “South-eastern Premier,” and John Waters appeared at the event “in the flesh.”¹⁰² By this point, in fact, Waters appears to have generated an auteur cult of his own based on the cult audience attending his films. Further, his cultural position took on a new legitimacy during this period. In addition to his appearances and speaking engagements, respected film critics treated his movies as legitimate works of cinema, even if they were highly unconventional.

Perhaps the greatest sign of Waters’s elevation to the status of an auteur with a vision worth taking seriously was that the Museum of Modern Art booked *Pink Flamingos* as part of its “Bicentennial salute to American Film Comedy” in 1976. An announcement from New Line quoted MoMA as saying, “We feel this film is an important representation of modern-day comic attitudes.”¹⁰³ MoMA’s own publicity flier for *Pink Flamingos* celebrates the film as an intelligent and intentionally subversive “assault on the bastions of 1973 Propriety.”¹⁰⁴ Yet the announcement attempts to connect the film to the larger comedy film series in adding: “That this is an American film comedy there is no doubt.”

MoMA consecrated Waters’s film as legitimate art worthy of serious consideration. In this respect, the MoMA screening of *Pink Flamingos* resonated with an element of New Line’s industrial and cultural identity. Cultural elites at MoMA were taking Waters seriously at the same time that his films played to college audiences who had appetites for entertainment and edification alike, at the same time that New Line was seeking bigger commercial success by expanding its theatrical distribution efforts.

Despite these efforts, Waters’s films never gained traction in traditional theaters. Neither *Female Trouble* nor *Desperate Living* enjoyed the same financial success as *Pink Flamingos*, earning New Line \$104,000 and \$68,000, respectively, over the lifetime of their runs in both conventional and college campus theaters.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, *Pink Flamingos* and Waters’s subsequent films of the 1970s helped define New Line during this period, coloring the company’s legend as a renegade maverick that challenged both industrial norms and cultural standards.

EDUCATION AS ENTERTAINMENT:
NEW LINE PRESENTATIONS

While New Line expanded into exploitation movies in the early 1970s, the company also entered an entirely new business endeavor, which seems, on first consideration, to contrast with its commodification of lowbrow culture. Specifically, New Line entered the “lecture bureau” business, representing public figures for paid speaking engagements, and the company eventually created a division called New Line Presentations. The company started booking personal appearances attached to campus film screenings in the early 1970s. As noted, John Waters would frequently appear at showings of *Pink Flamingos*. New Line may thus have first gotten the idea for programming speakers at universities from the success of Waters’s personal appearances. Slightly earlier, however, in 1971, New Line was already booking screenings of Norman Mailer’s film *Maidstone* (1970), and the company arranged speaking engagements for Mailer as early as the summer of 1972.¹⁰⁶ It does not appear that New Line Presentations at this point was a distinct division within the company. The first public mention of New Line’s lecture bureau occurred in an article in *Variety* from the summer of 1973, but the company did not distribute a New Line Presentations catalog until 1974 or early 1975.¹⁰⁷

As a cultural phenomenon and business, the lecture circuit got its start in the late 1800s at the Chautauqua Institute in western New York, where attendees and residents could hear intellectual but accessible lectures on a variety of topics. It subsequently became common for women’s clubs, fraternal organizations, and other civic groups to host speakers covering a range of popular but intellectual topics.¹⁰⁸ This form of public intellectual entertainment persisted into the 1960s and 1970s, with speakers appearing at “every town hall, every trade association, every chapter of Rotary, Kiwanis, Eagles and Elks” clubs.¹⁰⁹

By the mid-1960s, college campuses became a dominant site of the lecture circuit, and thousands of colleges around the country would each book ten to fifteen speakers a year.¹¹⁰ In the late 1960s, estimates of the size of the overall lecture business ranged from \$65 to \$100 million, and by the mid-1970s, according to one story, the lecture business was “enjoying its healthiest boom ever, with a gross annual take estimated at \$100 million.”¹¹¹ By then, the lecture business was dominated by a dozen companies, mainly operating out of New York, with dozens of smaller companies “scattered around the country.”¹¹²

The lecture circuit covered a remarkably wide range of speakers and topics. As one story put it, “The lecture business provides a clue as to what’s on America’s mind at any given time.”¹¹³ Audiences of the 1970s appeared especially interested in speakers that addressed topics like the Watergate and CIA scandals. Other popular speakers included humorists like Art Buchwald and advice gurus like Ann Landers.¹¹⁴ As the lecture circuit intertwined with college campus culture,

it opened up a new spectrum of speakers and issues. In addition to conventional speakers such as politicians, military figures, and authors of respected literature, a report asserted, the college audience “openly admires kooks, cuckoos and controversy in equal portions.”¹¹⁵ The president of the Keedick Lecture Bureau noted that controversial speakers were particularly appealing: “If you’re anti-Establishment, it usually makes you more controversial than the pro-Establishment type.”¹¹⁶ The field included “spicy figures” like Andy Warhol and Timothy Leary, as well as spiritualists, yoga enthusiasts, and figures discussing birth control and abortion.¹¹⁷

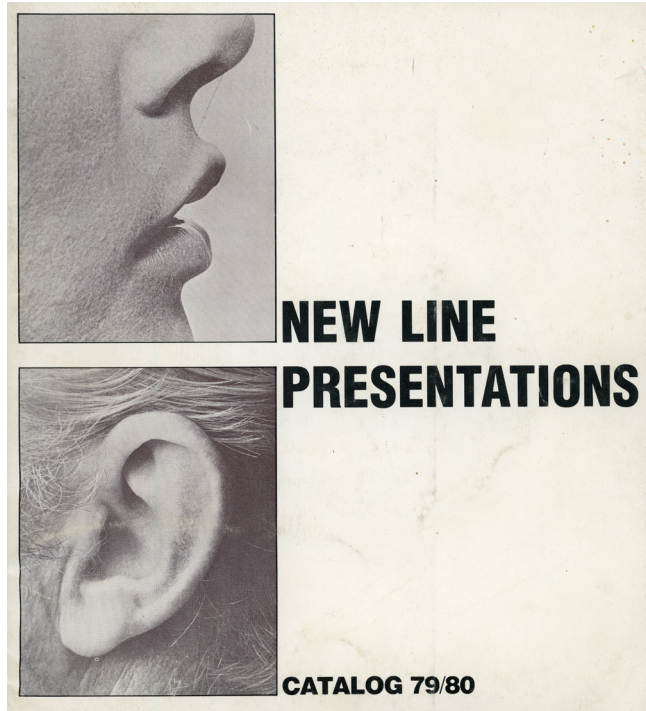
Thus, New Line was fairly well poised to enter this odd corner of the “media business” when it did. The field was already defined by a mixture of intellectualism, controversial politics, and sensationalism. These qualities were packaged as a kind of educational entertainment experience that resonated strongly with the college campus culture already in existence. That is to say, if New Line was already in the business of mixing “education” and “entertainment” by bringing diverse, niche films to college campuses, the lecture circuit offered similar appeals and aligned well with the company’s profile. It seemed especially fitting for New Line to enter this business given the company’s established relationships with student groups at colleges across the country.

Records indicate that working with Norman Mailer, in particular, created new and significant revenues for New Line. New Line organized a tour for Mailer to travel with his film *Maidstone* in February 1972. Mailer’s fee was to be at least \$2,000 per appearance and New Line was contracted to take 25 percent of the revenues.¹¹⁸ Throughout 1972, New Line booked Mailer at over thirty universities, taking in over \$70,000 in revenue.¹¹⁹

The first New Line Presentations catalog (1974–75) indicates that the company had already been booking speaking engagements for Mailer, as well as R. D. Laing and Terry Southern, for “five years.”¹²⁰ The opening page of the catalog states, “We’ve begun with what we know best—the motion picture industry.” Accordingly, the catalog features directors like Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, and John Waters. It also features film critics Arthur Knight, Andrew Sarris, and Leonard Maltin.

The first catalog also shows that a number of presentations about film and media took a critical, political angle. For instance, New Line represented such early and foundational voices in feminist film criticism as Molly Haskell, author of *From Reverence to Rape*, and Joan Mellen, author of *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*. By the time the company released its second annual catalog, for 1975–76, it also represented Marjorie Rosen, author of *Popcorn Venus*, making feminist film criticism a distinct element of New Line Presentations’ profile. New Line also represented James Murray, author of *To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Superfly*, who gave lectures on representations of Blackness in

FIGURE 7. New Line sold education as a form of entertainment with a lecture bureau division formed in the 1970s that programmed speakers on a wide array of subjects, including cinema, drug decriminalization, civil rights, and UFOs. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.



cinema. As of the company's second catalog, it added Donald Bogle, a former writer for *Ebony* and the author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*; like Murray, Bogle lectured on the history of Black representation in the movies.¹²¹

New Line also featured speakers who addressed sexuality and the media. New Line's first catalog featured Vitto Russo giving talks on the topic of homosexuality in the movies. Although Russo's talk "The Celluloid Closet: A History of Homosexuality in the Movies" would not be published as a book until 1981, the first catalog notes that he was working on a book with the same title. The catalog attempts to create a sense of drama around Russo's talks: "His presentation has stirred both anger and adoration in his audiences. The reactions are violently pro or con, but never neutral."¹²² Here we can see New Line attempting to sensationalize a discussion of nonheteronormative sexuality. The company's second catalog builds on this interest in sexuality by featuring author Donald Fass giving a talk on "the bisexual experience" that included film clips.

Aside from film and media, New Line Presentations offered a range of speakers. The company's catalogs promised "a broad cross-section of what is intellectually current in the arts, politics, business, journalism, science, and human rights." The second catalog notes that the Presentations division had grown substantially, with more than eighty individual speakers. Although the company's first and second

catalogs feature speakers simply according to their name and the title of their presentation, the indexes clump the speakers into a number of categories, including “Artists,” “Critics,” and “Journalists” but also “Minorities,” “Feminism,” “Sexuality,” and the catchall “Politics.” This approach suggests that New Line Presentations envisioned an audience for its speakers that was strongly related to the audience it served with its films. New Line Presentations aimed to entice university community members, as well as an adjacent public, who were interested in edification as a form of entertainment, and that a blend of culture and politics—cultural politics, in fact—defined this educational entertainment. As a group, this college community audience entailed multiple, overlapping groups defined, by the company’s catalogs at least, by their affiliation with distinct tastes in cultural forms and products that spoke to their social identities.

New Line strengthened this conceptual framing of its speakers in its third catalog (1976). Now featuring over 150 presentations, the third catalog organizes speakers by concept, ranging from the cultural, to the political, to the esoteric. Many filmmakers and actors appear, as do film critics. The catalog features a number of authors: in addition to Mailer, it offers talks by William S. Burroughs, whom New Line represented from 1975 through early 1978.¹²³ In addition to a “Politics,” the catalog has sections for “Prisons,” “Energy,” “Economics,” and “Law.”¹²⁴ Reflecting the company’s continued focus on issues of identity, beyond the realm of media, the third catalog included a section “Women on Women,” as well as offering talks by Dave Kopay about being gay in professional sports. The company also retained its association with the counterculture by featuring Timothy Leary and speakers from NORML.

All told, the New Line Presentations division encompassed an eclectic range of speakers and topics, all of which point to a cultural appetite for intellectual engagement outside the classroom. This kind of informal educational discussion appended well to the college culture of the time, which was already invested in a sustained engagement with new ideas. At the same time, as *entertainment*, these lectures appealed to audiences with material that was, in many cases, not dealt with in the classroom or that was treated with a sensationalism that similarly marked it as distinct from classroom instruction.

Within the context of the 1970s, New Line Presentations seems especially noteworthy for the way the division blended culture, politics, and issues of identity. If, as a film company, New Line was defined in the mid-1970s by its opportunistic eclecticism, the Presentations division reflected this in two ways: first, the division reveals an eclecticism that extended beyond the catalog of *films* the company distributed; and, second, opening the division represents an opportunistic branching out into a new business sector on the part of New Line itself. The company’s very identity multiplied in this endeavor. Indeed, the Presentations division makes especially clear New Line’s interest in identity as a force that shaped audience tastes, values, and choices.

CORNERING THE NICHE MARKET(S):
DIVERSITY AND DIVERSIFICATION

From the mid-1970s onward, New Line augmented its library in ways that solidified its specialties in foreign art cinema, American underground films, and exploitation cinema. As already described, the company released a number of older anti-drug and anti-VD films for camp audiences and released all of John Waters's films through the decade. As with *Sympathy for the Devil*, the company released films with a connection to rock 'n' roll, including the Hendrix concert film *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (1971) and the experimental rock documentary *Journey through the Past* (1973), featuring and directed by Neil Young.¹²⁵ At the same time, New Line self-consciously tried to sell prestige by augmenting its selection of art films; it released several films by Pier Paolo Pasolini, including *Porcile* (1969); two films by Kenji Mizoguchi; and *The Seduction of Mimi* (1972), by Italian director Lina Wertmüller.¹²⁶ Perhaps most notably, New Line offered a number of films by French New Wave auteur Claude Chabrol beginning in 1974, including *Ophelia* (1963), *La Rupture* (1970), *Wedding in Blood* (1973), and *Nada* (1974).¹²⁷ The company maintained its association with Chabrol by releasing *La Femme Infidèle* (1969) and *Dirty Hands* (1975, originally titled *Innocents with Dirty Hands*), later in the decade.¹²⁸

In this way, New Line maintained a consistent strategy through the remainder of the decade of specializing in distinct genres of different cultural registers that all fell outside mainstream Hollywood cinema. Scholars such as Eric Schaefer have described how, following World War II, foreign art films and American exploitation films occupied an overlapping social and cultural space as independent distributors and exhibitors traded in both types of film.¹²⁹ New Line was not alone in distributing a mixed slate of nonmainstream films in the 1970s. Roger Corman's New World Pictures, to take just one example, released a range of exploitation films, including the "Nurse" film *The Student Nurses* (1970), the female prisoner movie *The Big Doll House* (1971), cheap monster movies like *Piranha* (1978), and the low-budget sci-fi film *Death Race 2000* (1975); all of this while the company distributed foreign art films such as *Amarcord* (1974), *Autumn Sonata* (1978), and *Dersu Uzala* (1975).¹³⁰

In many ways New Line Cinema thus typified marginal, independent film distribution in the 1970s. By the same token, New Line was unusual for finding such consistent success in this marginal and volatile industry arena. To mitigate the vagaries of this market, the company generated film series or even protofranchises whereby a single film served as an industrial and intertextual engine for continued commercial releases. Releasing *Cocaine Fiends* on the heels of *Reefer Madness* made the latter film appear to be a pseudo-sequel. And, although John Waters's films featured different characters and settings, they also used many of the same performers, and New Line was strategic about advertising these films' relation with the others, positioning them as near sequels to *Pink Flamingos*.

Perhaps the strongest example of New Line's attempts to create film series during this period is its release of several *Street Fighter* films. The market for East

Asian martial arts action films was considerable in the early to mid-1970s, built significantly on the success of films starring Bruce Lee. As David Cook has written, "By early 1974, every major distributor but Fox and United Artists had picked up one or more 'chop socky' films, as *Variety* called them."¹³¹ New Line exploited the success of this cycle of films when it released the Japanese karate film *Street Fighter*, starring Sonny Chiba, in 1974, which the company promoted with television advertising.¹³² The MPAA gave the film an unusual X rating for violence, which Shaye unsuccessfully appealed.¹³³ Despite fears that the rating would limit the film's advertising reach and commercial potential, *Street Fighter* did considerable business.¹³⁴ Although the market for East Asian action films began to wane in the mid-1970s, New Line released *Return of the Street Fighter* in the fall of 1975. The sequel performed more modestly than the original, but was still successful.¹³⁵ New Line was innovative enough to license *Return of the Street Fighter* for broadcast on the fledgling HBO channel in 1975, mere weeks after releasing the film in theaters.¹³⁶ The company followed these two films with yet another in the series, *Sister Street Fighter*, in 1976.

By the time New Line released *The Street Fighter's Last Revenge* in 1979, the company showed that it was dedicated to cultivating film sequels and series as a means of generating consistent revenues. New Line was not unique in this regard, either, as many cult action films were similarly franchised in this manner during the 1970s, such as with the *Shaft* series (1971, 1972, 1973). New Line developed and used the strategy of re-exploiting existing intellectual properties precisely because the company operated at the margins of the movie business. The company would make this practice an explicit part of its business strategy from the 1980s onward.

New Line demonstrated a *cultural* strategy of addressing social diversity through the spectrum of the genres it specialized in, and this practice was paired with a number of attempts to diversify the company's business activities in the mid-1970s. The first of these, as mentioned above, was to enter more concertedly into theatrical distribution in 1973–74. The company partnered with Mark Fleischman as a "full-time financial consultant" in 1976.¹³⁷ Fleischman worked in the restaurant and hotel businesses and was one of the original stockholders in New Line Cinema when the company first sought outside investors. *Variety* reported that, with the addition of Fleischman and his economic resources, New Line "now sees itself as a real competitor to such U.S. indies as Roger Corman's New World, Don Rugoff's Cinema 5, and American International [Pictures]."¹³⁸ New Line, it seemed, was poised to leave one marginal sphere of the movie business for another, slightly less marginal realm.

As part of this effort to expand and diversify, New Line began to engage in producing films, not just distributing films made by others. In 1977, ten years after its founding, New Line finally released its first in-house production. The film, *Stunts*, was made in Southern California and Shaye served as one of the executive producers.¹³⁹ At the 1976 Cannes Film Festival, Shaye acquired a significant portion of the film's estimated budget, which reached around \$1 million.¹⁴⁰ New Line partnered

with Spiegel-Bergman Productions on *Stunts*, a small production company that went on to make low- and mid-budget films through the mid-1980s.¹⁴¹

New Line premiered *Stunts* at Cannes and then released it in about a hundred theaters in June 1977.¹⁴² The film tells the story of a Hollywood stunt man named Glen, played by Robert Forster, who investigates the death of his brother who died while making a movie. The film features many film-within-a-film sequences that depict both impressive stunt work and the preparation for these stunts. In this respect, *Stunts* took part in a larger cycle of stunts-oriented films in the 1970s that included *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974), *Gone in 60 Seconds* (1974), and *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977). *Stunts* was followed by *Hooper* (1978), in which Burt Reynolds likewise played a stunt man and which offered similar film-within-a-film scenes of impressive stunt work.

Thus, *Stunts* latched on to a small but identifiable trend within exploitation cinema at the time and sought to innovate within that arena. Although the film is not part of a series, it aligns with New Line's established practice of releasing films that closely resemble existing, successful exploitation films. That is, New Line deliberately used *film cycles* as a cultural and industrial strategy during the 1970s, anticipating in some ways the company's efforts in film franchising from the 1980s onward. As Amanda Ann Klein explains:

Like film genres, film cycles are a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes. However, while film genres are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax) . . . the formation and longevity of film cycles are a direct result of their immediate financial viability as well as the public discourses circulating around them. . . . Because they are so dependent on audience desires, film cycles are also subject to defined time constraints: most film cycles are only financially viable for five to ten years.¹⁴³

This characterization accords very well with the films and series of various stripes that New Line released in the 1970s, including the anti-drug camp films, the Waters films, the rock documentaries, the *Street Fighter* films within the cycle of East Asian martial arts films, and now *Stunts* in the stuntsploitation cycle. However contradictory it may seem, New Line sought stability through timely responsiveness.

Although other independent film companies appeared to be restricting themselves to distribution in 1978, New Line continued to make a concerted push into producing original films following *Stunts*. Part of the impetus for this move was a changing marketplace for pickups of foreign films, with "major companies" entering the market and thereby inflating acquisition prices.¹⁴⁴ New Line's entry was enabled by an infusion of nearly \$5 million in capital that year from both private investors and a loan from Chemical Bank. The company planned to make a slate of films that ranged in budget from \$500,000 to \$2 million. It announced in 1978 that it planned to make films in a range of genres, including comedies and

thrillers.¹⁴⁵ From the summer of 1978 through early 1979, the company publicly indicated that it planned to produce two new films, a thriller titled *Power Play* and a rock music drama featuring Debbie Harry.¹⁴⁶ These films appear not to have been made, however, indicating that New Line's ambitions for rapid growth were stymied.

In fact, during the late 1970s, New Line branched out into a number of business activities that proved to be dead ends. In 1976, for instance, New Line announced plans to begin investing in other companies' film productions through negative pickup deals. This endeavor, the company asserted, would give it better access to better films in the market for independent and exploitation cinema.¹⁴⁷ In 1978, New Line announced its intention to become a financial arranger for independent film production, and it created subdivisions "designed to bankroll indie films and get them to the international market."¹⁴⁸

At this point, the company reoriented somewhat and moved into selling foreign distribution rights to New Line films and acting as a broker for selling these rights for other films as well.¹⁴⁹ In 1978, for example, the company attempted to sell the foreign distribution rights to two low-budget horror films that had been made for TV, *Ants* (1977) and *Tarantulas: The Deadly Cargo* (1977).¹⁵⁰ Other deals functioned as "foreign pre-sales" to support the production of a yet-to-be-made film.¹⁵¹ New Line apparently facilitated the financing of at least one film in this way, *Steel* (1980), which was later picked up for North American distribution by World-Northal Films.¹⁵² In addition to this trade in international distribution rights, New Line's financial arm offered bonds to independent film producers.¹⁵³

On one hand, these financial activities appear a bit erratic and seem to stray from New Line's "core" business of film distribution. On the other hand, they positioned New Line to better access both films to distribute and funds for its own productions through international sales. Although none of these activities seems to have been especially successful for the company during the late 1970s, they would become more standardized and profitable as the company *did* manage to find more financial success through its distribution business in the 1980s and beyond.

A LAST HURRAH AT THE END OF THE 1970S

In August 1978, Shaye explained the company's efforts to diversify its business practices by claiming that the "core" business simply wasn't working. He said New Line did not have the financial strength to release films in the North American theatrical market.¹⁵⁴ Yet the company's *cultural* strategy of specializing in a mix of art and exploitation films does seem to have worked well at the end of the decade. In an ad from 1977, New Line offered a slate of films that included John Waters's *Desperate Living*, the original production of *Stunts*, *Revenge of the Street Fighter*, and the French art film *Voyage to Grande Tartarie* (1974).¹⁵⁵ Again, there

was a mix of art and exploitation and of the upper and lower strata of cinematic taste. In one instance the company conflated the two, as it distributed a film called *Cars That Eat People* (1977), which was actually a version of Peter Weir's film *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), recut by the distributor.¹⁵⁶

The shining star in New Line's catalog at the time was *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*. Directed by Bertrand Blier, the film is a romantic melodrama with a love triangle that recalls Francois Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1963). Following its North American premier at the 1978 New York Film Festival, New Line acquired the film and released it in December. At the time, the film had already been submitted as the French entry for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.¹⁵⁷ The National Society of Film Critics named it "Best Film of the Year," and the film earned many positive reviews, which New Line quoted heavily in its extensive advertising of the film.

Get Out Your Handkerchiefs thus offered New Line an opportunity to attach itself to a prestigious foreign film with trappings of artistic quality and cultural distinction. The film differed considerably from the rougher, politically oriented films the company had released in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it maintained the company's specialization in foreign cinema. Further, it continued New Line's association with a more conventional French art cinema represented by the many Chabrol films it had distributed.

Get Out Your Handkerchiefs became both a commercial and critical success. In a full-page ad in *Variety* from January 1979, New Line highlighted the revenues the film earned during its run at the Paris Theatre in New York, which totaled more than \$160,000 in four weeks.¹⁵⁸ New Line rolled the film out in theaters across the country through the winter of 1979 and took out a full-page ad in *Variety* boasting the film's winning of the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.¹⁵⁹ By May, the film had earned over half a million dollars.¹⁶⁰ Robert Shaye was quoted at the time as saying, "Art movies seem to be doing moderately well in the last couple of years as opposed to doing terribly in the previous five."¹⁶¹

Indeed, this moment seemed far away from the end of the 1960s, when New Line had worked with college film groups to screen a handful of lesser-known Czech New Wave films. It seems equally distant from 1973, when New Line programmed *Pink Flamingos* at the Elgin Theater. Yet the company continued to release Waters's films while it reaped the financial and cultural rewards from *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*. New Line's moment of success cannot be taken as a singular representation of the company, as it continued to engage with an eclectic variety of films and genres, opportunistically working for one of these nonmainstream films to become an unlikely hit. *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* just happened to be that hit in 1978 and 1979. In their own ways, *Sympathy for the Devil*, *Reefer Madness*, and *Pink Flamingos* were hits as well. All of these disparate films represented New Line in the 1960s and 1970s in that they demonstrated the disparate-ness of the company itself. Each of the films reflects the eclectic and shifting movie

culture of this period: nonmainstream, youth-oriented, operating alongside Hollywood, overlapping with it and yet dissimilar all the same. New Line, in this way, represents something of the substantial alternative film culture of the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse and eclectic group of multiple audiences defined by their interest in nonconventional entertainment—entertainment mixed with edification and politics, sleaze and refinement.

New Line's moment of success with *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* truly cannot define the company, because it would change again, dramatically, in the following decade. While New Line had been capitalizing on the college market, the midnight movie circuit, and refined art cinema, Hollywood and movie culture had undergone major shifts. The old studios were now all parts of larger conglomerates. Young Hollywood auteurs like Francis Ford Coppola and William Friedkin were changing Hollywood's expressive norms while winning awards and financial success. Films like *Jaws* and *Star Wars* ushered in a wave of action blockbusters—and sequels—that became the gold standard for Hollywood's success from that point forward. The margins of the film industry also shifted, as home video offered new distribution opportunities to small-scale independent film producers. In the midst of this changing industry and culture, New Line's cultivation of art and cult no longer held the promise it once had. During the 1980s, however, the company would show how the margins could become mainstream.

“So-Called Ancillary Markets”

New Line Takes the Margins to the Mainstream

Despite its successes during the 1960s and 1970s, New Line Cinema remained a small player in the American movie business at the start of the 1980s. For many film historians, the shift from the 1970s to the 1980s marks the end of Hollywood’s momentary openness to artistic experimentation, after it had ceded some control over film production to several visionary directors who construed themselves as auteurs.¹ The “Hollywood Renaissance,” which generated offbeat but financially successful films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), facilitated the entry of new, young, and often university-educated directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese into the Hollywood system. These Hollywood virtuosos fashioned blockbuster films, including *The Godfather* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), that reworked conventions of established genres in ways that appeared to demonstrate Hollywood’s artistic validity.

This renaissance did not constitute Hollywood’s only mode during this period, as generic blockbusters were also successful, such as the disaster films *Airport* (1970) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974). Further, scholars point toward the immense financial success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) as ushering in a version of “New Hollywood” based on tent-pole pictures that could spin off into sales of “ancillary” goods, such as soundtrack albums, toys, and branded clothing.² The failure of some auteur-driven films in the early 1980s, like *One from the Heart* (1982) and *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), ended the temporary power of young directors in Hollywood, while the success of films like *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982) confirmed that fantasy films and their sequels mapped Hollywood’s path forward through the ensuing decade.

Just as New Line Cinema illustrates an undertold story of American movie culture in the 1960s and 1970s, the company also complicates our understanding of the movie industry and culture of the 1980s. Although it began the decade as a struggling independent film company, in 1990 New Line distributed the most successful independent film up to that time: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. If it seems strange that the same company that released *Pink Flamingos* to stoned midnight movie audiences in 1973 would distribute this child-oriented fantasy film, it may be equally surprising that it was New Line's success with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* (NOES) series that prepared the company to succeed with *Turtles*. Indeed, in many ways the NOES films defined New Line Cinema in the 1980s. During this decade, New Line continued its approach of opportunistic eclecticism. This strategy led the company to broaden even further into new genres and engage with different audience groups as such opportunities appeared. In turn, this eclectic expansion impacted, altered, and complicated New Line's ongoing legend in the movie business. Much of this expansion was supported by the extraordinary success of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and the ensuing franchise.

It was during this time that new niches opened as viable consumer markets. New Line capitalized on them at the same time that it altered its business practices to draw niche audiences and genres to the mainstream media business. The 1980s were defined by the movie industry's expansion into home video and cable.³ The decade was when movies were increasingly tied in with other commodities, including toys, clothes, and lunchboxes. Although there is a long history to such practices of "industrial intertextuality," Derek Johnson has shown that franchising developed as a coherent strategy for media production during this decade.⁴

While Hollywood perfected franchising, as evidenced by the transmedia barrage of *Batman* (1989), New Line Cinema experimented with and refined analogous industrial practices.⁵ In the 1980s, New Line walked a line between practices typical of small, independent distributors and those of the Hollywood majors. Coming from the industry's margins, New Line helped innovate the very franchise logic that the Hollywood studios adopted as a primary strategy. Although this chapter tracks a number of New Line's releases in the 1980s, I focus on NOES, the *Critters* films, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* to show that the company innovated franchising practices in ways that reflected its marginal industry status but that allowed the company to become more central to the American media industry.

With NOES, New Line catered to the existing market for slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s and built on this success by releasing multiple sequels, as was the case with other slasher film series. Unlike many horror series, however, New Line extended NOES into multiple media platforms and consumer products, including a television series, computer video games, Halloween costumes, and other merchandise. Thus, as this chapter shows, New Line brought the Freddy

Krueger character out of the slasher genre and into a wider popular culture through franchising practices. In doing so, the NOES franchise propelled New Line more squarely into the larger, mainstream media industry. Whereas its industrial identity and cultural legend had been eclectic—perhaps erratic—in the 1970s, New Line appeared somewhat less disjointed in the 1980s with its focus on the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. A 1992 article in *Premiere* about New Line was titled “The House That Freddy Built,” and this moniker stuck with the company for decades to follow.⁶

THE HORROR: ADJUSTING TO THE 1980S

New Line’s first significant release of the 1980s was John Waters’s *Polyester* (1981), which was produced by Waters’s Dreamland Productions. In this case, however, New Line took a role in the film’s development. As Matt Connolly has discussed, Waters sought to make a film that “look[ed] better” than his previous films and, consequently, sought a larger budget than he had previously worked with.⁷ New Line helped to finance the film, budgeted at \$300,000.⁸ Famously, *Polyester* featured the use of scratch-and-sniff cards, promoted as “Odorama” technology, which enabled audiences to smell things occurring on screen when cued.

New Line president Robert Shaye took an active role in aspects of *Polyester*’s production, giving feedback on drafts of the script.⁹ As Connolly notes, Shaye commented on the number and placement of different smells in the film, generally calling for fewer smells than Waters had planned.¹⁰ In addition to such script and Odorama issues, it appears that Shaye had final approval over the film’s casting.¹¹ *Polyester* uses Waters’s usual ensemble less than his previous works, and although the film does star Divine, it also engaged in a bit of “stunt casting” with the appearance of fading Hollywood star Tab Hunter.¹²

The film was a financial success, especially when compared to Waters’s previous two films, *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*. In an ad for the film following its release, New Line indicated that the film had made \$450,000 at fifty-two theaters in New York City and was successful in theaters elsewhere as well.¹³ The film was reported to have earned over \$1 million by July 1981, though its revenues quickly declined following its opening dates.¹⁴ *Polyester* continued New Line’s association with John Waters and demonstrates the company’s continued ambition to engage more consistently in film production.

But, just as the company had found it difficult to sustain regular productions in the late 1970s, it was not especially successful in producing films in the early 1980s, either. It distributed a mix of films, including the New York punk culture films *Underground U.S.A.* (1980) and *Smithereens* (1981). Yet New Line’s releases of several low-budget horror films during this time are more notable, because they represent a new genre for the company and they anticipate its eventual release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in 1984.

New Line experimented with horror cinema previously when it handled a reissue of *Night of the Living Dead* in 1976. This paradigmatic zombie movie was originally released in 1968 and had become an underground hit, earning \$5 million during its initial run.¹⁵ As it had done previously with *Reefer Madness*, New Line was especially opportunistic in capitalizing on the fact that *Night of the Living Dead* had entered the public domain and released the film alongside a number of other companies that obtained prints of the film; New Line catalogs indicate that it continued to distribute the film until at least 1979.¹⁶ As a cult film, *Night of the Living Dead* already fit within New Line's established identity, and the film played not just at drive-ins but also at midnight movie screenings and on college campuses. Importantly, New Line's distribution of *Night of the Living Dead* overlapped, at least momentarily, with the release of the sequel, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which was heavily advertised and financially successful.

New Line also handled a re-release of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 1980. Like *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* had been produced on a small budget and proved to be a massive financial success, earning "more than \$6 million in rentals" during its initial run in 1974 and 1975.¹⁷ New Line acquired *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* after the original distributor, Bryanston, lost control of the rights in a legal battle.¹⁸ Crucially, New Line's reissue of *Texas Chainsaw* followed a wave of "teen slasher" films, such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. In this way, New Line situated the film amid a larger generic cycle at the time.¹⁹

New Line demonstrated ingenuity in its release of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. One of the major innovations transforming the distribution sector in the New Hollywood was "saturation booking," in which a film would be released simultaneously in theaters across the country. This contrasted with an earlier model in which a film would be rolled out to major downtown theaters in certain cities and over time would play in other cities, eventually making its way to smaller neighborhood theaters. New Line didn't have the capacity to manage a nationwide release for *Texas Chainsaw*, so instead engaged in a "region-by-region saturation" pattern of release. The company booked the film simultaneously in eighty-five theaters in New York in May 1981, after having played it in multiple theaters in Chicago, Cleveland, and other markets around the country.²⁰ This strategy proved successful and New Line earned \$6 million from the film in 1981 alone.²¹

In addition, New Line sold the home video rights for the film to Wizard Video for \$200,000, "the highest price ever paid for an independent film up until 1982."²² In this deal, New Line aligned with a larger industry trend of film distributors licensing their films to home video outlets, a strategy that had already proven to be a growing market since the introduction of VCRs in the United States in the mid-1970s. Indeed, home video became a crucial element of the new, multimedia "film" industry in the 1980s, and horror films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* were vital to the early growth of this sector.

In 1983, New Line released another film that would mark an important entry in the horror genre, *The Evil Dead*, by Sam Raimi. Raimi made the film in 1980 in Tennessee and Michigan on a budget of \$400,000.²³ As it played at various festivals, the film gained a reputation for its intense depictions of graphic violence. It got a promotional boost when Stephen King lauded the film after seeing it at the 1982 Cannes festival.²⁴ New Line acquired the North American distribution rights in January 1983. The company released *Evil Dead* without a rating, apparently because it did not want to release the film with an X rating.²⁵ The film's advertisements stated, "The producers recommend that no one under 17 be allowed to see *The Evil Dead*."²⁶ The film did well financially, earning over \$600,000 in its first week in New York.²⁷ It got positive reviews, with *Boxoffice* writing that it featured some impressive camerawork as well as "extreme, non-stop gore effects."²⁸ Likewise, *Variety* gave the film an excellent review, and asserted that it balanced "considerable black humor" with "showy outbursts of special effects gore and graphic violence."²⁹

In addition to these reissues and pickups, New Line became involved in the production of two horror films prior to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The first was *Alone in the Dark* (1982). Starring recognizable stars Jack Palance, Martin Landau, and Donald Pleasance, the film is an odd horror film about violent patients at a mental asylum breaking out and causing havoc. Mixing violent mayhem with a goofily humorous tone, it features several scenes of suspense and violence, along with one in a punk rock club. *Variety's* review of the film stated that this scene, along with a sex scene, would "help [the film] grab its fair share of young suspense fans."³⁰ New Line premiered the film at Cannes in May 1982 and put it into theaters in October. The company opened the film in Detroit and Cleveland, where it did reasonable business, and then expanded to New York and other areas.

The company also cofinanced a British sci-fi horror film, *Xtro* (1983), which featured many practical special effects. Shaye acted as the executive producer of the film and tried to get additional production financing for the film by preselling foreign distribution rights.³¹ The film tells the story of a man who gets abducted by aliens, who then replace him years later with a murderous doppelganger. *Xtro* features several scenes of visceral splatter, such as when a woman gives birth to a fully formed alien duplicate. New Line promoted the film in contrast to *E.T.*, with advertisements that depicted an alien attacking a woman in a sexually suggestive pose, with text that reads, "Some extra-terrestrials aren't friendly."³² The film received a miserable review in *Variety* that mentioned the ads' comparison to *E.T.*

Despite the lack of success with these two original productions, New Line's focus on the horror genre in the early 1980s is important in several ways. First, the move toward horror should be seen in the context of the company's greater library of films. When New Line went to Cannes in 1983, it intended to acquire around six "mass market" films, as well as "six to nine" art films.³³ At this moment, New Line's eclectic and wide-ranging approach toward cinema appears to have been

consolidated into two groupings, which remained eclectic all the same. “The very diversity of New Line’s portfolio,” *Film Journal* observed, “works against easy identification of a ‘New Line picture,’ but the vast majority of its product falls into one of two categories: exploitation . . . and various offbeat foreign/art/underground pictures.”³⁴ New Line’s horror films—its “mass market films”—constitutes yet another genre in its collection of specialty genres. The company’s legend was still in formation, characterized in part by a lack of clear definition.

Although horror films may have been somewhat marginal when compared to Hollywood blockbusters like *Superman* (1978) or *Raiders of the Los Ark*, the genre was certainly part of mainstream movie culture in the late 1970s and 1980s. Films like *The Exorcist*, *The Amityville Horror* (1979), and *The Omen* (1976) had all been blockbusters, and even lower-budgeted, independently produced films like *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* did exceptional business in theaters. Thus, a second significant aspect of New Line’s entry into the horror market was that it placed the company in a new industrial situation. By 1982, the company had five different divisions: production, domestic and international theatrical distribution, nontheatrical distribution, and speaker presentations.³⁵ New Line was a more robust and rationalized operation than it had been in the previous decade, earning \$6 million in revenue and \$500,000 in profit in 1982.³⁶

Third, New Line’s expansion into horror films in the early 1980s meant that it competed differently with companies in different strata of the industry. This included New World Pictures, which distributed horror films like *The Evil* (1978), *The Brood* (1979), and *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982). At the same time, New Line faced new competition also in the realm of specialty cinema, as some larger studios opened divisions that handled such fare. For instance, United Artists turned its United Artists Classics into an art house division in 1980, while Orion Classics began operation in 1983.³⁷ Stanley Dudleson went so far as to say that New Line was “forced into the commercial picture business by the fact that the majors started getting into the art business.”³⁸

Fourth, entering the market in horror films also signaled a *cultural* shift for New Line and its identity. In the late 1960s, the company had offered “New Films for the New Audience,” hailing the college-based youth culture in its marketing and advertising of nonmainstream films. New Line continued to seek out youth audiences, among other groups, through the 1970s, through its exploitation and East Asian action films. But by the 1980s, those populations were no longer young, and the contemporaneous youth culture had different tastes. The “youth” of the late 1970s and early 1980s was *not* the same group as had attended university in the 1960s or been energized by the counterculture of that era. As many of the baby boomers who had made up this movie culture established careers, bought homes, and had children, the composition of youth movie culture necessarily shifted. This new group was more attuned to the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, comparatively conservative consumer culture of the moment. Horror films allowed New Line to

maintain its appeal to youth audiences seeking sensational entertainment, even while the sensibilities of those youth shifted along with the forms of sensationalism they desired.

DREAMS COME TRUE

New Line developed *A Nightmare on Elm Street* amid its other horror films, but the project was distinguished for having a better pedigree. Director Wes Craven wrote the script around the time that his film *Swamp Thing* (1982) finished production, and New Line got involved in 1982. In addition to *Swamp Thing*, Craven had established a reputation as a successful director of horror films, beginning with the notorious *The Last House on the Left* (1972) as well as *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

Initially, *NOES* was intended to have a \$2.5 million budget, and New Line sought financial partners for the film in 1982 and continued to seek production funds through 1983.³⁹ The eventual financial arrangements for the film reflected New Line's established business practices and augured its future success in multimedia licensing. New Line gained some production funds by preselling the film's distribution rights to foreign distributors.⁴⁰ In this respect, *NOES* built on New Line's established connections to international markets achieved in the 1970s.

However, as much as half of the production budget for *NOES* was supplied by Media Home Entertainment (MHE).⁴¹ Founded in 1978, MHE was one of the earliest and most successful home video distributors in the United States. By funding the production of *NOES* through preselling the movie's home video rights, New Line tapped into a new industry sector that was altering the landscape for the movie business generally. Movies were no longer bound to the theatrical market, and television no longer served as the only secondary market for feature films. With the rise of home video and pay cable networks, movies now had multiple possibilities for commercial exploitation. Home video was becoming *central* to the movie industry of the 1980s, even as it was decentering that industry. With *NOES*, New Line actively participated in and capitalized on this industry change.

NOES began production in summer 1984. The film tells the story of several teenagers who are terrorized in their dreams by Freddy Krueger, a scary and verbose figure whose face is disfigured by burn scars and who wears a glove with razor claws at the tip of each finger. In these nightmares, Freddy can enact real violence and even kill people; the film plays on confusion between what is real and what is a dream. After Freddy vanquishes several of her classmates and friends, the protagonist Nancy squares off against him in a "final girl" scenario.⁴² The film dramatizes a split between the teenagers and their parents, as the teens do not trust their parents with the truth about Freddy because, as the film reveals, the adults burned Freddy alive after he'd killed several children. Freddy's pursuit of the teens is in retribution against their parents.



FIGURE 8. The dream logic of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* created opportunities for surrealistic imagery, such as when the villain Freddy Krueger surprisingly stretches his arms across an alleyway.

Stylistically, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* has a number of features that distinguish it from previous slasher films. The film's conceit of blurring waking reality and dream allows for a number of scenes with bizarre and fantastical imagery and illogical juxtapositions. These moments take on the character of surrealist oneirism, such as when Freddy stretches his arms ten feet in length so that he may scratch the sides of an alleyway with his claws while stalking a victim, or when his tongue erupts from the speaker of a rotary telephone while conversing with Nancy. While these images and scenes add a level of formal sophistication to the film, its more defining characteristic is Freddy's talkativeness, including one-liner zingers in the fashion of James Bond, Dirty Harry, and other male action movie figures. Unlike the decidedly mute Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* and Michael Myers in *Halloween*, Freddy taunts and torments his prey verbally. This banter displays a corny, crude wittiness on Freddy's part and, in this way, connects him to audiences by letting them in on the "jokes." This verbal comedy would grow with each subsequent entry in the franchise and contributed also to Freddy's ability to find popularity beyond the confines of the slasher movie genre. Indeed, Freddy's repartee grew increasingly cheesy and juvenile as the series went on and New Line pushed to have the franchise address broader—and younger—audiences.

Upon its release in November 1984, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was something of a blockbuster, earning moderate reviews but significant income at the box office. New Line placed it on 165 screens nationwide, then expanded to hundreds more when the box office and word of mouth proved excellent.⁴³ Driving this success, New Line promoted the film heavily prior to and during its release. As Richard

Nowell has argued, inventive marketing and advertising propelled the wave of teen slasher films of the early 1980s, and New Line in particular was innovative by “adopting the synergetic marketing tactics used for contemporaneous Hollywood blockbusters.”⁴⁴ In this case, the main ad image for *NOES* features a female teenager staring out from bed, with an obstructed, menacing figure dangling razor claws above her head. Other advertisements would supplement this image with details regarding the film’s financial success, along with quotes from positive reviews.

New Line tried to create a legend for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* early on by suggesting that the film was bigger, better, and more culturally legitimate than other slasher films. Nowell asserts that New Line promoted the *Nightmare* films “as youth event pictures.”⁴⁵ Especially in the film’s press kit, if not always in its public advertising, New Line differentiated *A Nightmare on Elm Street* from previous teen slasher films by promoting the film as “female-friendly, middle-class-centered.”⁴⁶ The company used the film’s remarkable box office numbers in its advertisements, hoping that popularity would generate more popularity. The film earned \$4 million in its first week and \$16 million in its first four months of release.⁴⁷ The film was also a major hit on home video, with MHE handling the release; *NOES* was still number eight on the rental charts thirteen weeks after its video release, and 110,000 copies of the video were eventually sold.⁴⁸ This success on home video was particularly important in bringing Freddy to young audiences that could not get into movie theaters because of the film’s R rating. A news article from 1987 reported that market research commissioned by New Line indicated that Freddy’s “core audience” was fourteen to twenty-four years old.⁴⁹

IMAGINING A FRANCHISE

The commercial success and widespread recognition of *NOES* and the Freddy character had concrete, positive effects on New Line Cinema. In January 1985, while *NOES* was still playing in theaters, New Line made a deal with RCA/Columbia Home Video. No doubt inspired by the success of *NOES*, Columbia agreed to pay New Line \$30 million for ten of the company’s upcoming productions; excluded from this deal was *NOES* itself and any related sequels, which remained with MHE.⁵⁰ The agreement provided New Line with a significant infusion of capital, enabling the company to adjust its industrial and cultural standing. Shaye indicated that the new slate of films generated out of the RCA/Columbia Home Video deal would aim for a more general audience. The films, he said, “would resemble ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ in terms of their comparatively low cost and their appeal to a broad-based, youthful audience.”⁵¹

Here, Shaye used a rhetorical strategy that would encompass a larger cultural and industrial strategy that New Line used with *NOES* and other films and franchises: New Line attempted at every turn to take what might otherwise be seen as a marginal film, from a nonblockbuster genre, and position it in such a way as to

make it appealing to audience groups not customarily linked to that genre. The company would, in other words, take the marginal to the mainstream.

The deal with RCA/Columbia points to the changing industrial environment that New Line operated in and demonstrates the company's skill in changing its business practices to exploit this new industry situation. Home video was crucial to the spread of many films and genres from the late 1970s through the 1980s, from low-budget horror films to blockbuster hits like *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982). It provided a new playing field for movies, one where otherwise small, marginal companies could compete with the Hollywood majors.⁵² With the blockbuster success of *NOES* in theaters and on video, New Line was poised to create a multimedia franchise.

With his distinctive appearance, signature razor gloves, and characteristic verbosity, the Freddy Krueger character was the most distinguishing feature of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and in many ways functioned as a "star" that accrued a cultural life and identity transcending its representation in a single film. New Line managed to license the Freddy character into a small number of related products based on the first *NOES* movie. In 1984, for instance, a company called Comics Images released packs of *NOES* stickers as well as a thirty-two-page sticker album. Though limited in its reach, this kind of licensing facilitated the dissemination of the Freddy character through paratexts aimed at consumers under the age of seventeen. Further, the kind of collecting behavior these stickers solicited indicates New Line's aim to create a longer-term relationship between consumers of any age and the Freddy character.

Yet New Line's efforts to create sequels based on the first *NOES* film outshined these early attempts at transmedia franchising. In this respect, New Line navigated a course somewhere between the independent exploitation sector and Hollywood. Perhaps more than any other genre or cycle, horror films appeared especially apt for sequelization in the 1970s and 1980s. The blockbuster success of films like *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, and *The Amityville Horror* prompted the quick turnaround of sequels. Perhaps more important, sequels were a definitive element of the teen slasher cycle of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with four additional *Halloween* and seven more *Friday the 13th* films appearing before the end of the 1980s. Paul Wells has referred to this sequelization as a "McDonaldisation" of the horror genre, whereby these cultural products were evacuated of meaningful substance through the process of being serialized.⁵³

By invoking McDonalds, Wells gestures toward the ways the sequelization of horror films in the 1970s and 1980s aligned with broader efforts by the big media companies to create film franchises. Although Hollywood developed sequels to a number of blockbuster hits during this period, including the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Superman* series, the major studios, with only a few exceptions, refrained from producing or distributing horror films. As James Kendrick notes, "The majority of horror films were therefore handled by smaller, independent

production and distribution companies such as New Line Cinema.”⁵⁴ It appears there were two parallel forms of re-exploiting intellectual properties at the time, and New Line navigated the space between them with *NOES*. For Wells, the *NOES* films epitomize the “McDonaldisation” of horror.⁵⁵ But whereas Wells suggests that the result was the genre’s degradation, it seems more fruitful to examine how such horror sequels bolstered New Line Cinema and helped innovate film franchising more generally.

The *NOES* franchise properly began with the release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* in November 1985. The first *NOES* film had been released on video a few months earlier and remained a successful rental when *Freddy’s Revenge* entered theaters. From the start, the sequel was imagined as part of a greater series. The press reported, “Shaye believes that he has on his hands a full-fledged ‘horror franchise’ along the lines of that which accrued to the producers of the original ‘Friday the 13th’ terror feature.”⁵⁶ The film takes place five years after the first and features a family with a teenage boy, Jesse, who gets terrorized by Freddy in nightmares after moving into the house where Nancy had lived. Aside from Freddy, *Freddy’s Revenge* features none of the characters from the first movie. Over the course of the film, Freddy takes possession of Jesse and, through him, kills several people, while Jesse struggles to keep Freddy from taking complete control. The sequel is distinctive in reversing the gender dynamics found in many slasher films, as well as in featuring a mass killing of teenagers on Freddy’s part, as opposed to the single-kill scenarios more typical of the genre. It ends with an explicit opening for a sequel, just as the first film does.

New Line opened the film on 520 screens and planned to have it play on 1,600 screens during its theatrical run.⁵⁷ New Line advertised *Freddy’s Revenge* so as to invite a large, general audience. Nowell has asserted that “the marketing campaign [for *Freddy’s Revenge*] . . . highlighted the film’s focus on young love so as to invite comparisons to youth-oriented Hollywood hits.”⁵⁸ The film’s poster features a young man caressing a woman in a negligee, looking past her into a mirror image in which he appears as a Freddy-like monster. Hinting at the film’s possession narrative, the poster combines the threat of violence with sexual innuendo, in keeping with the tropes of slasher films.

Freddy’s Revenge capitalized on the positive reception the first *NOES* film had generated and proved to be even more financially successful than the first film. In fact, this pattern of increasing financial returns persisted for the *NOES* franchise through *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* in 1988. *Freddy’s Revenge* earned over \$3 million in its opening weekend and more than \$30 million in total at the box office.⁵⁹ Further, as one article noted, *Freddy’s Revenge* “is shaping up to be a monster home video hit. According to various reports, Media [Home Entertainment] has shipped nearly 200,000 copies to distributors and retailers. It’s Media’s biggest seller by far.”⁶⁰

Strategically, MHE dropped the price for the original *NOES* video from \$80 to \$20 in July 1986, simultaneous with the video release of *Freddy’s Revenge*.⁶¹ This

pricing strategy conformed to a larger move toward sell-through in home video during the mid-1980s, especially for blockbuster hits.⁶² Although it is unclear whether this decision affected video sales for the first *NOES* movie, MHE's strategy reveals that the company believed it had already saturated the rental market and could use a promotional boost. It also shows that the company treated the film as an A-grade video title comparable to something like *The Wrath of Khan* or *Top Gun* (1986). In fact, when MHE released *Freddy's Revenge* on video in the summer of 1986, the company engaged in an extravagant promotional campaign that brought Freddy into a wider public arena and helped establish *NOES* as a multimedia franchise. Instead of the film's poster imagery, the cover of the VHS tape depicted Freddy's face staring out from the box, with his gloved hand prominently displayed. It appears MHE and New Line recognized that, by this point, Freddy had become such a draw for the films that he should be isolated and featured in advertising. MHE spent more than \$1 million on the promotional campaign and distributed materials that included "the industry's first three-dimensional molded plastic poster and a six-foot [sic] standee" cutout of the Freddy character.⁶³ In addition, the company distributed Freddy merchandise, such as calendars, and apparently had people in Freddy costumes appear at various locations.⁶⁴ These promotional efforts extended Freddy far beyond the textual bounds of the two feature films, placing him widely into everyday cultural life.

Just prior to the theatrical release of *Freddy's Revenge*, Shaye announced that New Line was trying to license Freddy for a video game and "other licensed merchandise."⁶⁵ Yet New Line faced challenges in this endeavor. Shaye said that New Line, as primarily a film company, did not make movies to *intentionally* franchise them into other products. He also acknowledged the difficulty in getting "youth-oriented licensing deals for R-rated films, 'unless the film happens to be Rambo.'"⁶⁶ Although Shaye sought to position *NOES* as a transmedia franchise, the text posed problems for the creation of paratexts. New Line's efforts to franchise Freddy were linked to having the character transcend the demographic for R-rated films and enter the realm of kids' media culture specifically.

ATTEMPTS AT EXPANSION

The success of the first *NOES* film prompted New Line to reimagine itself as a company that generated film franchises that could gain broader audiences. It was one of many moments when the company assessed its capabilities and successes and vied to augment its cultural presence. *Critters* represents the company's attempt at expanding beyond the *NOES* series in this way. It was the first film that resulted from New Line's home video deal with RCA/Columbia, a product of the company's efforts to attain a more prominent position within the media industry.⁶⁷ New Line endeavored to augment its industrial reputation when it used *Critters*, in combination with *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, to assert the company's growth and larger status at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival.⁶⁸

New Line developed *Critters* in early 1985, with a planned budget of \$3 million, and shot the film in summer 1985.⁶⁹ It released the film on April 11, 1986, on over 600 screens, making it the company's largest theatrical release to that point.⁷⁰ By comparison, Paramount initially released *Top Gun* on 1,028 screens and Tri-Star placed *Short Circuit* (1986) on 1,064 screens when those films debuted the following month.⁷¹

Critters begins with the titular creatures escaping from a prison on an asteroid. Two shape-shifting, alien bounty hunters track them to a small town on Earth. There, the film focuses on the Browns, a family with a teenage daughter and a pre-teen son. The critters' ship lands near the Browns' farm, and the creatures, which roll speedily across the ground, begin attacking everyone and everything in sight. Amid this mayhem, the film maintains moments of quirky humor, such as when one stares down and bites the head off an E.T. doll. Eventually, the bounty hunters arrive at the Brown farm and eradicate the critters. The last image of the movie promises a sequel, however, by showing unhatched critter eggs in the barn.

Critters earned mixed reviews, many of which compared the film unfavorably to *Gremlins* (1984). A critic at the *Boston Globe*, for instance, wrote, "Critters' seems to want to do nothing more than rip off 'Gremlins' and half a dozen other sci-fi outings."⁷² Such comparisons to *Gremlins* are unsurprising, as that film had been released nearly two years earlier and garnered lots of press. New Line did little to avoid these comparisons with *Gremlins*, and in fact New Line executives referred to the film as a "thematic mix of 'Gremlins' and 'The Terminator.'"⁷³ Although film distributors commonly associate their films with successful similar films, *Critters* was firmly associated with the mainstream hit *Gremlins*, both by New Line and within the wider critical discourse.

Critters contributed to a broader wave of "little monster" movies appearing in the mid-1980s. Although *Gremlins* initiated it, the cycle was largely regarded as trash cinema. In another review of *Critters*, the *Los Angeles Times* movie critic wrote, "Two years ago we had 'Gremlins' . . . it was a good movie. . . . Last year we had 'Ghoulies' . . . a stinker [that] cleaned up at the box office. . . . And now we have another species: 'Critters.'"⁷⁴ Aside from *Gremlins*, *Ghoulies* (1984), and *Critters*, other films in this wave included *Munchies* (1987) and *Hobgoblins* (1988). In all of them, small, mischievous, or outright malevolent little monsters wreak havoc on a family or an entire community. Unlike *Gremlins*, however, which had a respectable production budget and got a major release by Warner Bros., all the other little-monster films were produced inexpensively and distributed by small, independent companies. The cycle, then, largely fell into the realm of cult or exploitation cinema, as a result of the films' industrial conditions and apparent derivativeness.

Yet it appears that New Line hoped to emulate *Gremlins*' mainstream success, in particular by drawing on the company's experience with the first *NOES* film. Before *Critters* was released, New Line situated the film as a franchise-in-the-making by pairing it with *Freddy's Revenge* in publicity and advertisements. New Line took

out a two-page spread in *Variety* in May 1985, for instance, to promote its films to international and home video distributors; the left-hand page advertised *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, and the right side was devoted to *Critters*. This cartoon ad prominently featured the gun-toting alien bounty hunters from the film, standing above a pile of critters with glowing eyes huddled into a pile, and had the tagline, “They’re loose, hungry and in pre-production.”⁷⁵ Here, the company presents the two films side by side as though they are both related to the success of the first *NOES* film, as though they both somehow extend from that film. Similarly, New Line ran a two-page advertisement in *Variety* regarding the company’s participation in the 1986 ShoWest convention, and highlighted *Critters* alongside details about the financial success of *Freddy’s Revenge*.⁷⁶ In combination, these ads suggested that *Critters* could earn revenues comparable to the *Nightmare* sequel’s. *Critters* was a modest financial hit, though more modest than *Gremlins* or New Line’s own *Nightmare on Elm Street*, earning \$4.7 million in North American theaters.⁷⁷

Propped up by the financial success and public awareness of the *NOES* films and *Critters*, New Line announced in July 1986 its plans to become a publicly traded company. It planned to offer more than 1.6 million shares of common stock, aiming for a price of \$10–\$13 per share. Investment bank Drexel Burnham Lambert underwrote this initial public offering (IPO), hoping to raise \$20 million.⁷⁸ Although boosted by the \$30 million from the deal with RCA/Columbia Home Video, this IPO represented an attempt by New Line to attain more robust and stable financing, as well as a more significant and competitive place in the larger media industry.

By this point in the 1980s, all the major Hollywood studios were part of larger conglomerates and, as a result, could draw on substantial financial resources. Indeed, most of the conglomerates that owned major studios saw significant gains in stock price that year. Moreover, New Line’s public stock offering was part of a wave of IPOs by a range of media companies in 1986 that sought to capitalize on what was then a bull market (in advance of the financial crash of 1987). Other media companies that went public that year included Carolco, De Laurentis Entertainment, News Corp., and Aaron Spelling Productions.⁷⁹ Thus, in its attempt to create larger, more mainstream film series and franchises, New Line also engaged in larger, more mainstream industrial endeavors. Shaye indicated as much, and said that he hoped the money gained through the IPO would “provide us with the wherewithal to expand in intelligent directions”—i.e., film production and general corporate purposes, as well as to repay some \$5,500,000 in corporate debt.⁸⁰

The company received good press in advance of the IPO, with one investment review stating that New Line was a “producer and distributor of trendy horror films, such as *Nightmare on Elm Street I and II*.”⁸¹ The company went through with the IPO in late September, but the stock offering quickly proved a disappointment. Of the 1.6 million shares offered, only 800,000 were sold, and instead of \$10–\$13

per share, the stock sold at \$8. Although the IPO raised only \$6.4 million, Shaye maintained that the revenue generated would facilitate the company's growing slate of original productions, as well as pay marketing expenses and support other corporate purposes.⁸² Reflecting the company's new corporate stature, New Line ran advertisements in trade publications in October carrying the slogan "New Line Cinema. Where entertainment gets down to business."⁸³

New Line's internal business documents from this time also indicate continued hopes for expansion. The company's 1986 annual report, its first since going public, declared, "Our fiscal performance in 1986 achieved record levels, primarily as a result of the success of *Critters* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*, in both the motion picture and home video marketplaces."⁸⁴ The company earned revenues of over \$26 million in 1986: significantly smaller than the earnings of a major studio but remarkable for an independent distributor. The *NOES* films and *Critters* were multimedia victories that included home video. Moreover, these achievements generated additional productions, particularly sequels for both *Critters* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

FRANCHISING FREDDY

New Line Cinema's 1986 annual report contains a revealing statement: "Although New Line Cinema generates most of its revenue from the theatrical distribution of its films, so-called ancillary markets like home video, cable and broadcast TV have become increasingly important profit centers for the Company."⁸⁵

As New Line thus conceived of itself, it was broaching mainstream media industry practices while still holding to its position as an independent film distributor. As the industry transformed around it, New Line endeavored to bring its content into a much broader cultural arena, and did so by adopting, adapting, and innovating the business practices of multimedia licensing and merchandizing. These were only "so-called ancillary" markets because, in fact, Hollywood was proving that licensing and merchandising could be central to the contemporary media business.

New Line realized this ambition most fully with *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: The Dream Warriors* (1987). Production on the film began in October 1986 with a budget of \$4.6 million.⁸⁶ In the film, Freddy Krueger once again terrorizes a host of teenagers, but this time all are patients at a psychiatric hospital where Nancy, the protagonist from the first *NOES* film, works as a therapist. Nancy and the teens work together through hypnosis to have collective dreams in which they develop skills to fight Freddy. They work to secure the physical remains of Freddy in order to lay him to rest and eliminate him forever. They are successful, it seems, though Nancy and several of the teens are killed in the process.

For *Dream Warriors*, New Line engaged in its first nationwide release in February 1987, opening the movie in 1,300 theaters across the country.⁸⁷ The company

spent more than \$5 million promoting the film, including placing television advertisements in 220 markets around the United States.⁸⁸ These ads highlight Freddy and show various characters encountering spooky, surreal environments. Posters and newspaper ads for the film situated it as a youthful adventure film, with four teenagers brandishing different weapons and facing down an immense image of Freddy's face, his razors pointed outward. With the teens' backs to the viewer, Freddy serves as the primary draw for the film. Reviews of the film were positive and noted that its tone benefited from self-conscious humor delivered largely through Freddy's banter.⁸⁹ Supported by this marketing push, *Dream Warriors* earned nearly \$9 million in its first weekend, which was the best opening weekend of any film to date that year.⁹⁰ The film would go on to garner a total of \$45 million at the box office and sell 185,000 video units.⁹¹

In addition to ads, *Dream Warriors* was accompanied by a wave of cross-promotion and, eventually, concerted efforts at transmedia franchising. Freddy appeared in several promotional spots on MTV prior to the film's release, and the character served as a guest host on the station. In addition, the heavy metal band Dokken recorded the film's title song, and the music video for the power ballad premiered at the time of the film's theatrical release. In typical crossover video fashion, it depicts segments from the movie interspersed with images of the band performing; Freddy also appears at the end of the video, breaking the fourth wall by asking viewers, "Who were those guys?"

A news article from the time took stock of *NOES* as a cultural phenomenon and of Freddy as an unlikely star. It began: "The folks at New Line Cinema knew that Freddy Krueger was on his way to official cult status when the display art began to disappear from video stores and theater lobbies. The cardboard cutouts and gory one-sheets . . . were pilfered or, in some cases, sold to teen-age Freddy worshippers." However anecdotal this claim may be, it suggests that New Line's efforts at promoting Freddy via advertising paratexts helped to generate a greater appetite for additional paratexts that could be sold as commodities. "In the coming months," the article observed, "there will be Freddy T-shirts and Freddy bubble gum, Freddy wall posters . . . wall hangings and pillowcases."⁹² The pillowcases represent an especially ironic form of merchandising, given that Freddy kills his victims while they sleep.

For New Line, the cross-promotion and licensing of Freddy entailed a strategic endeavor. The company's 1987 annual report stated that New Line had recently completed business deals that had the "potential to significantly broaden the Company's operations," particularly through creating television spin-offs and licensed merchandise. The report claimed that licensing and merchandising its film properties was "yielding a new and growing source of revenue."⁹³ It detailed how Freddy Krueger had been successfully merchandised in the form of Halloween costumes and reported that "model kits, *Elm Street* board games, hologram watches, skateboards, and a seven-foot blow-up Freddy figure are all now on the market."⁹⁴

The practice of creating merchandise based on successful films was not unusual in the mid-1980s. For film historian Justin Wyatt, films like *Grease* (1978) epitomize the “high concept” trend of the 1970s and 1980s, in which a film was merely one element in a larger, coordinated effort to exploit an intellectual property in multiple media forms.⁹⁵ In this context, sequels were just one manifestation, among many, of a recycled intellectual property. What makes the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise so remarkable is the way New Line managed to transcend the traditional market for teen slasher films and bring the Freddy character into a cultural mainstream.

This popularity and financial success were all the more notable for the way *NOES* engaged child consumers. Many children accessed the *NOES* franchise in some manner or other during the decade. As Nowell observes, New Line courted preteen consumers to the *NOES* franchise through merchandise and spin-off products.⁹⁶ Ian Conrich has likewise noted that savvy marketing and merchandising of the Freddy Krueger character likely helped the character appeal particularly to children.⁹⁷ Admittedly, *NOES* was not the first R-rated film series to be franchised across media in ways that engaged with multiple demographics. Similar merchandizing occurred with Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* films, as well as Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, including clothing, comic books, and video games. Similarly, as Shaye noted, the Rambo character from *First Blood* (1982) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) appeared in numerous products, including action figures from Coleco, and in other media like video games and the animated series *Rambo: The Force of Freedom* (1986). Thus, rather than calling the multimedia franchising of *NOES* to children unique, it is more accurate to say that *NOES* contributed strongly to the franchising logics of the time, which included the proliferation of texts and products that crossed previously assumed divisions between “adult” and “child” consumers.

Freddy Krueger was reported to be the best-selling Halloween costume in 1987.⁹⁸ Marty Toy Company made a version of Freddy’s glove, with plastic blades extending from the fingers. The package reads: “Not recommended for children under 10 years of age. Caution: do not use this glove in any violent manner. Do not wave, poke or jab this glove at anybody’s face, eyes, ears, or nose.” Designed both to thrill children and appease concerned parents, the package features a picture of Freddy extending his claws while reassuring buyers, “Soft plastic blades! No sharp edges!” and “It’s play safe!” Collegeville Costumes also produced a Freddy costume in 1987, which included a mask of Freddy’s burned face and packaging indicating that a “medium” was the right size for trick-or-treaters seven to eight years old.

Similarly, a *NOES* board game was released in 1987 for “ages 8 to adult,” the box advised. Retailing for \$24.95, the game was produced by Victory Games, a subsidiary of Avalon Hill, known for publishing war and role-playing games. Also in 1987, New Line worked with the Moss Music Group to release a novelty album, “Freddy’s Greatest Hits,” which was released on Moss’s sublabel RIC Records. Primarily a female synth pop album, it consists of original compositions and cover

songs, with Freddy Krueger occasionally interjecting roars and sinister laughs, including “Wooly Booly,” “Do the Freddy,” and “In the Midnight Hour.”

The *NOES* franchise continued to proliferate across texts and products beyond the *Dream Warriors*. In the summer of 1988, the rap group the Fat Boys released the album *Coming Back Hard Again*, which featured the song “Are You Ready for Freddy?” This track features the Freddy character talking and rapping along with the Fat Boys. The song was released in the wake of another song that invoked Freddy and *NOES*, “Nightmare on My Street,” by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, which appeared on the album *He’s the DJ, I’m the Rapper*, released in March. Documents show that New Line negotiated with representatives for DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince to create a video based on *NOES* at the same time the company was working out a similar deal with the Fat Boys. Negotiations with the Fresh Prince broke down, however, just as *He’s the DJ, I’m the Rapper* came out, which still included the *NOES*-themed song. Moreover, a music video for “A Nightmare on My Street” was produced that featured characters and settings that resembled the *NOES* films. New Line sued the music company responsible for the video, and a court upheld an injunction against it being aired. Instead, the video for the Fat Boys’ “Are You Ready for Freddy?” aired on MTV in fall 1988 and depicted the Freddy character terrorizing the Fat Boys.

Court documents from the lawsuit state that New Line sought a rap song specifically because the company understood that “40 percent of the Nightmare series audience was Black.”⁹⁹ Whether or not this figure was accurate, the document shows that New Line aimed to create paratexts that appealed to specific demographics, in this case defining audiences in terms of race. Franchising, in other words, served as a way of confirming and strengthening a relationship between the distributor and a specific consumer group, however imagined or real that group might be. This document suggests how New Line used the lessons it learned on college campuses in the 1970s in the 1980s. The company conceived of audiences as having tastes and preferences based on their social identity. Clearly, in the case of *NOES*, this was not a simple matter of representation, of showing Black characters in a film so as to invite Black viewers, for instance. Rather, it shows New Line’s more flexible understanding of taste, content, and social identities. This instance of marketing to social identity does not just point to New Line’s history but also to its future, as the company would increase its focus on Black audiences through the use of hip-hop and hip-hop culture in its movies in the 1990s.

With the Fat Boys’ song and video now circulating among the many other iterations of Freddy across pop culture, New Line launched the fourth *NOES* film in August 1988, *The Dream Master*. Produced for \$6 million, the movie opened on more than 1,700 screens.¹⁰⁰ The company spent around \$10 million in promoting and advertising the film, helping it earn \$12.8 million in its opening weekend.¹⁰¹ *The Dream Master* reached \$50 million overall at the box office and sold about 300,000 video units, once again surpassing the film that had come before.¹⁰² Then,

in October 1988, a new *NOES* television program went on the air, *Freddy's Nightmares—A Nightmare on Elm Street, the Series*. *Freddy's Nightmares* was an anthology horror series, somewhat resembling *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64) or *Tales from the Dark Side* (1983–88), with each episode centered on a different short, independent, spooky story. Freddy provided introductions and epilogues to each episode and appeared in several of the stories as well. The program was not especially popular, but it managed to bring the *NOES* franchise into people's living rooms via broadcast.

New Line continued to proliferate Freddy through 1988 and 1989. There was a pay-per-minute 900 number with a trivia game. Freddy appeared in Marvel comic books. There continued to be stickers and collectible cards (TOPPS and IMPEL), and another board game was released in 1989, this one by Cardinal Industries.¹⁰³ Freddy appeared in video games as well, following such horror movie game adaptations as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* for the Atari 2600 in 1982 and the *Friday the 13th* game on Nintendo. The *NOES* game came out in 1990 on the Nintendo Entertainment System, and other versions of a *NOES* game appeared for home computers. Produced by LJN, known for making games based on movies, the Nintendo game is a side-scroller in which players navigate a spooky house and fight off various creatures. In the end, players confront a giant, flying Freddy head and then a disembodied Freddy glove.

The process of making *NOES* a widely popular media franchise, and of bringing the Freddy character into the realm of kids' media culture more particularly, was not always smooth. In 1988, New Line worked with Matchbox to create an action figure of the character, and in 1989 the toy company released a Freddy doll that spoke when one pulled a drawstring. However, religious groups threatened a boycott, which prompted Matchbox to release fewer dolls than planned and halt all advertising for the figures. Similarly, after Marvel published a Freddy comic book in 1989, at least one comic shop allowed only patrons sixteen years or older to purchase it. In the face of this policy, one fourteen-year-old customer said, "It's so stupid, when you've already seen the movie [on home video] . . . I don't see how the comic could be more violent or more frightening."¹⁰⁴ New Line also garnered criticism when a survey of ten- to thirteen-year-olds conducted by the National Coalition on Television Violence found that more kids could identify Freddy than could identify Abraham Lincoln or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁰⁵

Despite such difficulties, New Line's efforts in franchising *NOES* remained strong; in some ways, the survey cited above serves as evidence of New Line's success. These franchising activities were so systematized that in 1989 New Line distributed an "Elm Street Catalog" of "gifts and collectibles." In addition to offering many of the products sold in stores individually, including games, action figures, posters, and T-shirts, the catalog also showcased *NOES*-themed jewelry, watches, and sunglasses, as well as videos for all *NOES* films made to that point. Projections indicated that retail sales of *NOES*-related products might reach \$15 million in

1988.¹⁰⁶ Legal documents indicate that New Line earned over \$2 million in 1988 from licensing fees and royalties from the NOES films.¹⁰⁷ As Nowell indicates, New Line “exerted only partial control over the consequences” of this franchising activity.¹⁰⁸ But as Derek Johnson has pointed out, franchising relies on partnerships among different firms in their shared exploitation of intellectual property.¹⁰⁹ Thus, rather than seeing New Line’s “lack of control” as a weakness, it seems more accurate to point out, first, that New Line did indeed approach franchising from a position of industrial marginality and, second, that these licensing deals spread Freddy more widely through culture and, in the process, generated additional value for the films themselves.

CORPORATE, INDEPENDENT

In spring 1986, on the heels of the success of *Critters* and the first two NOES films, New Line opened a number of branch offices in cities around the country, including one in Los Angeles that was soon listed as the primary address for “New Line Distribution, Inc.” in the company’s advertising and promotional materials.¹¹⁰ Although New Line maintained its headquarters in New York during this period, by 1990 the Los Angeles office was so active that more than half of the company’s employees worked there.¹¹¹ This included New Line executive Sara Risher, for example, who had worked at New Line since 1974 in a variety of publicity and production positions before becoming the president of New Line Productions in 1987.¹¹² In public discourses Shaye and other New Line workers continued to situate the company in an ambivalent relationship to Hollywood. But from the mid-1980s onward, the company’s growth, expanding production and distribution capacity, and business practices increasingly aligned it with the mainstream movie business. In terms of business practices, this move toward the mainstream included New Line’s use of external market research for its films. In the 1960s and 1970s, and even to a large degree in the early 1980s, New Line depended on a closer connection to its intended audiences and employed marketing and distribution practices that engaged these communities, whether through on-the-ground marketing on college campuses or releasing films in slow but flexible, regional theatrical rollouts. Now answerable to shareholders, the corporate incarnation of New Line sought to rationalize its marketing, advertising, and distribution efforts.

Justin Wyatt has argued that the New Hollywood, or “High Concept” cinema, is defined largely by the integration of marketing and filmmaking, and by the commonplace use of market research. “Although market research in the film industry can be traced back to forecasts of market demand for movies in 1915,” Wyatt writes, “market research did not become an integral part of the film industry until the late 1970s.”¹¹³ This entailed the outsourcing of research regarding audiences’ tastes, interests, and preferences to specialized firms, particularly National Research Group (NRG). As of 1986, NRG handled test screenings for “two-thirds of all

movies released in the United States.”¹¹⁴ Test screenings and other forms of market research carried out before the release of a film entail measuring audience members themselves, and not just their tastes. In this regard, NRG and similar companies use social scientific methods, including questionnaires and focus groups, to link cinematic tastes to demographic characteristics of audiences, including gender and age. NRG and market research more generally systematized a practice that New Line had developed more fluidly in the 1970s, orienting its marketing and advertising efforts around the idea that social identities affect audience tastes.

Hollywood’s increased reliance on market research was intertwined with conglomeration. Because these companies were now so large, diversified, and accountable to corporate shareholders, market research promised a rational way to assess an otherwise difficult cultural terrain.¹¹⁵ Accordingly, New Line’s outsourcing of market research to NRG in the late 1980s speaks to the company’s changing conditions and its less proximal connection to its audiences. These shifts become apparent in the company’s handling of John Waters’s film *Hairspray* (1988). If *Polyester*, with its R rating and toned-down weirdness, marked a move toward the mainstream by Waters, then *Hairspray* appears to approach the mainstream even more. Filming for *Hairspray* occurred in the summer of 1987, and it featured an “all-star” cast including singers Debbie Harry and Sonny Bono.¹¹⁶ The budget for the film was around \$2 million, the largest ever for a Waters film.¹¹⁷ The movie tells the story of a young woman in 1960s Baltimore, Tracy, who rises to fame by appearing on an *American Bandstand*-type dance show; along the way, Tracy helps to make the program racially integrated. It earned a PG rating from the MPAA.

New Line worked hard to make the film a breakout hit. The company employed PMK Public Relations to handle a wide-scale promotional campaign for the film in advance of its release in late February 1988. PMK coordinated reviews and feature stories in a number of national and international magazines, including *Elle*, *Premier*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Teen*. It also organized advanced screenings of the film for critics at a number of long-lead magazines, such as *Newsweek* and *Time*.¹¹⁸ Whereas in the past, New Line handled its own promotion for its films, the company’s work with PMK indicates that it required assistance in handling the wide-ranging promotional efforts that a national theatrical release required.

New Line also worked with NRG to assess the effectiveness of *Hairspray*’s trailer and print ads. NRG conducted intercept interviews with roughly 250 people in five cities across the United States, breaking these groups down according to age and education. In addition, NRG categorized respondents according to their viewership of “eleven sophisticated movies,” thus aiming to identify the cinephiles among them.¹¹⁹ The firm also conducted intercept interviews in eight cities for the film’s print ads, and divided the research population according to age, gender, and film-viewing habits. Although the trailer tested badly among all moviegoers, it appears that the audience clearly identified the film as a comedy with music and dance and expressed some interest in the film’s dancing element.¹²⁰ The print ads also tested

badly overall, but viewers responded most strongly to images of people dancing.¹²¹ Indeed, the ad that New Line actually placed in newspapers across the country shows only the legs of a man and woman dancing.

In light of these market research reports, New Line opened the film in only seventy-nine theaters following its premier in Baltimore. The film did modestly well, however, and earned \$1.5 million in its first ten days of release, prompting New Line to expand it into more than two hundred theaters.¹²² Sadly, Waters's star Divine, who played the protagonist's mother in *Hairspray*, died just as the film spread to more theaters. The movie received positive reviews, and much of the discourse about the film centered on how "mainstream" it was.¹²³ Although it earned only \$2.7 million over the course of 1988, the film marked a significant success for Waters as a director and helped sustain New Line's growth at the time.¹²⁴

The late 1980s were difficult for a number of publicly traded, independent media companies, a situation not helped by the stock market crash of 1987. In August 1988, the De Laurentiis Entertainment Group filed for bankruptcy.¹²⁵ The Securities and Exchange Commission sued Cannon Films for misrepresenting its earnings, and the company was subsequently dismantled and sold to other media companies.¹²⁶ New World's stock price plummeted as well.¹²⁷ New Line stood out in this context as an anomalous, though still modest, success. As one news story put it, "New Line remains an almost solitary exemplar of an independent film company whose ambitions have not outstretched its resources."¹²⁸ News articles detailed how financially conservative and reliable New Line was, even if its stock performance was mediocre.¹²⁹

Beginning in 1988, New Line planned to double its production slate in an attempt to diversify into new genres and pursue franchises beyond *NOES*. An internal memo from 1988 referred to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Critters* as "tried and true" examples of the company's efforts to make "teenage movies for a mass audience."¹³⁰ A New Line marketing executive remarked, "It would be nice if *Critters* turned out to be the same kind of franchise as *Nightmare*."¹³¹ Similarly, the company's 1987 annual report notes the company's success in licensing *NOES* and then states, "Similar exploitation of items from *Hairspray* and *Critters* are now being explored."¹³² New Line also toyed with the idea of a *Hairspray* television program.¹³³ Although it does not appear that any *Critters* merchandise or a *Hairspray*-based TV program was made, the annual report makes clear that New Line sought to expand both films into a multimedia franchises.

But the *Critters* series demonstrates that New Line needed to be flexible with its franchising activities. The company released *Critters 2: The Main Course* in April 1988. The film's story follows the first, with the critters back to terrorize the same small town, and several characters from the original appear in the sequel. It made nearly \$2 million in its opening weekend.¹³⁴ Its revenues dropped quickly in the following weeks, however, and the film earned around \$3.8 million during its theatrical run.¹³⁵

The film's performance raised questions about the potential for *Critters* to find widespread popularity. A review in *Boxoffice* put it this way: "This klutzy sequel to the 'Gremlins' rip-off managed to gross only \$3.3 million in its first two weeks, meaning that we've probably seen the last of those rotten old Crites."¹³⁶ Further, a number of the other, low-budget "little monster" movies were released in the late 1980s. In addition to *Munchies*, which came out in 1987, both *Hobgoblins* and *Ghoulies 2* came out the following year. By this point, films like *Critters 2* that featured small mischievous monsters were more associated with cheap exploitation cinema than with Hollywood franchises like *Gremlins*.

Following the theatrical run of *Critters 2*, Shaye defended the film: "Critters' was less successful at the box office (than 'Elm Street'), but the greatest financial success of 'Critters' came through television and home video."¹³⁷ Shaye here indicated that those "so-called ancillary markets" actually serve as an important source of revenue. "There's equivalent interest for 'Critters 2,'" said Shaye. "If it's as strong as it seems, there might be a 'Critters 3.' But if we don't have an idea for it, there won't be one."¹³⁸ Although New Line may have hoped to generate multiple transmedia franchises, it remained flexible as it tried to exploit an intellectual property as much as possible. In fact, *Critters 2* was not a hit on video.

New Line produced the sequels *Critters 3* and *4* back to back in the summer of 1991.¹³⁹ The company used this cost-saving strategy years later with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. But that is where comparisons to *The Lord of the Rings* end, as *Critters 3* and *4* are decidedly low-budget, campy films aimed at an audience of cult horror fans. Although New Line attempted to generate interest in the films in various markets, both sequels were direct-to-video releases, with *Critters 3* coming out in 1991 and *Critters 4* in 1992. It appears that New Line was resigned to the idea that *Critters 3* and *4* occupied the same disreputable cultural zone as *Ghoulies 2* or *Munchies*. The straight-to-video releases of *Critters 3* and *4* show how the company still had one foot in exploitation cinema and another in mainstream, transmedia franchises.

OUT OF THE SEWERS

New Line took additional steps toward the mainstream of the movie business and popular culture in the early 1990s. It promoted several executives in 1989, including making Janet Grillo the vice president of creative affairs for the East Coast.¹⁴⁰ By 1991, she served as the East Coast director of development and eventually worked as the senior VP of production in the East Coast office. In September 1990, the company made a major addition to its management team when it hired Michael Lynne as its president and chief operating officer. Shaye had known Lynne when the two were enrolled at Columbia Law School in the 1960s, and Lynne had worked in entertainment law for several decades.¹⁴¹ After reconnecting with Shaye in 1984, Lynne served as outside counsel for New Line and as a company board

member.¹⁴² With Shaye maintaining his position as chair and chief executive officer, the addition of Lynne inaugurated a wave of industrial expansion. A news article stated that Lynne would assist New Line “as it expands into other sectors of entertainment, such as television production, home video and pay-per-view television.”¹⁴³ Lynne added, “I will become primarily responsible for expansion of the business base of the company into new areas, and to insure that those expansions are properly managed.”¹⁴⁴

In June 1990, New Line invested in the television production company RHI Entertainment, thereby significantly expanding New Line’s TV division, which had previously produced *Freddy’s Nightmares*.¹⁴⁵ In November, New Line formed its own home video division, New Line Home Video.¹⁴⁶ Although RCA/Columbia continued distributing some New Line titles, the creation of the new division indicates New Line’s growing capabilities and, perhaps more important, its ability to better control the exploitation of its films across different media.¹⁴⁷

In fact, New Line bought the home video rights to the *NOES* franchise from MHE for between \$5 and \$6 million in 1991.¹⁴⁸ Further, as part of the deal with RHI, New Line acquired the rights to around one thousand films and television programs held by RHI’s corporate parent, which the company could then distribute on home video.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, in May 1991, New Line acquired the rights to the library of six hundred titles held by Nelson Holdings for \$15 million, including *The Graduate* (1967) and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), as well as all current and future films by Castle Rock Entertainment.¹⁵⁰ This gave New Line the video rights to the horror film *Misery* (1990), which was a big hit on video. New Line was now a full-fledged multimedia company, involved in theatrical, television, and home video distribution as well as film production.

The *NOES* franchise continued to succeed during this period, though not so well as it had previously. *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* opened in 1,900 theaters in August 1989, but it garnered largely negative reviews, many of which indicated that the *NOES* franchise felt spent.¹⁵¹ The film earned around \$21 million at the box office, which is substantial but represents less than half the amount made by the previous *NOES* film.¹⁵² A sixth *NOES* film, *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare*, was released on Friday, September 13, 1991, and featured a 3-D sequence at the end of the film.¹⁵³ New Line promoted the film heavily, including a promotional documentary aired on MTV.¹⁵⁴ In addition, New Line secured a product tie-in for the film with Barq’s Root Beer whereby Barq’s distributed coupons for the film’s 3-D glasses.¹⁵⁵ The film grossed \$35 million at the box office.¹⁵⁶ Thus, even though it might be slowing down, the *NOES* franchise remained highly successful.

But New Line found its greatest economic and cultural success to date by attaching itself to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) franchise. For Marsha Kinder, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles epitomize a media “supersystem,” in which a specific figure or property gets wrapped up in an intertextual, industrial

network that spans media and collectible merchandise, targets different consumer populations, and takes on the cultural impact of an “event.”¹⁵⁷ The Turtles were, in other words, the very picture of a transmedia franchise in 1989. In a counterintuitive kind of way, TMNT perhaps best embodies New Line Cinema’s opportunistic eclecticism in the 1980s. Counterintuitive because, as part of a popular franchise, the *TMNT* movie was aimed squarely at bigger, broader, more general audiences than any previous New Line film. But that is exactly what made the film such an oddball addition to the New Line repertoire—one the company achieved in an unusually successful exercise in opportunism.

TMNT began as a small, independently produced, black-and-white comic book. Written by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird and published by Mirage Studios in 1984, the comic featured four anthropomorphic turtle characters named after Renaissance artists—Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, and Raphael—who live in the sewers of New York and emerge to fight crime. The characters gained mainstream popularity after Laird and Eastman worked with a licensing agent, Mark Freedman, to license the characters.¹⁵⁸ In 1986, Freedman licensed the Turtles to Playmates Toys, which at the time was a relatively small company based in Hong Kong with an office in California.¹⁵⁹ Playmates worked with Group W Broadcasting to produce a *TMNT* animated series, which first aired in 1987 and entered syndicated broadcast in 1988. The show made several alterations to the characters, many of which helped make the Turtles more child friendly, such as a reduction in the comic’s grittiness and violence and the addition of catchphrases like “Ninja power!” As one reviewer of the program remarked, “The designers have softened the bold lines of the comic book figures and made the Turtles look like muscular Muppets.”¹⁶⁰

A plethora of TMNT toys and merchandise appeared in stores simultaneously with the program’s premier. This first wave of merchandise maintained the brighter aesthetic of the cartoon to appeal to younger consumers. The television show also inspired a new comic book, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Adventures*, published by Archie Comics, which paralleled the original comic but featured the more kid-friendly version of the Turtles. By the end of 1988, Playmates had sold more than \$23 million’s worth of action figures and related toys, while an additional \$20 million had been generated through other licensed TMNT products, including “hats and caps, sleeping bags, tricycles, coloring books, puzzles, board games, watches and posters.”¹⁶¹ By the following summer, Turtlemania was raging, and the characters appeared on “lunch boxes, backpacks, calendars, drinking straws, decals, shampoo, toothbrushes and, of course, the obligatory Nintendo video game.”¹⁶² By 1989, Turtle products and cross-promotional deals had generated more than \$250 million in revenue.¹⁶³

A *TMNT* film began production in 1989 on a budget of around \$12 million.¹⁶⁴ Filmed in North Carolina, the movie was produced independently of the Hollywood studio system by the Hong Kong-based studio Golden Harvest, known

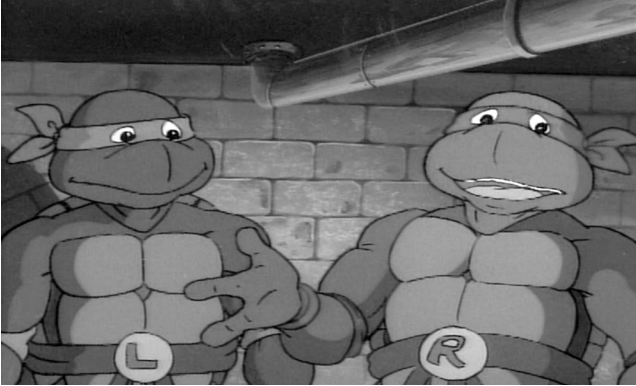


FIGURE 9. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise included a popular television cartoon that featured silly, child-friendly versions of the characters.

for making action movies aimed at the East Asian market.¹⁶⁵ Jim Henson's company designed and produced the suits for the Turtles, which included remote-control animatronics that allowed the characters to move their mouths and change facial expressions.¹⁶⁶ Although Golden Harvest promoted the *Turtles* film at the American Film Market in 1989 and then at the Cannes Film Festival that year, the company had difficulty securing a distributor for North America.¹⁶⁷

New Line Cinema acquired the North American rights to the film in 1989. *Screen International* reported that the film would be "the most expensive feature New Line has released to date."¹⁶⁸ Intense cross-promotion was already in the works when New Line bought the rights, including tie-ins with Burger King, a breakfast cereal company, and a soda company, as well as plans for a promotion on MTV.¹⁶⁹ As New Line was only a licensee of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, its participation in the franchise was somewhat marginal. But it coordinated its business practices with other aspects of the franchise to benefit from the network effects. Sandra Ruch, the copresident of New Line Marketing at the time, put it this way: "There were a tremendous amount of licensees already in place by the time we decided to take on this movie. New Line does not own the licensing rights, but we were able to contact all the licensees and try and do tie-ins specifically for the movie. Since we had people in place, what we did was piggyback and capitalize on it and exploit it, if you will, even further."¹⁷⁰

As just one of many different companies that proliferated the Turtles through popular culture, New Line held a contingent relationship with the franchise as a whole. Nevertheless, this film played a crucial role in the TMNT franchise and in New Line's expansion as well.

Prior to the film's release, New Line conducted considerable marketing and advertising. Whereas the company had carved its place in the movie industry by identifying and cultivating distinct audience communities, such as college students, the art cinema crowd, or teenage horror fans, the *TMNT* film represented something aimed squarely at the cultural mainstream. Although New Line had

promoted the *NOES* films as broad-based teen pictures and had even sought out child consumers, *TMNT* was even more clearly tailored for a “general” audience. New Line executives noted the challenge that *TMNT* presented to the company; the president of distribution said that “it was harder [to promote] than ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ . . . because we wanted to go for everybody and that’s expensive.”¹⁷¹ Shaye expressed concern that the film would “only appeal to little kids,” but successful test screenings at two universities suggested that teenagers and college-age viewers would also have interest.¹⁷²

New Line also conducted recruited-audience test screenings through NRG in February 1990 in order to identify how the film played to different audiences. NRG found that “the movie received well above average ratings and recommend scores among regular moviegoers (non-parents 12 and over) and among children.” The study also found that “audience members under 18 rated the movie at much higher levels (strong above average) compared to audience members 18 and over.”¹⁷³ All children gave the film “strong above average ratings.”¹⁷⁴ The NRG report’s overall positivity clearly signaled that New Line had a highly likable film on its hands, one that could appeal to a much broader audience than the company usually targeted. The report also indicated that the film would benefit from the existing *TMNT* franchise, as scores for the film were notably higher among regular viewers of the cartoon.¹⁷⁵ The market research therefore incentivized New Line to advertise the film to a broad audience, and to child fans of *TMNT* in particular.

New Line released the film nationwide in March 1990 on more than two thousand screens.¹⁷⁶ A Hollywood-style wide release, this was a massive undertaking and a greater launch than was customary for the company. As in the comics and cartoons, the film features the four Turtles fighting crime in New York; their nemesis is the “Foot Clan” of evil warriors who are led by a villainous ninja named Shredder. The Turtles become friends and allies with reporter April O’Niel and vigilante Casey Jones. The movie features numerous fight sequences and lots of silly humor, and in the end, the Turtles defeat Shredder and peace is restored. The look and tone of the film reflect a balance of the dark grimness of the original comic, particularly in the cinematography, and the silliness of the cartoon, through characterization and dialogue. One reviewer thought that the movie was “aimed squarely at the single-digit set. People older than 10 are allowed to watch, but they have to keep their objections to themselves.”¹⁷⁷

The film earned over \$25 million in its first week.¹⁷⁸ News stories noted that this figure was especially impressive because so many of the tickets were reduced-price child tickets.¹⁷⁹ This made the *TMNT* film the third-best three-day opening ever, behind only *Batman* at \$42.7 million in 1989 and *Ghostbusters* at \$29.4 million in 1984.¹⁸⁰ Over the remainder of the year, the film earned over \$133 million.¹⁸¹ This was New Line’s biggest financial hit by far and the most successful independently distributed film up to that point.

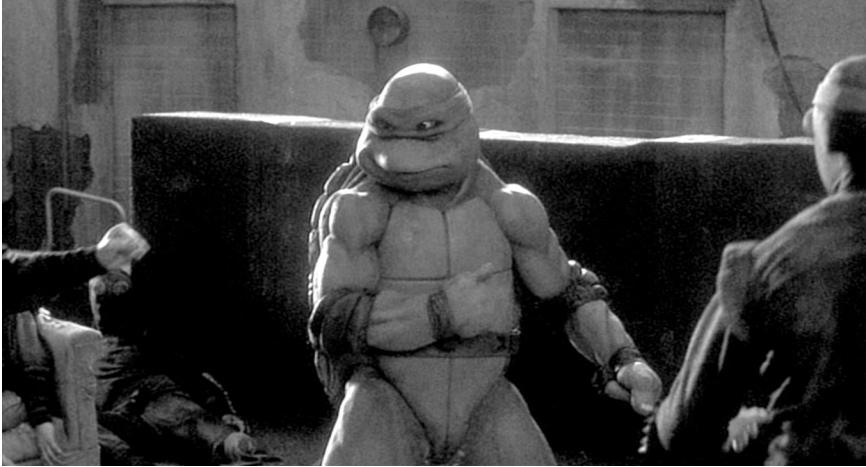


FIGURE 10. The movie *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was a massive hit for New Line and was the highest-grossing independently distributed film for many years.

A wave of merchandise and cross-promotional tie-ins flowed from the film and connected specifically to the Turtles' cinematic incarnation. The film's soundtrack featured a song by hip-hop star MC Hammer. There was also a storybook for kids, and a television ad for the TMNT breakfast cereal referenced the film, among other promotions.¹⁸² In this way, New Line integrated the *Turtles* film within an already-existing franchise. Shaye used the success of *TMNT* to rhetorically signal the strength of New Line as a company. "Turtles is a great franchise," he declared, "not only a worthy, highly entertaining product, but a superb vehicle for demonstrating to the entertainment and business communities the strong acquisition, marketing and distribution skills that New Line has been building for the past 23 years."¹⁸³

Although New Line came upon this franchise as a kind of tagalong, attaching itself opportunistically and strategically to the TMNT industrial network, the wave of associated promotions and tie-ins helped to establish the importance of the feature film in the overall franchise. Through its association with *TMNT*, New Line itself appeared to be a mainstream success.

It is difficult to overstate the level to which the *TMNT* franchise permeated culture in the period following the film's release. Estimates indicated that *TMNT*-related products would earn \$600 million in 1990.¹⁸⁴ Playmates alone earned \$400 million from Turtles toys that year, and the Turtles were the best-selling action figures in the country.¹⁸⁵ Although New Line did not control the video rights to the first *TMNT* film, it was nevertheless a major success, earning around \$67 million in rentals.¹⁸⁶ A *TMNT* live show called *Coming Out of Their Shells* played in forty

cities, with the Turtles performing musical numbers.¹⁸⁷ This stage show toured continuously from September 1990 through the following summer, at which point a new iteration of the live show was planned.¹⁸⁸ Burger King engaged in a cross-promotional campaign in which the fast food chain sold VHS copies of *TMNT* cartoons, reportedly selling 200,000 videos per day. One industry source estimated that thirty to forty *TMNT*-related products appeared in grocery stores in the fall of 1990.¹⁸⁹

New Line secured the North American rights to the *TMNT* sequel in July 1990, including theatrical exhibition, home video, pay cable, and television.¹⁹⁰ Golden Harvest returned to produce the film, made for around \$20 million in North Carolina.¹⁹¹ Advance promotion for the film, titled *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze*, indicated that it would appeal even more to children than the previous film. One review noted that the sequel “will reportedly be brighter and more colorful than the original” and “will also be less violent than the first.”¹⁹² Another review called the sequel a “more lighthearted, brightly colored pic” and noted that it adds “two hilarious childlike monsters.”¹⁹³ Indeed, the film features lots of action, but the violence is even more cartoonish than in the first, and the characters engage in near-constant silly banter along the way. Among the film’s many attempts to appeal to young audiences is a sequence with rapper Vanilla Ice performing the song “Ninja Rap” in a nightclub while the Turtles battle enemies and then dance along.

New Line marketed the *TMNT* sequel heavily at the same time that it engaged in an intense distribution campaign. On March 26, 1991, for instance, the night that the Academy Awards aired on television and just following the premier of the sequel, Barbara Walters hosted an interview with the Turtle characters that parodied Walters’s previous interviews with famous figures. New Line gave the sequel a saturation release, opening the film in some 2,500 theaters.¹⁹⁴ Another surge of *TMNT* merchandise surrounded the sequel, including a new Hostess pie filled with pudding, to match the radioactive ooze that transformed the Turtles into mutant ninjas.¹⁹⁵ “Ninja Rap,” released by SBK Records, was the centerpiece of the soundtrack album, continuing New Line’s efforts to partner with hip-hop artists and derive revenue from music licenses. Yet the *TMNT* franchise declined in popularity from this point forward. The sequel was comparatively less successful than the first film, earning around \$78 million at the box office.¹⁹⁶ New Line Home Video released the VHS of the sequel at the end of July 1991, just four months after its theatrical release, pricing it for sell-through rather than rental at \$22.95.¹⁹⁷ In addition to its sell-through revenue, the *TMNT* sequel made \$41.9 million in video rentals.¹⁹⁸

Even with this reduced revenue and popularity, New Line persisted with the franchise. In March 1992, the company acquired the North American rights to a third *TMNT* film, which included theatrical, cable, and broadcast.¹⁹⁹ In this sequel, the Turtles use a magical device to travel in time to medieval Japan. The film

opened on March 19, 1993, in another saturation release of around 2,100 theaters.²⁰⁰ However, New Line had a more restrained promotional push for the film. “There have been few interviews, no big-time rappers and no cable special,” the *Wall Street Journal* noted.²⁰¹ Further, many of the *TMNT* licensees did not coordinate any promotions with the third film, though Burger King did run some advertisements and Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley made March 19 “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Day.” Still, there was the perception that kids—and not teenagers or other groups—constituted the majority of the audience for the *TMNT*.²⁰² The film earned nearly \$40 million at the box office, about half what the first sequel had made.²⁰³ Similarly, *Turtles*-related products sold \$200 million in 1992, considerably lower than their earnings during the height of the Turtles’ popularity in the previous few years.²⁰⁴ Although the film series may initially have crossed over into a broad audience, and certainly brought New Line into the center of the cultural mainstream as never before, by this point the franchise appeared to be exclusively for children.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM

In an advertisement that New Line placed in *Screen International* in August 1983, the company referred to itself as “*The Independent for the 1980s*.”²⁰⁵ A bold claim, to be certain, and a clear example of the company trying to establish a legend for itself—a rhetorical strategy devised with economic consequences in mind. But this claim to be the “independent for the 1980s” proved prescient. New Line did indeed succeed during this decade while other independents faltered and disappeared, and it did so in a strange mirroring of the mainstream movie business. It is difficult to recognize the New Line of 1991 as being the same company that released *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* in 1978. It had moved from releasing a small number of niche films to handling multiple franchises that cut across media and products and, further, garnered immense popularity and revenues that rivaled those of the Hollywood studios. It had become a publicly traded corporation with multiple divisions and more than two hundred employees. In addition to theatrical distribution, the company had an active television division and a robust home video business. Although still independent of the Hollywood studios, New Line resembled these studios in many respects, including its diversification and focus on multimedia franchises.

However unlikely this trajectory may appear, it seems just as surprising that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* could have created such possibilities. But New Line treated *NOES* much the same way that Warner Bros. treated *Superman* or Paramount treated *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: as an industrial success that could prompt the generation of additional films and, ideally, merchandise. In doing so, however, New Line truly helped transform the mainstream media industry and culture in the 1980s, turning a teen slasher film into a multimedia hit for a broad audience.

The company helped show Hollywood and the world how seemingly niche content, such as horror films, could slip beyond conventional markets through continued serialization and, crucially, through franchising across media and products.

New Line's involvement with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles attests to the company's commitment to franchising as a means of accessing mainstream audiences. Despite being produced independently on a comparatively small budget, the first *TMNT* film broke through as a mainstream, child-friendly blockbuster embedded in a transmedia franchise. At the same time, *TMNT* stretched the boundaries that had previously defined New Line. Even the *NOES* franchise seemed marginal by comparison, despite its surprising manifestations as a video game, television program, children's Halloween costume, and so on. *TMNT*, in other words, put New Line's industrial and cultural identity into question—an identity that was already defined by eclecticism, independence, and marginality. *TMNT* firmly situated New Line as a company that catered in transmedia franchises that could cross over into broadly popular success.

For the most part, that is. Alongside the *NOES* and *TMNT* franchises, New Line released several modestly budgeted films that echoed the company's previous specializations in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to oddball comedies and dramas, cheap sci-fi movies, and horror films, New Line released *The Decline of Western Civilization, Part II: The Metal Years* in 1988, continuing the company's tradition of distributing documentaries on contemporary rock music. Analogously, it released *Pump Up the Volume* (1990), a movie about a disaffected teenager who uses a pirate radio station to rebel against the social norms in his town. The film continued New Line's trend of addressing youth audiences interested in nonmainstream culture but supplanting 1960s-era countercultural politics with 1990s-era Gen X angst.

In a 1991 survey of New Line's progress to date, the *New York Times* stated that the company's strategy was to "keep the costs down, aim at a specific audience [with the hope that] a modest profit may loom."²⁰⁶ The story noted that *NOES* and *TMNT* were the successful products of this tactic, and then called out *Suburban Commando* (1991), a family comedy starring Hulk Hogan and Christopher Lloyd, as a critical failure for New Line.²⁰⁷ Regarding *Suburban Commando*, Shaye admitted, "We may have cast our nets too broadly," and added, "If we'd made it for less money and targeted it more narrowly, it might have worked better."²⁰⁸

Despite the breakthrough success of *TMNT*, Shaye pondered whether the long-standing strategy of targeting niche audiences through eclecticism would remain New Line's strength going forward. To a degree, it would. But as the following chapter shows, New Line grew by leaps and bounds during the 1990s, first when it was purchased by Turner Broadcasting System and then, as part of the Turner media empire, when it became part of Time Warner. Chapter 3 thus tells the continuing story of New Line's changing industrial identity and evolving legend, and details how the company transformed its logic of opportunistic eclecticism into one of incorporative heterogeneity as it was integrated within the Hollywood system.

“Evolutions of Identity”

New Line and the Transformative 1990s

The 1990s were a transformative era for the film business and media culture, as the industrial and technological innovations of New Hollywood crystalized into a new formation, Conglomerate Hollywood. Hollywood underwent a wave of corporate mergers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, propelled by “a logic of synergy and tight diversification,” as Thomas Schatz describes it. These mergers were intertwined with “the larger forces of globalization, digitization, and US media deregulation.”¹ At the same time, several smaller, independent distributors, including New Line Cinema and Miramax, thrived. The Conglomerate Era appeared paradoxical, as big business got bigger while specialized firms attracted sizable audiences for off-beat cinema.

The apparent schism between mainstream blockbusters and specialty cinema, including foreign art house movies and American indie films, occurred within a larger context in which the cultural industries grew and consolidated power through eclecticism and increasing personalization. The media business of the 1990s obeyed a logic of *incorporative heterogeneity*, as cultural producers in multiple arenas addressed, appealed to, and commercialized divergent tastes in entertainment. In television, cable channels proliferated and sought out distinct groups of viewers through narrowcasting and niche programming. The music scene was defined by the simultaneous popularity and commercial success of “alternative” music, hip-hop, and country. New forms of mediated leisure and entertainment also proliferated with the rapid increase in home computing, the increasing use of the Web in the latter half of the decade, as well as the continued growth in the video game market.

New Line also transformed in remarkable ways during the 1990s as the company embodied the paradox between conglomeration in Hollywood and the

rise of the independent film sector. In its effort to exploit markets not already dominated by Hollywood, New Line had a long-standing practice of seeking out separate audiences based on taste distinctions and social identities, comparable to narrowcasting in the realm of cable television. This strategy proved valuable in the larger media business, which increasingly aimed to attract audiences that wanted media texts and genres tailored to their individual tastes. What had once been an opportunistic form of eclecticism grew into a related but more robust strategy of incorporative heterogeneity, even more in line with the broader media industry.

New Line grew by leaps and bounds during this period, and its slate of films increased apace. Its industrial placement and public legend fluctuated dramatically as a consequence. This chapter focuses on several of the company's defining aspects during this period. Specifically, it examines how New Line participated in and contributed to a wave of Black films and filmmaking. Through movies like *House Party* (1990), *Friday* (1995), and *Set It Off* (1996), New Line expanded and added some complexity to Black cinema of the era. The chapter then details New Line's corporate transformation, first, when it was purchased by Ted Turner in 1993 and became a division within the Turner Broadcasting System (TBS); and, second, when TBS merged with Time Warner in 1996. Through these transactions, New Line was swept up in the era's "merger mania." In the process, the public discourse debated New Line's identity and fit within Hollywood, sometimes in negative ways. The chapter next examines New Line's efforts with broad-based, populist comedies during this period that reflected the company's continued movement toward films and marketing strategies that aimed at broader audiences. The chapter closes with an examination of how the company's established logic of eclecticism and incorporative heterogeneity transformed, and sometimes failed, as New Line increased production budgets on films with questionable appeal.

NEW LINE AND BLACK CINEMA OF THE 1990S

New Line was at a crossroads as it entered the 1990s, caught somewhere between the margins and the mainstream. Was it a small independent distributor that carved success from niche audiences or a minimajor that competed with Hollywood through franchises like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? This tension is evident in New Line's work in Black cinema, which became a consistent thread for the company and distinguished it from most other studios. Perceiving that African Americans made up a significant portion of the audience for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, New Line executives "began to think about other movies that they—as well as others—might find appealing."² With the films *Above the Rim* (1994), *A Thin Line between Love and Hate* (1996), *B.A.P.S.* (1997), *Love Jones* (1997), *The Players Club* (1998), and *Love and Basketball* (2000), New Line helped reshape the range of Black cinema throughout the 1990s. Late in the decade, with films like *Spawn* (1997), *Blade* (1998), and *Rush Hour* (1998), New Line made a regular practice of

releasing big-budget action and spectacle films that starred Black actors, comparable to studio blockbusters like *Bad Boys* (1995) or *Independence Day* (1996). New Line was so consistent in releasing Black films that it became a discernable part of the company's identity; the *New York Times*, for instance, identified New Line with "an amalgam of teen-age and horror films as well as movies aimed at black audiences . . . over-the-top John Waters movies . . . and some serious dramas."³

Representations and conceptions of Blackness underwent important changes across multiple domains of media culture during the 1980s and 1990s, prompting novelist Trey Ellis to identify a "New Black Aesthetic."⁴ For Ellis, the New Black Aesthetic entailed new stylistic and generic eclecticism on the part of Black artists in various media and more consistently represented Black figures with middle-class concerns. Further, the music, television, and cinema of the New Black Aesthetic were characterized by their ability to appeal to white audiences. Black artists and performers appeared prominently across media, whether on television with programs like *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) and *In Living Color* (1990–1994), in sports with star athletes like Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan, or in music with hip-hop's rise to international popularity.⁵ In American cinema, Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989) made a new space for films made by Black directors and precipitated the "New Black Cinema" of the 1990s, in which films featuring Black performers, often made by Black directors, proliferated. Nineteen films directed by Black directors were released in 1991, more than had been released during the entirety of the 1980s.⁶

By making, marketing, and distributing many Black films, New Line Cinema participated in the construction of Blackness as a cultural category at the same time that it made Blackness a calculated part of its business strategy. Anamik Saha has argued that cultural critics should examine the way cultural industries produce the very category of race. He encourages scholars to look at symbolic goods, such as movies, as part of a larger system of cultural commodification that bears heavily on social identities and, in doing so, understand better how and why textual representations of race take the forms they do.⁷ With this in mind, it is crucial to consider how New Line produced and circulated ideas about race in general and Blackness in particular.

The television industry also changed in ways that allowed for the circulation of new forms of Blackness to appear on TV screens. As Herman Gray details, the networks increasingly produced and aired programs aimed at specific audiences, and in the 1980s, "the networks were forced to reckon more seriously with Black audiences and Black programming."⁸ Similarly, Craig Watkins connects the "black film boom" of the late 1980s and early 1990s to structural changes in the Hollywood system and finds that "the cultural industries have been forced to develop a more differentiated conception of their prospective audiences and the kinds of product offerings they make available to them."⁹ In just this manner, New Line Cinema filled one of the industry spaces that opened up for Black cinema in the 1980s and 1990s.

New Line had two parallel goals at this time: to release more films aimed at wide audiences and to continue releasing films that aligned with specific tastes and groups. These strategies impacted the company's handling of Black films and Black cinematic representation. The film *Heart Condition* (1990) epitomizes the first of these strategies. The film tells the story of a racist and bigoted police officer, played by Bob Hoskins, whose bad eating, smoking, and heavy drinking lead to a heart attack. Denzel Washington plays his rival, a lawyer who dies and whose heart is transplanted into the police officer. Soon thereafter, the lawyer begins appearing to the cop as a ghost.

The film resembles an interracial police drama like *48 Hours* (1982) or *Lethal Weapon* (1987) mashed up with a body-switch comedy like *Freaky Friday* (1976). *Heart Condition* fluctuates in tone from silly comedy to gritty crime drama and is littered with racist clichés. Indeed, for bell hooks, *Heart Condition* is a prime example of “eating the Other,” in the sense of a white man literally subsuming a Black man, who assists the white guy in becoming less racist and more “sensitive and loving.”¹⁰ As hooks writes, this film “addresses the fantasies of a white audience” and “leaves a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy intact.”¹¹

Heart Condition signaled New Line's effort at the time to reach broader audiences. Both Washington and Hoskins were notable stars when it was released. Some of the advance press about the film noted that it was part of a New Line entry into comedy.¹² The press also discussed the way the film dealt with issues of race, noting that Denzel Washington served as a mediating force in the film's representation of Blackness.¹³ One story revealed that Washington had helped revise the script to avoid stereotypical and negative depictions of Blackness.¹⁴ The film's engagement with race was timely, as it played in theaters alongside *Glory* (1989), which also starred Washington, and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). Yet New Line's marketing and advertising for the film largely avoided issues of Blackness or race relations, instead highlighting the stars and positioning it as a buddy comedy.

HOUSE PARTY, HIP-HOP, AND “CROSSOVER” AUDIENCES

Heart Condition was a commercial and critical failure and pushed New Line to adopt a narrower approach toward engaging with Black representations and audiences. Indeed, in a memo from 1988, company executives asserted that, in addition to comedies and horror films, the company should make “ETHNIC” films. They wrote, “These are target markets we can isolate very easily, why haven't we? KRUSH GROOVE & ACTION JACKSON were strong ethnic CONCEPTS with new ethnic TALENT.”¹⁵ New Line's work with *House Party* followed such a focused conception of distribution, marketing, and audiences, and the film's success help set a trajectory for the company's work with Black films and Black representation through the rest of the decade. Directed by Reginald Hudlin and produced by his brother

Warrington Hudlin, this lighthearted comedy tells the story of two high school friends, played by the members of the rap duo Kid 'n Play. As musical artists, Kid 'n Play had been successful with their 1988 gold album, *2 Hype*. The pair's popular music videos helped to construct the group's upbeat, semicomical personae, comparable to DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. *House Party* follows the duo as they try to throw a party while Play's parents are away and features several dance sequences and rap performances intermixed with the characters' frequent hijinks.

Focusing on rap music and featuring hip-hop artists, *House Party* continued New Line's attempts to attract younger viewers with films connected to popular music, including *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (1971), *Underground U.S.A.* (1980), and *Pump Up the Volume* (1990). In addition, as part of its attempts at transmedia franchising initiated with *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, New Line sought to generate additional revenues through the sale of soundtrack albums, which were a common tie-in with "high concept" films of the era. *Pump Up the Volume*, released later in the summer of 1990, is particularly notable in this respect. Although the film failed to gain the large youth audiences that New Line had hoped for, the soundtrack is a veritable showcase of "alternative music" and its subgenres, featuring tracks by Bad Brains, Concrete Blonde, Cowboy Junkies, the Pixies, Soundgarden, and Sonic Youth, among others. New Line demonstrated a strong commitment to further developing its soundtrack market when, in 1992, it hired Toby Emmerich as senior vice president of music. Emmerich had worked previously at Atlantic Recording Co., where he "oversaw soundtrack productions for film and television projects."¹⁶ Under Emmerich, New Line had hits with the soundtracks for *Menace II Society* in 1993 and *Set It Off* in 1996, among others through the decade.

House Party specifically demonstrates New Line's commitment to hip-hop music. This was the same general period when New Line worked with the Fat Boys on "Are You Ready for Freddy?" and featured MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice, among other hip-hop artists, on the soundtracks for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and its sequel, respectively. Moreover, New Line distributed *Tougher than Leather* (1988), which starred the members of Run-DMC and featured appearances by Slick Rick, the Beastie Boys, and other hip-hop figures. Despite these performers, *Tougher than Leather* received largely negative reviews and did not do well at the box office.

On one hand, *Tougher than Leather* and *House Party* illustrate New Line's effort to use hip-hop and Black stars to attract Black audiences. But the company also endeavored to create "crossover" hits with Black cultural productions that could appeal to white audiences. Part of the calculus here was the significant revenue that rap and hip-hop were generating among white consumers. "Artists such as Ice-T, Ice Cube and L.L. Cool J.," *Newsday* observed, "generate more sales in America's suburban malls than in city shopping districts. 'Def Comedy Jam' has an audience that is 60 percent white."¹⁷ "Mainstream" and "crossover" were common phrases within film industry and popular discourses regarding the ability of some Black-produced media texts to find success with white audiences. Historically, the

term “crossover” was used more commonly in music industry trade discourses to describe an artist or song that charted well in multiple categories. Yet these categories themselves commonly had strong racial associations, such as with the R&B chart.¹⁸

Thus while “crossover” did not *always* connote the traversing of assumed racial boundaries, music discourses frequently used the term in exactly this way. Deployed with reference to *House Party*, a movie already strongly associated with hip-hop music as well as with other Black films and cinematic performers, “cross-over” functioned in the press as an elusive but prized goal for Black media, as otherwise “Black” texts were treated as limited or risky because they would presumably appeal only to Black consumers.¹⁹ “Hollywood is still cautious and uncertain,” one reporter stated, “about how to position entertainment that is hot in part because it is Black. The marketers want so-called crossover viewership from white audiences, but they don’t see it as something they can buy or build in.”²⁰ In the context of these discussions, “mainstream” served as an unconcealed code word for “white.”

There was considerable discussion in the press at this time regarding Black audiences in terms of commercial potential and purchasing power, and multiple articles assessed the size of Black movie audiences. One story reported that Black people made up 25 percent of movie audiences and spent \$1.6 billion on movie tickets per year.²¹ Another quoted a survey which found that “close to 60% of blacks had attended a movie during one month, compared to only 51.2% of whites.”²² As Caetlin Benson-Allot has explained, public discourses of the era frequently associated Blackness with violence at movie theaters.²³ Yet Hollywood simultaneously endeavored to develop the market for Black media.

In this contradictory context, it is not surprising that New Line’s appeals to Black audiences demonstrated a lack of coordination. With *House Party*, the company’s marketing and publicity exhibit a complex ambivalence about race and Blackness, reflecting the media industry’s changing but still convoluted approach toward Black cultural production and representation. The promotional copy attending the film stressed its connections to Blackness and Black culture but also discussed ways that it might appeal to white consumers.

House Party figured prominently, in fact, in a widespread discussion about race and cinema. Amid this discourse, *House Party* director Reginald Hudlin said: “My generation is trying to reconcile rhythm and business, to balance the business side of the thing with the creative impulse. And at the same time, to avoid the obvious pitfalls, the self-destructive drug abuse and other forms of martyrdom. The challenge will be to institutionalize the change.”²⁴ Hudlin had wanted rappers to play the lead roles in *House Party*, because “he was having a difficult time finding African-American actors who could connect with a young black audience.”²⁵ With regard to Black cinema, white audiences, and *House Party* in particular, one New Line executive stated, “We know that ‘Yo! MTV Raps’ is the highest-rated segment on MTV, we know that Arsenio [Hall]’s ratings are fantastic.” But this executive



FIGURE 11. The lighthearted teen comedy *House Party* played an important role in discussions of Black cinematic representation and audiences in the early 1990s.

also cautioned: “Still, when the perception is that a black entertainer is doing a show or record or movie that’s mainly for black people, and a white person looks and says, ‘Oh, that’s not for me,’ that’s what we have to overcome.”²⁶ On this topic, Bob Shaye stated, “Crossover in our mind ultimately has to come from the film itself, rather than any marketing we have to pay for.”²⁷

New Line launched *House Party* at the 1990 Sundance Film Festival, and its promotion of the film at the festival indicates just such an attempt at crossover. As the press noted, Sundance was transforming into a commercial market for independent films to access theatrical distribution. Accordingly, New Line used the festival to generate early buzz for *House Party*, and press coverage tended to discuss the film in terms of race and its Black cast.²⁸ In fact, that year’s Sundance had a number of films directed by or featuring Black artists: *Chameleon Street* won the Grand Jury Prize, for instance, and Charles Burnett’s *To Sleep with Anger* received a Special Jury Prize. *House Party* won the Filmmakers Trophy and the cinematography prize. Nevertheless, director Reginald Hudlin said of the festival, “These were very white people.”²⁹

After Sundance, New Line continued to show uncertainty with the distribution and marketing of *House Party*. Some executives discussed the film in terms of “crossover” to white audiences, while others indicated that the company primarily sought to attract young, Black, male moviegoers.³⁰ New Line hired a Black-owned public relations company, the Terrie Williams Agency, to help plan the film’s promotion.³¹ As one article put it, the agency aimed “to make sure that New Line avoided stereotypes that would alienate blacks or frighten whites.” Terrie Williams enticed critics to review the movie and prompted New Line to use positive pull quotes from these reviews, including a “thumbs up” from Roger Ebert.³² Terrie

Williams had ideas for promoting the film that differed from New Line's original plans.³³ The agency evidently nixed plans for a giveaway promotion of gold chains and stopped New Line from using publicity materials that depicted "the young Black actors with their eyes popping and mouths wide open."³⁴

The marketing budget for *House Party* was around \$6 million, far above the film's production budget of \$2.5 million.³⁵ In the words of one journalist, New Line's advertising positioned *House Party* "as a comedy rather than as a Black movie" in order to draw white viewers. New Line initially gave the film a limited release in 540 theaters, "carefully selected for reaching a primary black teen audience as well as a secondary vanguard of young white crossovers."³⁶ The company hoped that this limited release would generate a buzz that would enable the company to distribute the film more broadly in cities like Denver, Boston, and Salt Lake City and attract more white viewers.³⁷ The film opened very well at the box office, outpacing *The Hunt for the Red October* (1990) on a per-screen basis, and New Line expanded to Seattle and other cities after a few weeks.³⁸ *House Party* earned more than \$26 million over the summer, a major success for a film of that budget and release pattern.³⁹

New Line coordinated *House Party's* theatrical distribution with a soundtrack album, produced by Motown Records, that featured songs by Kid 'n Play and other hip-hop and R&B performers, including LL Cool J. Kid 'n Play also released their second record, *Kid 'n Play's Funhouse*, at nearly the same time, which shared the single "Funhouse" with the soundtrack. Both albums worked synergistically with the theatrical success of the film, and the soundtrack reached number 20 on *Billboard's* Top Black Albums Chart and number 104 on the Top Pop Albums Chart, while *Funhouse* reached number 11 among Top Black Albums and number 58 among Top Pop Albums.⁴⁰ The success of the film and the soundtrack was, *Billboard* thought, "a perfect example of the crossover exposure available to music in the new wave of black made films."⁴¹ Notably, in this instance "crossover" bore another conventional traditional meaning, referring to a figure moving from one creative industry to another.

Almost every review of *House Party* discussed issues of race and exhibited a spectrum of ideas regarding Blackness in American film. Some stressed ways the film was specific to Black youth culture and drew on discussions with the director and producer in support of these claims.⁴² As a way of establishing their cultural status, many reviews discussed the Hudlin brothers' Ivy League educations.⁴³ Press coverage also discussed the filmmakers' connection to Spike Lee, whom the brothers cited as an influence and source of support.⁴⁴ A piece titled "In Hollywood, Black Is In" discussed *House Party* as emblematic of new Black popular media, with other examples including *She's Gotta Have It* and *In Living Color*.⁴⁵

This same article contended with the issue of "crossover," observing that Hollywood "executives say they're color-blind," and it further suggested that releasing Black films served financial interests while simultaneously making studios look as

though “they are doing the right thing.”⁴⁶ The review of *House Party* in the *New York Times* also placed the film within a frame of color blindness in saying that it “looks to be taking place in a community as all-American as the small Midwestern city that is the locale of Booth Tarkington’s ‘Penrod’ stories. The only difference is that these kids are black and their manners and speech utterly idiomatic.”⁴⁷ Other reviews were more palpably problematic in their white supremacism. The review in the *San Diego Tribune* under the headline “Dumb Teen Movies Colorblind” asserted that “racism can go both ways” in its discussion of the film’s lack of white performers.⁴⁸ In an especially clumsy attempt to address the film’s connection to Black culture and possible white audiences, *USA Today* provided a glossary of slang terms used in the film, including translations for the phrases “gotta jet” and “peace out.”⁴⁹

Although *House Party* is a narratively simple and tonally silly film, it offers a playful engagement with Black popular culture that at once registers historical figures but also distinguishes itself from them along generational lines. Early in the film, for instance, Kid’s father invites him to join him in watching the Black action classic *Dolomite* (1975) instead of going out to the party, which Kid declines by rolling his eyes. “You like *Dolomite*, don’t you?” the father says. “You grew up on it.” In a comparable scene, Kid crashes a backyard party at a fancy house where the guests dance to music. Playing as the DJ at the party is George Clinton, whose music with Parliament-Funkadelic in the 1960s and 1970 was frequently sampled by rap artists. Fittingly, Kid confounds the middle-aged guests when he takes over the mic and raps while the DJ scratches records on the turntable.

As a teen comedy with a populist sensibility, *House Party* helped diversify and complicate Blackness in American cinema in the early 1990s. Raquel Gates provides a helpful conceptual frame for seeing this film’s importance. Gates’s work undermines simplistic understandings of “positive” and “negative” representations of Blackness across commercial media, arguing that so-called “negative” depictions of Black figures can serve as a “repository for those identities, experiences, and feelings that have been discarded by respectable media.”⁵⁰ In this manner, “negative” representations open a plurality of valuable Black identities and experiences. While *House Party* was not directly caught up in a discourse of “positive” and “negative” representations, the film’s silliness and playful youthfulness contrasted with the “significance” and “seriousness” attributed to other noted Black films at the time.

BUILDING BLACK CINEMA FRANCHISES

Despite its lightheartedness, in fact, *House Party* served as an emblem of Black cinema in the early 1990s. Critics regularly situated *House Party* alongside such films as *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), *She’s Gotta Have It*, and *Do the Right Thing*.⁵¹ As New Line began producing a sequel to *House Party* in 1991, the original film continued to figure prominently in a discourse around Black-produced films that grew apace

with the number of films by Black directors being released that year. In addition to *House Party 2: The Pajama Jam* (1991), commentators frequently held up Robert Townsend's *The Five Heartbeats* (1991), William Duke's *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), and Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991) as evidence of this new wave of Black cinema. New Line itself released several other films included in this wave, including Joseph Vázquez's *Hangin' with the Homeboys* (1991) and Topper Carew's *Talkin' Dirty after Dark* (1991).

Boyz n the Hood (1991) was a focal point of this discourse. As other scholars have discussed, this film and Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991) figured significantly in the creation of the "ghetto" drama cycle of films in the 1990s, which centered on the struggles of young Black men in urban settings.⁵² *Boyz n the Hood* director John Singleton represented the new potential for young Black filmmakers who could express distinctly Black cultural experiences and sensibilities while succeeding in Hollywood. The press noted that, before being hired to direct *Boyz n the Hood*, Singleton had graduated from the Filmic Writing program at the University of Southern California and attained a three-year contact with Columbia Pictures. The *New York Times* noted "Hollywood's sudden open door policy toward Black filmmakers, particularly those telling Black stories."⁵³

Some coverage of the "Black New Wave" contended with the way urban gang films obscured other types of Black films being made at the time.⁵⁴ In 1993, a number of leading figures, including Spike Lee and Warrington Hudlin, criticized Black urban dramas for dominating the representation of Black people in popular culture. Some of these figures raised the issue of "crossover," voicing concern that the dominant "gangsta" image in rap and movies had become a convenient way of reaching white consumers by commercializing problematic tropes of Black culture.⁵⁵ However, in contributing to this debate about Blackness in media culture, the press often treated *House Party* and *House Party 2* as noteworthy indications of Black cinema's diversity. The *Big Red News*, a Black newspaper in New York, singled out *House Party 2*, *Juice* (1992), *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), and New Line's *Talking Dirty after Dark* for being "entertaining black films."⁵⁶ Another journalist argued that the box office success of the two *House Party* films proved that nongang films could be successful.⁵⁷

New Line expected *House Party 2* to have an even greater appeal to white audiences. The press supported this idea, noting that the two performers had appeared in a cartoon as well as in a commercial for Sprite since the original film's release.⁵⁸ New Line again used the Terrie Williams Agency to help with *House Party 2* and was better able to market the film to Black audiences as a result. New Line advertised the film on television "to target adolescents and young adults on such channels as MTV and Black Entertainment Television" and also did spots on Black radio stations.⁵⁹ The company also partnered with AT&T and the Negro College Fund to provide advance screenings of the film on college campuses, recalling the company's days working with universities in the 1970s.⁶⁰

As reported in the industry press, *House Party 2* had “the biggest opening of any black film to date and has done much to dispel the Hollywood wisdom that says only violent black films work.”⁶¹ In such reportage, the film and the franchise continued to emblemize a new wave of Black cinema and, just as important, the diversity of representations of Blackness within this wave. Continuing with this franchise, New Line released *House Party 3* on 840 screens in January 1994, and the film earned over \$10 million within its first week in theaters.⁶²

With its connection to rap, its adolescent comic tone, and its successful franchising across multiple films and soundtracks, the *House Party* series set a model that New Line pursued with other Black films during the 1990s. The company released *Who’s the Man?* in 1993, a silly comedy with *Yo! MTV Raps* hosts Ed Lover and Dr. Dre, which did well at the box office. Many rap artists appear in the film, and the successful soundtrack features The Notorious B.I.G., Jodeci, Mary J. Blige, and Heavy D. Gesturing again to the way unassuming comedies contributed to the plurality of Black cinema, the *Los Angeles Times* compared *Who’s the Man?* to the films of Oscar Micheaux for mixing “entertainment and social consciousness.”⁶³

In addition to comedies like these, New Line occasionally released Black dramas, such as *Above the Rim*, which featured rapper Tupac Shakur. More notably, New Line distributed the Hughes Brothers’ crime drama *Menace II Society*, which followed in the wake of *Boyz n the Hood* and contributed to the cultural image of the “ghetto” and the “hood” as spaces of struggling Black men.⁶⁴ Although New Line took a more targeted approach to the release of the film than it had with the *House Party* films, *Menace II Society* proved highly profitable, and its hip-hop soundtrack went platinum.

New Line found a successor to the *House Party* films with *Friday* in 1995. The film tells the story of Craig and Smokey, two young men living in the hood in Los Angeles played by rapper Ice Cube and comedian Chris Tucker, respectively. Craig is unemployed and Smokey is a drug dealer. However, Smokey smoked all the pot that he was supposed to sell, and the boss dealer “Big Worm” threatens to kill both Craig and Smokey unless they pay him his due. The film’s loose plot follows these characters as they hang out, smoke pot, interact with eccentric personalities in the neighborhood, and fail in their schemes to get the money. They try begging, borrowing, stealing, and selling more pot. Nothing works, leading to a violent confrontation with a local tough guy at the film’s climax.

Until this dramatic scene, however, the movie conveys a carefree feeling typical of stoner comedies. But, like the *House Party* films, *Friday*’s seeming triviality is exactly what makes it notable amid the construction of Blackness in the commercial media of the 1990s. *Friday* locates a silly comedy within the context of the hood, a cinematic location more firmly attached to crime dramas at the time. It features irreverent cursing, pratfalls, drug-induced mishaps, and toilet jokes. At the same time, the film clearly situates itself in the hood, displaying many of the tropes found in dramas like *Boyz n the Hood*. Robberies and burglaries are

common and threats of violence erupt recurrently. At one point, the characters narrowly avoid getting gunned down in a drive-by shooting, but the entire scene is treated comically. In contrast, Craig gets into a brutal fistfight near the end, which the film depicts with some gravity before returning to silliness and potty jokes as it concludes.

Tonal shifts like these make *Friday* distinctive and illustrate the complexities of staging a comedy in the hood in the mid-1990s. Some stories about the film neglected to indicate that it was a comedy and focused instead on the film's setting in "the 'hood."⁶⁵ Much of New Line's publicity and advertising for the film emphasized its stars, and press coverage also centered on Ice Cube as a multimedia star consistently successful in both music and cinema.⁶⁶ New Line producer Mike De Luca connected the film to a longer tradition of stoner comedies featuring people of color, comparing *Friday* to Cheech and Chong movies.⁶⁷ New Line held some promotional events and screenings specifically oriented to Black audiences, as well.⁶⁸

New Line participated in *Friday*'s production and financing, which had a modest budget of \$2.3 million.⁶⁹ In keeping with its other smaller-budgeted films, the company gave the film a limited release, placing it in 865 theaters and then expanding to 881 in the second week.⁷⁰ *Friday* quickly proved successful, however, earning \$6.8 million, making it number 2 at the box office, after *While You Were Sleeping* (1995).⁷¹ *Bad Boys* was also in theaters at the time, a massively successful movie that also featured a rapper and a comedian, with Will Smith and Martin Lawrence appearing in the lead roles. *Friday* went on to earn \$14 million in its first twelve days of release.⁷² Capitalizing on Ice Cube's established stardom in music, the soundtrack was also a success, debuting at number 1 on *Billboard*'s Top R&B Albums chart.

As had been the case with *House Party*, critics discussed *Friday* in overtly racialized ways. *Variety*, for example, asserted that the film's "target audience of young blacks should respond favorably on sheer recognition factor of many of the film's conceits, although crossover and foreign potential appear limited."⁷³ The review in the *Los Angeles Times* connected the film to a host of other Black texts, including *Def Comedy Jam* (1992–1997) and *The Wayans Bros* (1995–1999).⁷⁴ A *New York Times* reviewer called the film a "ruder, cruder version of the hip-hop movie 'House Party.'" Also seeing the film as an important reflection of contemporary Black culture, however, the reviewer thought it "offers a fascinating glimpse at the way street life enters pop culture" and is "more intriguing as a social problem than as a movie."⁷⁵ In a related vein, the Black newspaper the *Michigan Chronicle* (Detroit) took issue with the way *Friday* portrayed the Black community and questioned whether it was a positive or authentic representation.⁷⁶

As with *House Party*, New Line franchised *Friday* across multiple films and other cultural commodities. Beyond the film's soundtrack, it spurred the production of two sequels, *Next Friday* (2000) and *Friday after Next* (2002), both of

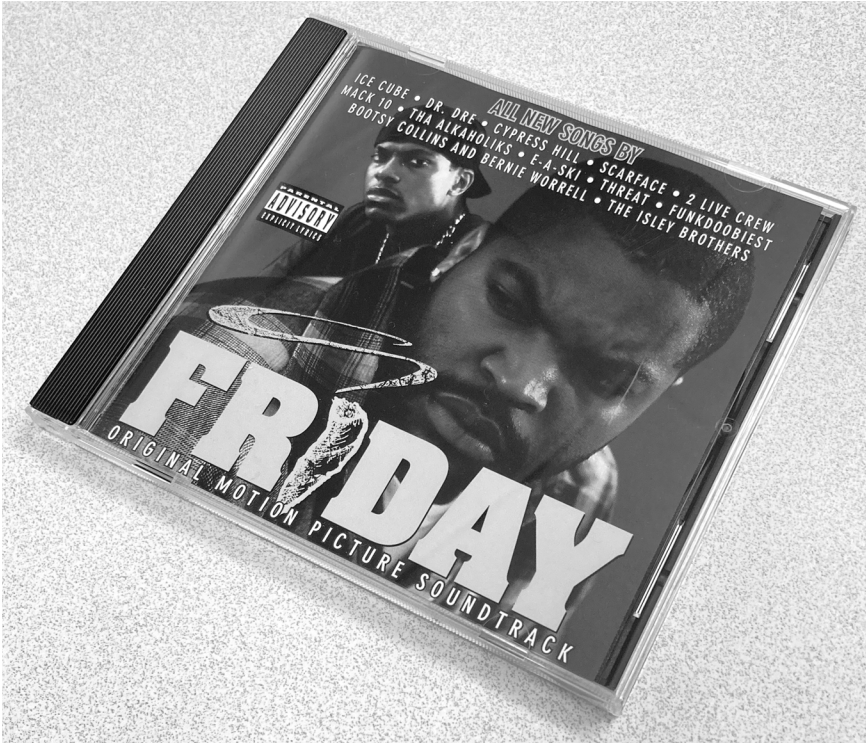


FIGURE 12. The soundtrack for *Friday* featured a large number of hip-hop artists and capitalized on the music stardom of Ice Cube. Soundtracks for Black films like this generated considerable revenue in the 1990s. Photo by author.

which were even more successful than the first film. New Line also partnered in the creation of a cartoon based on the film, but it aired only for a single season on MTV2. Thus, with both *Friday* and *House Party*, New Line applied the industrial and cultural logics of franchising to texts connected firmly with Blackness and Black popular culture. In this respect, New Line treated Blackness as a cinematic quality that could be serialized with the aim of creating cross-media synergies and gaining expanded audiences.

House Party and *Friday*, as well as the franchises that followed, are notable also for contributing a comic element to the construction of Blackness within the cultural industries in the 1990s. These movies blended comedy in a cinematic mix that otherwise could have been dominated by, on one hand, an indie auteur aesthetic represented by figures like Spike Lee or Julie Dash or by, on the other hand, hood dramas like *Boyz n the Hood* or *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991). Certainly, New Line was not alone in making Black comedies; one can look to contemporaneous television programs like *Family Matters* (1989–98), *In Living Color*, and *Martin*

(1992–97). And studios other than New Line released a number of popular, silly comedies featuring Black stars throughout the decade, including *The Nutty Professor* (Universal Pictures, 1996), *Major Payne* (Universal Pictures, 1995), and *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Miramax, 1996). But New Line was remarkable and distinctive for specializing so consistently in Black films in general and lighthearted Black comedies in particular. The seeming inconsequence and lack of pretention of films such as *House Party*, *Who's the Man?*, and *Friday* were actually quite consequential, as they offered alternatives to other Black representations at the time and, at the same time, successfully commercialized a comic form of Blackness.

THE BIG PICTURE AND THE BIG DEAL

Along with these Black films and franchises, the continued success of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* films contributed much to New Line's growth in the early 1990s. Amid the rapidly changing technological and economic conditions in the media industry at the time, it was precisely New Line's recurrent success with comparatively "marginal," "niche," or specialized content that made it susceptible to becoming more firmly enmeshed in the mainstream of the film business. Simply put, Hollywood sought to incorporate the heterogeneity characteristic of independent film distribution companies. In her analysis of Miramax, Alisa Perren connects the wave of conglomeration among media companies in the 1990s with the simultaneous growth of specialty distributors like New Line and Miramax: "Though on the surface it might seem paradoxical, the rise of Miramax and other indie subsidiaries can be seen as intersecting with the global media conglomerates' increasing focus on producing and distributing niche products to specific demographic groups."⁷⁷

Hollywood studios did not stop producing blockbuster films aimed at global audiences; rather, they embraced *both* strategies simultaneously and under one corporate umbrella. They internalized difference within their corporate structures, rationalizing heterogeneity. The studios adopted this two-pronged approach in tandem with the proliferation of cable television, which targeted select audience profiles while the major networks continued to address a national mass viewership.⁷⁸ Home video also contributed to a more fragmented and personalized movie culture.⁷⁹

At the same time, the media business underwent massive conglomeration.⁸⁰ Sony bought Columbia Pictures in 1989; Viacom took over Paramount Pictures and Blockbuster Video in 1994; Disney and the ABC television network merged in 1996; Matsushita acquired MCA (Universal Pictures) in 1990 and then sold the movie studio to Seagram in 1995, which then sold Universal to Vivendi in 2000; Time Inc. merged with Warner Bros. in 1990; and as the millennium came to a close, Time Warner merged with America Online in 2000 in a deal finalized in

2001. These moves were prompted and enabled by significant deregulatory measures on the part of the US government, most particularly the repeal of the fin-syn (financial interest and syndication) regulations in 1995, followed by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Consequently, by the end of the decade, the Hollywood studios were multinational businesses centrally devoted to the ownership of intellectual properties and the exploitation of those assets in any number of media and outlets and as myriad cultural commodities. Movies were but one manifestation of these conglomerates' power over cultural production and circulation.

It was amid these large mergers and acquisitions that the studios either purchased specialty distributors or created their own specialty labels. "By 2000," Perren writes, "News Corp. had Fox Searchlight, Vivendi Universal had Universal Focus, Time Warner had New Line and Fine Line, Viacom had Paramount Vantage, and Sony had Sony Pictures Classics and Screen Gems."⁸¹ These endeavors followed in the wake of Disney's purchase of Miramax in 1993. And while Miramax may have been the first company to get caught up in this restructuring of the specialty film business, New Line's role in this story is significant. Shortly after Turner bought New Line, in fact, *Variety* dubbed the company "a crown jewel of '90s-style merger and acquisitions mania."⁸²

As the 1980s came to a close, the independent film sector was in a bit of a crisis. Although some independent production companies were succeeding, most needed to partner with Hollywood studios to distribute their films.⁸³ Part of the trouble was that the Hollywood majors were releasing specialty films normally handled by independent companies. For its part, New Line made efforts to expand the number, range, and in some cases the budgets of its films as it entered the 1990s. It still made and distributed films aimed at targeted audiences but increasingly reached for large-scale successes as well. It largely succeeded in these endeavors, and in 1992 it had grossed more than \$100 million for three years in a row.⁸⁴ In this context, New Line actively sought to forge new industry partnerships.⁸⁵ Shaye was publicly guarded about the company's plans, stating that he was "not talking about a merger or acquisition with anyone" but that New Line had "very selective discussions about strategy alliances."⁸⁶

It does not appear that New Line engaged in any discussions with Ted Turner until a few years later. Turner launched Turner Broadcasting in 1976 and in that same year took the television station WTCG, which broadcast from Atlanta, and placed it on the Satcom I satellite for retransmission via cable in other areas around the country. This "hybrid broadcast/cable property [that used] satellite distribution" became SuperStation TBS in 1979 and was available nationally.⁸⁷ The company continued to expand in cable television with the creation of CNN in 1980. Following the acquisition of the library of films held by MGM in 1986, Turner Broadcasting launched TNT in 1988. Finally, for the moment, the company launched the Cartoon Network on cable in 1992. Thus, by the early 1990s the Turner empire encompassed multiple cable channels that specialized in different

media genres and held an immense library of film properties to exploit on these stations and home video.

Predictions that Turner would add New Line to his company's many assets began appearing in early August 1993; these reports also discussed Castle Rock as part of a possible deal, a company owned by Sony with which New Line had a video distribution agreement.⁸⁸ New Line planned to begin distributing Castle Rock's films after 1997, when Castle Rock's output deal with Sony Pictures was set to expire.⁸⁹ Some of the reporting indicated that Time Warner, which held 20 percent of Turner Broadcasting stock, opposed the acquisition out of fear that it would make New Line a competitor with Warner Bros.⁹⁰ Time Warner later clarified that it would not block the purchase.⁹¹ Yet concerns about the relationship between the studios would persist for years, ultimately contributing to New Line's undoing in 2008.

Turner made the deal to acquire New Line in mid-August 1993, with the plan to close the purchase "no later than Feb. 28, 1994."⁹² As planned, Turner purchased Castle Rock in tandem, paying over \$650 million for the two companies. Whereas Turner paid \$100 million in cash for Castle Rock, including paying off that company's existing debt, he purchased New Line through an exchange of Turner stock, the value of which totaled around \$506 million at the time. In addition, Turner took on New Line's outstanding debt of around \$70 million.⁹³ As the press noted at the time, Turner's acquisition of New Line and Castle Rock symbolized the changing industrial relationship between film, television, and cable during the 1990s.⁹⁴ Contemplating the ongoing media business consolidation, the *New York Times* stated, "The deals reflect the increasing vertical integration of the entertainment business as companies seek to control both production and distribution of entertainment programming." More particularly, Turner's purchase of New Line and Castle Rock "would give Turner a long-sought stake in the film production business, providing it with programming for its entertainment channels, Turner Network Television and the WTBS superstation."⁹⁵

Once a tiny nontheatrical distributor, New Line Cinema had now become one element of a multimedia conglomerate. The company was at the center of the subtle but impactful industrial reconfiguration that turned New Hollywood into Conglomerate Hollywood. Vertical and horizontal integration became the new norm as media conglomerates had multiple holdings in the production, distribution, and exhibition of texts in different media and outlets. New Line held a distinct value in this world, where cable and home video gained importance as sources of revenue alongside movie theaters and national television networks.

Television entered a "postnetwork" era in the 1990s in which it relied increasingly on narrowcasting rather than broadcasting.⁹⁶ New Line's long-standing practice of addressing, cultivating, and commercializing smaller but identifiable audience communities aligned well with this industrial and cultural schema. But now this logic was augmented, set within a new financial context and institutional

configuration. New Line remained in the theatrical film distribution business, first and foremost. But in a world where niches proved to have increased financial importance *and* where media companies had interests in film, television, cable, and home video, a “film” company like New Line had just the sort of qualities that served an industrial environment in which medium specificity began to erode. This is not to say that New Line had operated like a cable channel, or that the niche logic of cable in the 1990s and afterward was the same as that of earlier independent film distributors. Rather, the Turner–New Line deal, as with Disney and Miramax and other mergers and acquisitions during this time, shows just how interrelated the logics of these two supposedly distinct media and industries were.

Bob Shaye remained with New Line as CEO, but he no longer had final decision-making power over it. The deal greatly impacted Shaye financially, as he owned 27.2 percent of New Line stock at the time of the sale.⁹⁷ Thanks to his stock holdings and the way he was compensated in Turner stock, Shaye made an estimated \$100 million, personally, from the sale.⁹⁸ *Variety* quipped, though, that while Turner “has been a rich man for many years, Shaye, by contrast, until recently ran a very frugal operation from rather shabby offices and, by Hollywood standards, lived a rather middle-class existence based in New York.”⁹⁹ The big deal was a big deal.

“FREED TO COMPETE WITH THE MAJORS”?

Turner’s acquisition of New Line, in fact, raised many questions about New Line’s identity in terms of its business activities and strategies, its internal work culture, and its overall profile; its legend was in flux once again. An October 1994 article assessed New Line: “The company has undergone numerous evolutions of identity since 1967 and distinguished itself by having a thoughtful business plan and sticking to it.”¹⁰⁰ And there were many similarly positive, even obsequious articles about New Line in the industry and popular press. But the company’s transformation into a corporate division was not entirely smooth. Stories both positive and negative proliferated through 1994 and 1995 that questioned New Line’s “fit” in Hollywood. Various statements and actions on the part of the company and some New Line executives occasionally contributed to a troubled cultural and industrial identity.

Despite how frequently the company had promoted itself as “independent” and proudly outside Hollywood, Shaye sometimes disavowed the company’s former strategies, saying that previously “we were restricted [on the kinds of films we made] by loan covenants . . . we accepted it because that was our persona.”¹⁰¹ New Line did, in fact, alter its production tactics, taking on even more bigger-budget films aimed at large audiences, as it had begun trying to do toward the end of the 1980s. In some cases, the press celebrated New Line’s aggressive financial activities as signs of the company’s growth and ability to compete with Hollywood. Stories highlighted the fact that, following the Turner deal, New Line was increasing its production budgets and annual slate.¹⁰² One article commented that when Turner

purchased New Line, “the company was freed to compete with the majors.”¹⁰³ In such characterizations, New Line appeared to be a valiant, maverick studio that had finally realized its potential.

Some news coverage sought to affirm New Line’s new legitimacy by noting that it was working with top talent like Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan in a planned remake of *The Women* (1939).¹⁰⁴ Others celebrated the amount that New Line was spending on the films it developed, equating budget size with legitimacy. In this vein, the *New York Times* reported, in positive terms, that New Line planned to pay Julia Roberts \$12 million and Meg Ryan \$8 million for *The Women*, and paid Jim Carrey \$7 million for appearing in *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) after having paid him \$450,000 for *The Mask* (1994). The same article discussed how New Line had won a bidding war with Hollywood studios for the screenplay to *Long Kiss Goodnight*, for which the company paid a “record \$4 million,” and noted that the company had beaten other studios in acquiring the rights to *Lost in Space*.¹⁰⁵

But other coverage of the company was more disparaging and deemed it deficient in relation to Hollywood, financially and culturally. Despite its attachment to the Turner empire, the press noted that New Line still did not have the relationships with national theater chains that the major Hollywood studios had, relationships that provided the studios with “financial advantages” unavailable to smaller companies. Some stars declined to work with New Line, even for more advantageous financial deals, because they had more faith in the marketing and distribution capabilities of the major studios.¹⁰⁶ Some executives working in other Hollywood studios still rejected the thought that New Line had officially entered the mainstream movie business.¹⁰⁷ 20th Century Fox had refused to allow New Line to develop an unproduced Fox film for free through a courtesy “reciprocal agreement,” and Fox chairman Peter Chernin commented that such deals are “a long-standing business agreement among studios . . . and New Line is not part of it.”¹⁰⁸

Still other press coverage made the issue more directly about cultural status. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, opined, “Since most Hollywood producers still associate New Line with dead teenager movies and little else, the company must continue to show the industry that it is worthy of respect.”¹⁰⁹ For his part, Shaye equivocated about New Line’s relation to Hollywood: “I think the industry takes a little umbrage at us. They even think of us as uppity. . . . There’s no question that we are viewed in L.A. with a combination of uncertainty and a little disdain and maybe even fear. . . . It’s an arcane society here. Like a club. Well, we’ve paid our dues. We’ve followed the regulations. We’ve joined the club.”¹¹⁰

The public discourse around New Line Cinema also evaluated its fit in Hollywood in terms of its internal work culture. Celebrating the company’s successes and expansion into bigger films, one story said New Line was “still Hollywood’s most informal company.” The story quoted screenwriter Shane Black as saying, “You can tell walking into New Line that you’re not in a place of suits. . . . It’s a truly creative environment.”¹¹¹ In a similar vein, director Renny Harlin observed

that the people at New Line “listen to the latest music, play video games, read short stories by underground writers and comic books.”¹¹² A 1995 story described New Line’s Los Angeles offices as having “unpretentious, white-washed suites, cases of tapes and posters spilling over into the hallways” and its staff as “hard-working . . . with an informal, affectionate esprit de corps.”¹¹³

Much of this public discourse fixated on Shaye as a force that shaped New Line’s work culture. One story called Shaye “an improbable movie mogul” and went on to note that “his long hair seems a relic of the 1960’s. . . . His casual clothes are not the de rigueur Armani worn by Hollywood hot-shots. Instead of driving the standard Mercedes or Jeep, Mr. Shaye pulls into restaurant lots in his 1972 Oldsmobile convertible.”¹¹⁴ A long piece in *Variety* stated that Shaye “has demonstrated a combination of frugality, business acumen and the creative eye of an artist,” an executive who displayed “the inherent spirit of an iconoclast.” Shaye reminded this writer of the “early Hollywood execs like Irving Thalberg” in that Shaye had built New Line up as a company from nothing.¹¹⁵ Although this comparison might make it appear that Shaye fit in Hollywood, the article actually used the comparison to distinguish Shaye from current Hollywood executives, who “may have little hands-on experience with either production or distribution.”¹¹⁶

New Line workers actively participated in this discourse themselves. New Line executive Mitchell Goldman explained the company’s financial dealings as entwining with its internal culture: “The key is the family atmosphere that Bob Shaye creates. We really are fighting for something and care how money is spent. It goes far beyond an employer-employee relationship; it’s almost like we have a mission.”¹¹⁷ Goldman continued this line of thought in a story in *Variety*: “Bob Shaye has established an organization that is very much a family . . . he creates an environment to work in where you’re working for something other than money. He engenders a feeling that we’re working for the common good.”¹¹⁸ This same piece quoted Michael Lynne recalling that Shaye had been an unusual law student in that he didn’t wear a tie, and the story closed by saying that Shaye “still doesn’t wear a tie.”¹¹⁹

Shaye was not the only executive to garner attention in the press or to be discussed as an outsider to Hollywood. A 1993 story characterized Michael Lynne as a savvy businessperson who oversaw much of New Line’s expansion in the early 1990s. The writer assessed Lynne as “uncharacteristically low-profile” among Hollywood executives and quoted one at Carolco Pictures as saying that Lynne “is no big wheel around town; a lot of people don’t even know who he is.”¹²⁰ Alternatively, Michael De Luca was frequently cited as a highly visible and unusual executive. One story asserted that De Luca embodied the “rebel spirit Shaye has fostered” at the company.¹²¹ Another wrote that his “unconventional style and his taste in material cut against the grain. His office doesn’t have a desk; his computer is crammed into a corner.” De Luca and another executive held meetings in offices littered with toys “while playing catch with an oversize baseball.”¹²²

These news stories and promotional articles illustrate how, during its industrial transformation through the mid-1990s, New Line Cinema was defined by *stories about* New Line and that the company actively participated in this discursive construction. As a movie distributor, New Line was always in the business of building hype to bolster the economic potential of its films. The company had a history of releasing advertising and marketing materials that constructed a legend about itself as a means of industry turf marking. But the flurry of press about the company following the Turner acquisition was especially noteworthy for two reasons. First, the sheer volume of this discourse speaks to the company's elevated stature during this period. Second, it illustrates how the company's nebulous identity, especially vis-à-vis Hollywood, was characterized *as* nebulous at the time. New Line was defined by a lack of definition.

The company's position changed dramatically once again in 1996 when Turner Broadcasting merged with Time Warner. Turner and Time Warner announced that the companies planned to merge in September 1995.¹²³ Such a merger posed potential regulatory pitfalls, as Jennifer Holt discusses. The new, combined company would be vertically integrated, have significant power in cable programming and distribution, and would also have holdings across multiple media industries, including film production and distribution, broadcast television, music, and publishing. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) originally opposed the merger, but after months of negotiation and slight alterations to the terms of the deal, the FTC approved the merger in August 1996. "The result," Holt writes, "was an unprecedented merging of media . . . [that] brought a much larger magnitude and range of assets under the same corporate insignia and far greater potential for strategic use of vertically and horizontally integrated media properties."¹²⁴

On one hand, New Line was just one, comparatively small element of this merger, and it does not appear that the conjoining of two film distributors, Warner Bros. and New Line, posed any problems from the government's perspective.¹²⁵ On the other hand, New Line and Warner Bros. were in the same business, even if the two companies operated at different scales, and different figures *within* the merging companies took issue with the pairing of these studios.¹²⁶ Some stakeholders, for instance, wanted to create new and advantageous connections between New Line and different cable networks within the corporation, while others expressed concern that New Line would be given unfair preferential treatment due to the terms of its new ownership.¹²⁷ As negotiations between Turner and Time Warner proceeded in August 1996, New Line presented a sticking point between the parties. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Mr. Turner is said to be annoyed that Time Warner openly floated a plan to sell the motion-picture studio after the merger closes. People who have talked to Mr. Turner about New Line say he believes Time Warner should keep New Line and is expected to press the issue."¹²⁸ Subsequent reports stated that Time Warner "informally indicated" that it intended to sell both New Line and Castle Rock Entertainment.¹²⁹ But Turner

continued to oppose selling New Line, and as of September 1996, no final plans had been made to spin it off.¹³⁰

One may presume that Time Warner wished to discard New Line because it viewed the company as redundant with Warner Bros. In addition, selling New Line would help ameliorate the significant debt incurred as part of the overall merger.¹³¹ As Turner continued to oppose the sale, Time Warner first devised a “partial spin-off” of New Line.¹³² Subsequently, the conglomerate proposed separating New Line but retaining a “controlling interest.”¹³³ Turner advocated for a plan whereby he could “keep a partial interest in New Line and let it proceed as a quasi-independent production company.”¹³⁴ This issue of New Line’s independence or overall relationship to Time Warner was, unsurprisingly, a concern for Shaye as well. One story reported that he “wanted his studio to be sold. He feared it would become lost within the much larger Warner Bros.” The article quoted Shaye as saying, “It’s best for all if New Line is semi-independent,” and summarized his thinking about the spinoff: “[it] will give him the independence New Line has earned.”¹³⁵

Thus, the Time Warner deal presented a new question regarding New Line’s status and identity, putting into stark relief the degree to which the company would retain any of its independence. This issue of identity was, as always, as much a question of cultural association and meaning as it was one of business arrangements and activities. Even as it had joined with the Turner empire, and even as it had increasingly made bigger-budgeted films aimed at wider audiences, the discourse about and issuing from New Line executives themselves strained to establish a concrete legend for the company. Certainly, New Line was not an “indie” in the context of the 1990s boom of “indie” cinema as an industry and set of cultural meanings; that would be the province of New Line’s specialty division Fine Line Features (discussed in the following chapter). Yet New Line was not Hollywood, either. It seemed that those at New Line hoped to keep it that way, even while Shaye and others may have had ambitions for bigger films that could attract larger audiences.

Ultimately, Time Warner did not sell New Line, a decision announced in April 1997, and questions remained at the time about how “independent” New Line would be as it continued within Time Warner.¹³⁶ The *New York Times* cast the decision to retain New Line in a negative light: “There were no buyers: the asking price of \$1 billion was viewed on Wall Street as far too high,” particularly as several New Line films failed at the box office during this period.¹³⁷ The story also perpetuated the discourse questioning the company’s independence and lack of “fit” in Hollywood. It referred to Shaye as “something of a 1960’s rebel” who “took pride in being an outsider who made low-budget films for ‘niche’ audiences.” It described New Line as having been “a feisty—and formidable—distribution and production company for mostly low-budget horror and comedy films” that had “ventured away from its roots in search of the super-riches of mainstream, major studio Hollywood.”¹³⁸ While New Line did expand the scope and scale of the films

it produced and distributed following both the Turner acquisition and the merger with Time Warner, the company also found some amazing successes and incurred some much-publicized failures.

Over the last half of the 1990s and through the 2000s, Warner Bros. and New Line operated simultaneously within the same corporation. As Michael Lynne detailed, New Line did not coordinate with Warner Bros. regarding talent or release dates; he went so far as to say, "If we compete with each other, it's not the worst thing in the world . . . [our] films need to stand on their own."¹³⁹ Time Warner appeared more accepting of the situation after New Line found a way to finance its operations independently of the conglomerate. In early 1998, New Line secured credit lines from two banks in the amounts of \$400 million and \$350 million, thus endowing the company with \$750 million to finance both its operations and film productions through the year 2000.¹⁴⁰ Crucially, these credit lines were "nonrecourse" to Time Warner, making New Line solely responsible for repayment.¹⁴¹ At once, then, this deal gave New Line financial independence from Time Warner and vice versa. Paradoxically as usual, New Line was independent, operating within a Hollywood conglomerate.

Amid these industrial events, New Line's identity was further marked in public discourse as renegade and even unacceptable because of scandals related to certain executives and the company's internal culture in general. The press especially cited Michael De Luca as a problematic figure. De Luca had originally joined New Line as an intern in the 1980s and worked under the supervision of production executives Janet Grillo and Sara Risher. He took over the position as New Line's head of production in 1995, while Risher stayed on with New Line for a number of years as production chair. For a long stretch, the press treated De Luca as a cinematic wunderkind whom Shaye mentored and developed a special affinity for. Further, and particularly important when considering the company's continued interest in attracting youth audiences, De Luca was viewed as having an instinct for unconventional material that would appeal to younger moviegoers. He was credited with bringing a youthful sensibility to New Line especially during the 1990s, and he was associated with the success of such films as *The Mask*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *Boogie Nights* (1997), and *The Wedding Singer* (1998). He was also credited with pushing New Line into making films related to other popular media: the movie *Mortal Kombat* (1995), for example, was adapted from the violent video game of the same name, and *Spawn* (1997) was adapted from a comic book.

But news coverage about De Luca's unruly private life was much more critical and tarnished the way New Line's identity as a maverick company was publicly understood. A journalist for GQ, for instance, reported witnessing an incident in which De Luca got into a fight at a restaurant.¹⁴² Most notoriously, De Luca caused a scandal following the 1998 Academy Awards. At this point, the executive was already known for being unconventional "with a history that includes public fistfights and drunken driving" and "a penchant for partying, chasing women and

outrageous personal conduct.”¹⁴³ De Luca and his date apparently engaged in a sex act that was viewable by other guests at an Oscars preparty held at the home of Arnold Rifkin, then president of the William Morris talent agency. This “elicited tittering as well as outrage from some guests and the host, who had security guards escort De Luca from the property.” The *Los Angeles Times* characterized De Luca as out of control but also as worthy of redemption and in need a “wake-up call.”¹⁴⁴

The *LA Times* situated this scandal and De Luca’s history of unacceptable behavior in relation to New Line’s profile and status in the movie business: “New Line tends to have a nonconformist working environment, where executives are given a lot of latitude and quirky behavior is often accepted.” But, the article continued, the Oscar party scandal “adds up to a public embarrassment for New Line. The former independent is now owned by publicly traded media giant Time Warner Inc.”¹⁴⁵ The article also assessed the work culture throughout Hollywood: “In the past, Hollywood generally has tolerated unconventional behavior, particularly if the perpetrator is successful. . . . Many of those in the industry believe Hollywood has changed dramatically”; that is, toward a professional culture typical of other industries.¹⁴⁶

Crucially, the story asserted that “the incident raises the question of when an executive’s antics in private life become a business issue.”¹⁴⁷ New Line functioned as a film business, but it was also a cultural entity with specific characteristics. Further, the coverage of this scandal shows how industrial and cultural identities were entangled. New Line’s legend mattered most to the people who worked for, competed with, and partnered with the company. As seen in these instances, some of the legend-building news stories about New Line did not confine themselves to the company’s business activities but also attended to the way New Line’s employees operated in a social, cultural realm, behavior that reflected on the institution and affected its business. New Line was an oddity in Hollywood, but this status was sometimes less about innovation and unconventionality than about disrepute.

Shortly after the Oscar party episode, a lengthy and damning story about New Line appeared in the July 1998 issue of *Premiere*.¹⁴⁸ Its title, “Flirting with Disaster,” made winking reference to an indie film distributed by Miramax a few years earlier. Passages in the article resemble many of the company overviews published in the press previously, highlighting various definitive and successful moments from New Line’s history to that point. Yet the *Premiere* article sets itself apart in the public discourse about New Line by providing a scathing account of a toxic work environment in the company’s offices and “widespread examples of questionable behavior” among the company’s top leadership.¹⁴⁹ The article draws from interviews with “dozens of industry professionals and former and current New Line employees” who detail unprofessional behavior related to abundant use of alcohol and illicit drugs.¹⁵⁰ Even more condemning, it cites multiple anonymous sources that describe pervasive sexual harassment and assault committed by New Line

executives, specifically at least two instances when company CEO Michael Lynne engaged in aggressive and predatory sexual behavior with female employees.

The article contrasts such behavior and workplace culture with the business needs and typical decorum found within other Hollywood companies. “The clean living, Pellegrino-sipping corporate ethos espoused by much of the movie industry in the early 90s wasn’t for New Line,” the article states.¹⁵¹ This story both provides a critique of unprofessional and unacceptable behavior in a contemporary workplace and, by means of this critique, evaluates New Line Cinema’s place within contemporary Hollywood. It presents a hedonistic and misogynistic climate at New Line as developing in tandem with the company’s “scrappy” industrial innovations and maverick position in the business. But this same culture now seemed especially objectionable due to the company’s position as a bigger, more conventional movie studio. The article suggests that booze, drugs, and poisonous sexism are somehow more naturally aligned with nonconventional media companies and are not necessarily systemic to Hollywood.

The behaviors described in the *Premiere* article are without doubt unacceptable in any professional workplace, and acts of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are inexcusable. Such a work environment is damaging for anyone and poses grave risks for women and LGBTQ+ people in particular. The flagrant irony of this episode is that sexual misconduct has long been rampant in Hollywood. The revelations of Harvey Weinstein’s lengthy history of sexual harassment and assault, first detailed in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* in October 2017, provide an egregious and highly publicized case.¹⁵² Indeed, these articles helped propel the contemporary #MeToo movement to new levels, inspiring many more people to come forward with stories of harassment and abuse in the film and other industries.

Among these contemporary accounts, former Fine Line Features executive Liz Manne published an article in *IndieWire* that supported and expanded on the 1998 story in *Premiere* by recounting her own harassment and assault by a senior executive at New Line in the 1990s.¹⁵³ Naming herself as one of the sources for the *Premiere* article, Manne’s 2017 *IndieWire* piece illustrates well how shifting social, political, and cultural conditions can shape the discourse—and silences—about and within the film industry. #MeToo has shed new light on the many instances of sexual misconduct and predation in the media business and brought renewed significance to the 1998 *Premiere* article.¹⁵⁴

These more recent events and discussions make it all the more historically significant that New Line rebounded from such damning press in the late 1990s. Indeed, as another sign of the company’s contradictory position both within and independent of Hollywood, multiple voices defended New Line and its executives in trade publications and other public venues, while others, including Peter Bart at *Variety*, dismissed the *Premiere* article for its reliance on anonymous sources.¹⁵⁵ In this manner, the ensuing public discourse of that time helped shore up New Line’s public image in the face of controversy, demonstrating how pervasive and

apparently acceptable sexism, misogyny, harassment, and even assault were within the media industry *generally* in the late 1990s. New Line and Hollywood moved on from this moment to continue business as usual.

MEN BEHAVING BADLY: NEW LINE'S COMEDIES

Following New Line Cinema's merger with Turner and subsequently with Time Warner, and as the press assessed the company's reputation and scrutinized its "fit" in Hollywood, New Line continued to produce and release a varied slate of films. It made a range of movies with larger budgets, including the neonoir *Seven* (1995); fantasy action films *Mortal Kombat*, *Spawn*, and *Blade*; and dramas with ambitions of prestige, including *Don Juan de Marco* (1995) and *Boogie Nights*. In this respect, the heterogeneity of the company's roster of films was paired with financial power fueled by the company's corporate situation. While New Line suffered some major setbacks in some of its efforts to diversify its slate (discussed further at the end of this chapter), these films helped the company address new, larger, and wider audiences and bolstered its standing in the industry as a result. Notably, it was in this period that Miramax created the Dimension Films division to handle the company's nonprestigious genre pictures, especially horror films. In this way, Miramax encroached on territory that New Line had long worked in, at the same that New Line sought bigger audiences with a greater range of genres and films.¹⁵⁶

Yet New Line showed consistency during this period in producing and distributing silly, lowbrow, often crude comedies with recognizable performers, particularly following the back-to-back success of *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* in 1994. Of course, New Line had a history with comedy, extending from *Pink Flamingos* to *House Party 2*, and it is worth remembering that the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise distinguished itself from other slasher films with Freddy Krueger's coarsely comic banter and conduct. But, considering the company's history and continuing significance, several aspects of New Line's comedies from the 1990s onward are especially notable. First, the comedies upheld the company's long-standing practice of keeping budgets contained; while the budgets were bigger than for previous films, the highest costs for these comedies were incurred for the talent, which served as a crucial marketing hook. Second, New Line focused particularly on lowbrow, populist, sometimes gross-out comedies, with some exceptions like the political satire *Wag the Dog* (1996). Whereas other Hollywood studios released child-friendly comedies, such as *Home Alone* (20th Century Fox, 1991) and *The Nutty Professor* (Universal, 1996), and others did star-driven romantic comedies like *Sleepless in Seattle* (Tri-Star, 1993) and *Notting Hill* (Universal, 1999), New Line's comedies were more consistently puerile and crude.

Third and finally, these comedies represented New Line's deliberate effort to attract broad, mainstream audiences. The comedies thus reflect the company's new

industry status and position, as it had the increased financing and infrastructural support that came with being part of a multimedia conglomerate. Comedies can be inexpensive to make, but now New Line could afford bigger stars. It is crucial to note also that many of these “mainstream” comedies were similar in their juvenile sensibility to many of New Line’s Black comedies from the same period. But, whereas New Line treated films like *House Party* and *Friday* as *marginal* works that *might* “cross over” to white audiences, following its bolstered corporate status in 1994, New Line aimed directly for big, general audiences with comedies having white casts. As the company envisioned which comedies might consistently attract the broadest audiences, it imagined those films as white. With films like *Austin Powers* (1997), *Dumb and Dumber*, and *The Wedding Singer*, New Line’s comedies often centered on outrageous, immature, white male figures.

The Mask was the first major comedy hit for the company. The film was based on a comic book character from Dark Horse Entertainment. New Line and Dark Horse had begun work on an adaptation in 1989, when New Line was still independent and before it had released *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.¹⁵⁷ Early ideas for *The Mask* included a version of the character more violent than the one in the eventual film, a plan aligned with New Line’s specialization in horror films in the 1980s.¹⁵⁸ But the script developed into more of a lighthearted comedy. Production began in the fall of 1993, and the film was released in theaters in July 1994.¹⁵⁹

The film tells the story of a timid, nerdy, ridiculed bank clerk who randomly discovers an ancient wooden mask. When worn, this relic turns him into “The Mask,” a green-faced, dynamically energetic, wisecracking figure who transforms his body and the physical world around him. The clerk uses these powers to humorously get back at his harassers, causing havoc and comic mayhem along the way. The character gets entangled in a scheme with some gangsters who run a nightclub and becomes romantically attached to a singer who works there. After defeating the gangsters, the clerk discards the mask, and he and the singer kiss happily to end the film. Aesthetically, *The Mask* is notable for Jim Carrey’s spirited and wildly hyperbolic performance, both physical and verbal, and the film features several set pieces that showcase the comedian’s antics. It also makes prominent use of digital effects and animation to render The Mask’s science-defying movement and manipulation of the physical world.

These two elements were the focus of the film’s press and promotion. Carrey had gained recognition for his work on *In Living Color*, where he appeared as a regular cast member from 1990 through 1994. More important, however, was his appearance in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, released in the February preceding *The Mask*. Although it received negative reviews, *Ace Ventura* did well at the box office and established Carrey as someone who successfully transitioned from television to movies.¹⁶⁰ The press and promotion for *The Mask* paired Carrey’s energetic and outlandish performance style with the film’s plot and use of special effects. “The Mask was made for Carrey’s unique rubber-band man brand of



FIGURE 13. The eye-popping computer-generated imagery and effects, combined with Jim Carrey's exuberant performance, helped make *The Mask* a major comedy hit for New Line.

loose-limbed, flexi-faced comedy," one profile of the actor claimed. "His amazing contortionist-like body 'saved us a lot of money on special effects,' says Michael De Luca, president of production for New Line Cinema."¹⁶¹ Reviews of the film fell in line with the marketing and focused on Carrey and the film's special effects. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, was quite negative but conceded that "Mr. Carrey works very hard here, as do the ingenious special-effects pioneers at Industrial Light and Magic, who exaggerate the star's manic gestures until they take on frenetic intensity."¹⁶²

The Mask proved successful at the box office, earning over \$100 million by mid-September.¹⁶³ New Line was aggressive with the movie's home video release. It priced the VHS at \$20, aiming for the sell-through market, and spent \$10 million in advertising the video.¹⁶⁴ This effort worked, and *The Mask* remained a top-selling video for more than half a year.¹⁶⁵ The hope from the start was for *The Mask* to generate a large, transmedia franchise aimed at wide audiences and especially kids. Dark Horse had been developing a television program, toys and action figures, a children's book, and possibly a live stage show in the vein of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' *Coming Out of Their Shells*.¹⁶⁶ Seventy-five Mask-related consumer goods were licensed before the film came out, and New Line strategized to create products and cross-promotions "to appeal to all demographics," with toys and games aimed at kids and video games aimed at teens.¹⁶⁷ New Line worked with Kenner to produce Mask toys, and with General Mills to make Pop Secret "the official popcorn of 'The Mask.'"¹⁶⁸ New Line also released a behind-the-scenes interactive CD-ROM for the film, foreshadowing the kind of bonus features that would appear on DVDs in the coming years.¹⁶⁹

In the months following the film's theatrical release, New Line developed a *Mask* cartoon in earnest and secured a deal with Dark Horse and CBS to produce it.¹⁷⁰ *The Mask: The Animated Series* aired on CBS on Saturday mornings in fall 1995 and continued for three seasons through 1997. This child-friendlier version of the property was regularly punctuated by catchphrases coined in the movie. New Line Home Video also did very well with the VHS release of the cartoon series, which the company promoted heavily leading up to the 1995 holiday season.¹⁷¹ At least one newspaper recommended the series as a holiday gift for children.¹⁷²

More extensive franchising of *The Mask* was hindered, it seems, by contract negotiations between Carrey and New Line. The company had neglected to secure a contract with Carrey for a sequel to the film. The same momentum around Carrey's stardom that bolstered *The Mask* and later *Dumb and Dumber* made securing a contract with the actor prohibitively expensive. New Line paid Carrey \$7 million for *Dumb and Dumber* after paying him \$450,000 for *The Mask*, and reports indicated that it might have to pay him as much as \$10 million for a sequel.¹⁷³ Thus, despite its best effort to transform *The Mask* into another long-running franchise, New Line was not able to produce a sequel to the film until 2005, which did not feature Carrey and performed badly at the box office.

But New Line rapidly achieved another major success with the gross-out comedy *Dumb and Dumber*. Although the film features none of the special effects of *The Mask*, press and promotion for the film were similarly energetic. Anticipation for *Dumb and Dumber* was high thanks to Carrey's success in *Ace Ventura* and *The Mask*, and the title signaled that it would maintain the silly, puerile humor that the actor was now associated with. Carrey's costar Jeff Daniels was known as a serious character actor. Bobby and Peter Farrelly wrote and directed *Dumb and Dumber*, and subsequently made other juvenile, crude comedy films. Indeed, *Dumb and Dumber* revels in the idiocy of its two main characters, a pair of men who have naïve, childlike sensibilities. The plot involves a criminal scheme with gangsters, a road trip, and an attempted romance. Through this plot, the film strings together a series of gags that includes an extended toilet humor scene, suggested bestiality, and the mocking of a blind child.

New Line spent nearly \$10 million on ads and marketing for the film—nearly half of its production budget.¹⁷⁴ On one hand, New Line's promotion of this film to a wide audience aligned with the company's new ambitions for mainstream successes. On the other hand, one can see the exceptional effort to make this film broadly appealing as harkening back to the company's earlier days of selling exploitation films through intelligent and ironic ads. The *Washington Post* linked this merging of big-budget Hollywood and exploitation advertising practices to the importance of opening-weekend box office figures in determining a film's overall success. The *Post* situated *Dumb and Dumber* at the very heart of contemporary marketing practices: "Dumb and Dumber' is a model of how the pieces of a successful marketing campaign come together."¹⁷⁵

Dumb (dum) *adj.* A person lacking mental power.

FIGURE 14. The trailer for *Dumb and Dumber* ironically provides definitions for words related to stupidity, interspersed with comic clips from the film that illustrate the characters' dim-wittedness.

Much of the promotion aimed to create a sense of ironic hipness around the film's claims to portraying stupidity. After looking at market research surveys, New Line determined that the primary groups for the film were "young boys and urban [i.e., Black] audiences who knew Carrey from his work on 'In Living Color.'"¹⁷⁶ Based on these data, New Line placed ads targeted to those viewers on MTV, the Comedy Channel, and ESPN2. New Line simultaneously endeavored to appeal to audiences outside these demographics, specifically, "adult moviegoers who might have felt self-conscious about seeing a movie that relied heavily on bathroom jokes."¹⁷⁷

One of New Line's television trailers for *Dumb and Dumber* aimed for an ironic disjuncture from the film's ridiculousness. It intersperses moments from the film in which the characters say or do exceptionally unintelligent or annoying things with intertitles providing dictionary definitions of words like "dumb" and "idiot," as though such words need clarification for especially obtuse viewers. Along similarly lines, another television trailer shows a rapid selection of silly moments from the film while a narrator reads quotes from fictional reviews of the movie, such as:

"I laughed till I stopped."—Nick Quality Garden and Tree Service

"Provocative, compelling, and other big words."—Bob Dullard, *Underachievers Monthly*

Advertisements like these highlighted the silly antics of Carrey and Daniels while also placing audiences in a position of knowing superiority to the film.

In what proved a savvy move, New Line released *Dumb and Dumber* on December 16, 1994. As an immature, even crass comedy, the film stood out among

the more conventional, family-friendly films of that season, including Disney's *The Santa Clause*, which had been in release for several weeks. Counterprogrammed in this way, and supported by substantial promotion, *Dumb and Dumber* earned over \$120 million within weeks of its release.¹⁷⁸ This was New Line's second film within an eight-month span to surpass \$100 million at the box office.

The company also tried to franchise *Dumb and Dumber*. Hanna-Barbera, also owned by Turner Broadcasting, produced an animated series that premiered on ABC in October 1995, during the same period when the first season of *The Mask* cartoon aired. An album released to promote the cartoon included a collection of oddball rock tracks like "Kung Foo Fighting" and the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Yertle the Turtle." But the cartoon played for a single season, and the *Dumb and Dumber* franchise never proliferated.

Nevertheless, the one-two success of *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* helped establish New Line as a significant studio in the mid-1990s and widened the space for broad comedy in the company's repertoire. Although New Line had some comedy failures during this time, including *The Stupids* (1996), it achieved another significant victory in 1997 with *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, starring comedian Mike Myers. New Line was in negotiations with Myers to produce the film in February 1996, while Turner was negotiating with Time Warner. By this point, New Line's association with comedy was so well established that it played a role in *Austin Powers's* development. "We chose New Line," Myers said at the time, "because they understand fun movies, and this is going to be a fun movie to develop, produce, and market."¹⁷⁹

The press discussed the movie in high-concept terms, conveying its spy film parody premise simply and efficiently.¹⁸⁰ The production also got attention for including numerous cameos.¹⁸¹ But most of the promotional discourse focused on Myers, who was known for creating zany characters on *Saturday Night Live* (1975–), such as the doofus Wayne of the fictional *Wayne's World* cable access program; Dieter, a severe German television host; and Linda Richman, the host of the fictional show *Coffee Talk*. Myers segued into movies with *Wayne's World* in 1992. This film and its sequel (1993) did well financially, earning \$121 million and \$47 million respectively, helping establish Myers as a comic star in advance of *Austin Powers*.¹⁸²

Austin Powers capitalizes on 1990s-era nostalgia for the 1960s by parodying the excesses of the James Bond film franchise, the Harry Palmer spy films starring Michael Caine, and tropes and clichés associated with the "Swinging London" scene of the 1960s. *Austin Powers* is a superspy who gets cryogenically frozen and then reanimated in the present day to thwart the supervillain Dr. Evil, who has also been frozen for the past thirty years and is also played by Myers. Many of the film's jokes play on incongruities between these characters' understanding of the world and the cultural norms of the 1990s, as when Dr. Evil holds the world ransom for a mere \$1 million and when *Austin Powers* tries to play a CD on a record player. *Powers* recurrently displays inappropriate attitudes regarding gender norms, sex,



FIGURE 15. *Austin Powers* mocks flower power and other cultural and cinematic clichés from the 1960s, the era when New Line Cinema began operation.

and sexuality, and casually makes numerous misogynistic comments as well as self-assured sexual advances meant to represent a 1960s-era “liberated” sexuality.

Sexual innuendos abound, too, amid comic dialogue punctuated by one-liners, puns, and catchphrases. In fact, *Austin Powers* thrust a number of catchphrases into pop culture at the time, including “Do I make you horny?” “Yeah, baby, yeah!” “Shagadelic,” and “Oh, behave!” all intoned with a thick British accent. The film also features visual gags, including Powers’s clownishly loud outfits, his crooked and yellowed teeth, and his car, which is painted with the Union Jack. The film had several comic set pieces, including an opening sequence that spoofs the opening of *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and an extended sequence in which Myers and his colead, Elizabeth Hurley, appear naked but with genitals, buttocks, and breasts strategically blocked from the camera’s view by random objects in the room.

New Line treated *Austin Powers* as a big, conventional, Hollywood-style release in its intensive promotional efforts and distribution pattern. The company made multiple cross-promotional deals for the movie, including “TV specials on MTV and Comedy Central, sweepstake promos with *Seventeen* and *Premiere*, [and] a joint promotion with Live! and Ticketmaster.”¹⁸³ In addition, New Line worked with America Online to publicize the film over the internet.¹⁸⁴ The company was consistent in branding the film from the beginning, highlighting the stars and the madcap main character. Myers appeared in character at the ShoWest industry convention.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, the theatrical trailer showcased the movie’s premise and the antics of the Powers character and stressed his anachronistic, fish-out-of-water situation. Print advertising featured Myers in costume striking a quirky pose, with

the film's title set in a wavy, flourished font that recalled the late sixties. Other ads played up the film's romantic angle by featuring Myers and Hurley embracing.

Austin Powers received positive reviews in trade publications, but those from major newspapers were more mixed.¹⁸⁶ A positive review in the *Washington Post* made a point of distinguishing Myers' comic style from the "broad and elastic" mode of Jim Carrey.¹⁸⁷ The *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin noted the film's somewhat divergent form, content, and audience appeals, writing that, "The film . . . aims for a teenage audience—a group that may be entirely oblivious to its jokey references—with bathroom jokes and frat house humor."¹⁸⁸ Market research conducted upon the film's release indicated that *Austin Powers* did, in fact, play especially well with young males.¹⁸⁹

New Line gave the film a wide release in more than 2,100 theaters, and it debuted at number 2 at the box office, earning \$10 million in its opening weekend, which exceeded expectations based on prerelease market research.¹⁹⁰ The film eventually earned a total of \$53.8 million.¹⁹¹ The film did exceptionally well on home video, as New Line sold more than 3.5 million copies on VHS and 750,000 DVDs of the movie.¹⁹² In addition to these direct financial successes, *Austin Powers* inaugurated a transmedia franchise that included two additional films, each of which earned around \$300 million—far exceeding the original film. *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, in other words, fulfilled the ambitions New Line had held previously for *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber*. It not only attracted large audiences but leveraged the first film's success into a consistent blockbuster comedy franchise.

Like the character Austin Powers, New Line originated in 1967, and the movie's narrative leap from 1967 to 1997 casts a light on New Line's own thirty-year history and its changing identity, sensibility, and industrial practices. New Line promoted multiple films in the sixties and seventies for their countercultural values, often related to politics and sexuality, such as *Sympathy for the Devil*, *Pink Flamingos*, and *Reefer Madness*. *Austin Powers*, by contrast, pokes fun at these very values. In a manner, *Austin Powers* disavowed New Line's very history and created a big, popular hit by ridiculing the revolutionary, exploratory, and liberated values the company had promoted previously.

New Line followed *Austin Powers* with *The Wedding Singer* in 1998, which ultimately earned the company nearly \$80 million in North American theaters.¹⁹³ Not nearly as exuberant as *The Mask* or as intentionally obtuse as *Dumb and Dumber*, *The Wedding Singer* resembles *Austin Powers* to the extent that it draws on nostalgic clichés, in this case from the 1980s. Like the previous films, *The Wedding Singer* centers on an unimpressive male, a down-on-his-luck wedding singer played by Adam Sandler. The film spun off not one but two soundtrack albums, featuring a huge number of new wave and pop hits from the 1980s, including "Blue Monday" by New Order and "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" by Culture Club, and the first of these albums went double platinum. *The Wedding Singer*

followed Sandler's previous oddball comedies *Billy Madison* (1995) and *Happy Gilmore* (1996). Thus, as with Jim Carrey in *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* and Mike Myers in *Austin Powers*, *The Wedding Singer* featured a comic who had already effectively transitioned from television sketch comedy to Hollywood. More generally, *The Wedding Singer* showed that by 1998 New Line could consistently reach large audiences with star-powered, populist comedies featuring ineffectual, buffoonish white men.

NOT ALL FUN AND GAMES

By focusing on New Line's work in Black cinema, its corporate transformations, and success with lowbrow comedies, this chapter presents a mostly positive and somewhat streamlined picture of the company's movement through the 1990s. During this same time, however, New Line experimented with a number of other genres, sometimes successfully and other times disastrously. It released a number of darker dramas, for example, that did well at the box office, earned critical prestige, and in some cases both. Though not a financial success, *Glen-garry Glen Ross* gained positive critical attention for the performances of its cast in 1992, while Louis Malle's drama *Damage* earned much praise and surprisingly impressive returns in 1993. New Line achieved a major, breakout hit with the grim neonoir *Seven* in 1995, which earned more than \$100 million in North America and over \$200 million more internationally. With both *Boogie Nights* in 1997 and *Magnolia* in 1999, New Line continued to release prestige pictures with ensemble casts by emerging auteur Paul Thomas Anderson, and both films performed reasonably well financially and received numerous critical responses, awards, and award nominations.

In addition to star-filled dramas like these, New Line released several action, fantasy, and sci-fi films following its purchase by Turner and the Time Warner merger. New Line had a blockbuster with *Mortal Kombat* in 1995, based on the violent video game, which the company subsequently franchised into an animated cartoon in 1996, a less successful sequel in 1997, and a live-action television program in 1998. It released several action films in the 1990s starring Jackie Chan and centered on his martial arts skills and stunt work, including *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and *Jackie Chan's First Strike* (1997). Blending these martial arts films with its focus on Black comedies like *Friday*, New Line achieved global, blockbuster success with *Rush Hour* in 1998, which costarred Chan and Chris Tucker. It also had successes with the comic book adaptations *Spawn* and *Blade* (discussed further in chapter 5), which are notable for featuring Black characters and Black actors in the lead roles.

However, a sizable number of New Line's star-driven, high-concept action films failed at the box office. The fall of 1996 was unusually bad for the company, when it released *The Island of Dr. Moreau* in August, *Last Man Standing* in September, and

The Long Kiss Goodnight in October. Each of these films was expensive, boasted big-name stars like Marlon Brando and Bruce Willis, and featured set pieces full of violence and special effects. Yet each earned less than half of its overall cost: *The Island of Dr. Moreau* cost \$65 million to produce and market and earned \$28 million; *The Long Kiss Goodnight* cost about \$85 million to produce and promote and earned \$34 million; *Last Man Standing* cost \$67 million to produce and market and earned less than \$20 million.¹⁹⁴ New Line bombed again in 1998 with the sci-fi movies *Dark City* and *Lost in Space*, the latter of which earned \$67.5 million in North American theaters against a \$90 million budget, the most the company had spent on any film to that point.¹⁹⁵

These failures gained considerable attention in the press and were regularly cited in the ongoing discourse about New Line's identity and the company's "fit" in Time Warner and Hollywood more generally.¹⁹⁶ Many articles found New Line lacking by multiple measures, as it was neither fully mainstream nor completely marginal. But an article in *Variety* from 1998, leading up to *Lost in Space*, offered many insights about New Line's cultural and industrial transformation. Noting that New Line was "allowed" to operate independently *within* Time Warner because it had secured separate lines of credit with major banks, the article asserted that workers at the company now adopted a "corporate look" to match their mainstream status: "Shaye now sports an uncharacteristic suit and tie, while president and chief operating officer Michael Lynne shows off New Line cufflinks."¹⁹⁷

The article unknowingly foreshadowed the company's upcoming success with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy when it characterized New Line's evolving business strategies: "Just like the big boys, New Line is looking for 'event' projects that have multi-dimensional potential."¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the story noted New Line's increasing revenues from international markets, which rose from \$15.8 million in 1990 to \$286 million in 1997, as well as the company's many dealings with international distributors and television networks. As chapter 5 details, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy brought together all of New Line's efforts to create global blockbusters and transmedia franchises. However much New Line might still operate "independently" and take on projects that other studios might not, the article suggested that, as of 1998, "New Line has become a microcosm of the synergy that [Time Warner] has attempted through its merger with Turner."¹⁹⁹ New Line was a neither-nor entity: neither Hollywood nor indie; neither inside nor outside; neither mainstream nor marginal. It was an embodiment of Conglomerate Hollywood in the 1990s, with its parallel business strategies and often troubling cultural politics.

“Upscale” Cinema

Fine Line Features and the Indie Boom of the 1990s

In what is likely the first official memorandum Ira Deutchman issued to New Line COO Michael Lynne, dated January 28, 1991, the executive marked the document with some telling marginalia.¹ Deutchman had joined the New Line organization the previous month to serve as president of Fine Line Features, a new division within New Line designed to “acquire, market and distribute upscale adult-oriented films.”² Formed amid the swirl of organizational transformation in which Lynne officially joined New Line and the company expanded into television and home video, Fine Line intended to distinguish itself as a platform for high-quality, specialized “indie” cinema, aiming to compete with companies like Miramax and Orion Classics.³

Deutchman’s 1991 memo is on company stationery topped with the NEW LINE CINEMA title. Deutchman used a pen to strike out NEW and CINEMA, and above these words wrote FINE and FEATURES, creating an improvised letterhead for the specialty division. Adding a line upon lines, and yet keeping “LINE” intact, these marks negated but did not erase New Line while they added Fine Line to the picture. In philosophy and critical theory, such marks are called putting something “under erasure,” a practice popularized among thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. As in those more cerebral instances, Deutchman’s marks on the memo create a palimpsest of overlapping signs, a simultaneous copresence that threatens the internal integrity of the individual elements. It is a stretch to say that Deutchman’s marginalia deconstructs the New Line brand or logo, and also too much to say that Fine Line Features deconstructed New Line’s industrial and cultural identity in the 1990s. But Deutchman’s marks do suggest some of the complexities of Fine Line’s creation, and Fine Line’s history disrupts the narrative presented about New Line thus far.

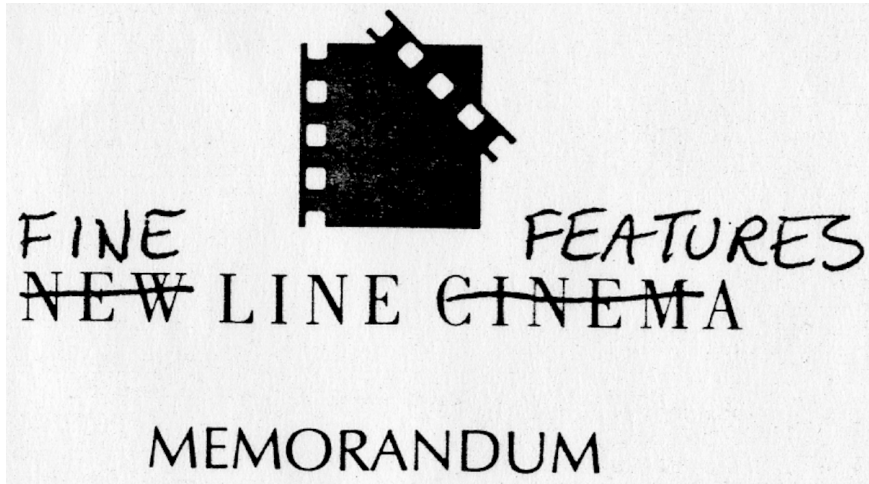


FIGURE 16. Fine Line Features carved a new space within New Line Cinema for artistically sophisticated films. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Ira Deutchman Papers.

As a division aiming for a prestigious cultural register high above the sewers of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and the dark boiler room of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Fine Line provided a new aspect to New Line. In some ways, though, Fine Line represented a *return* to form for New Line, which had distributed “quality” films in the 1970s, among other genres in its very mixed catalog. Internal heterogeneity had been a long-standing quality of New Line Cinema, from the films of Lina Wertmuller to those of John Waters. From this view, Fine Line simply institutionalized the organization’s enduring eclecticism. As a new division of New Line Cinema, focusing on films from which New Line now largely abstained, however, Fine Line embodied New Line’s growing logic of *incorporative heterogeneity*. That is, the division represents the company’s expansion through its dedication to new, distinct film types in its repertoire. As a specialty cinema division, in particular, Fine Line was especially devoted to heterogeneity, as so much independent cinema gains industrial and cultural value through peculiarity and distinction. Further, Fine Line’s emplacement inside the increasingly corporatized and conglomerated New Line Cinema of the 1990s aligns with the trend of specialty and indie cinema coming under the rule of media conglomerates during that decade.

As many critics and scholars have discussed, specialty and “indie” cinema attained remarkable importance in the 1990s. Yet, with the exception of Yannis Tzioumakis, critics and scholars have not looked closely at Fine Line, which played a crucial role in shaping independent cinema during this decade.⁴ Alisa Perren has explored how Miramax shaped the indie film scene and altered the operations of Hollywood in the 1990s.⁵ Perhaps no independent distributor operating in that decade was more devoted to legend building than Miramax. The company brought

new attention and financial rewards to independent films, with such noteworthy films as *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *Clerks* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Kids* (1995), and *The English Patient* (1996). But the field of specialty distribution was bigger than Miramax, and Fine Line played an active role in this scene. In addition to Miramax, Fine Line competed with independents like the Samuel Goldwyn Company, Gramercy Pictures, and October Films, as well as new Hollywood indie divisions, such as Sony Pictures Classics and Fox Searchlight Pictures.⁶

This chapter examines Fine Line Features from its beginnings in 1990 to the early 2000s when the division floundered and fell apart under the leadership of Mark Ordesky, who was occupied with New Line's production of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003). Given the dramatic way Fine Line's slate dwindled under Ordesky's tenure, this chapter focuses especially on 1991–98, which coincides with the “indie boom” of the 1990s and is also when the relationship between Hollywood and specialty cinema transformed definitively. During the first half of the decade, Fine Line carved out a distinct space for English-language “quality” movies in the United States, with hits like *The Player* (1992) and *Hoop Dreams* (1995), as well missteps like *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993). The division also contributed markedly to the “New Queer Cinema” of the era with films like *Swoon* (1992).⁷ Although Fine Line struggled from the mid-1990s onward, particularly after it engaged in more original productions rather than solely distributing films it *acquired*, the division continued to make a mark in indie cinema with films like *Shine* (1996), David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1997), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

During an era when specialty cinema broached “mainstream” movie culture in new ways, Fine Line fostered a cinema in which “quality” was a quality all its own, distinct from Hollywood movies and from the more sensationalist films and marketing practices of Miramax. At a time when notions of “indie” underwent considerable change, including a shift toward a “cinema of cool,” represented by the films of Robert Rodriguez, Kevin Smith, and Quentin Tarantino, Fine Line offered a more considered, sometimes critical vision for specialty cinema.⁸

AN INFLECTION POINT FOR INDEPENDENT CINEMA

The year 1989 represents a notable conjuncture of forces that spurred great changes in independent film. A whirlwind of activity brought together Miramax, the film *sex, lies, and videotape*, and the US Film Festival—later known as Sundance.⁹ The trajectory of *sex, lies, and videotape* through culture helped to crystallize certain understandings about indie film in general. Independently produced for \$1.2 million by first-time director Steven Soderbergh, *sex, lies, and videotape* quickly garnered attention when it debuted at the festival in January. Miramax acquired the film shortly thereafter and, from there, created considerable marketing and media buzz by highlighting its most commercially exploitative elements in a high-concept

mode of marketing.¹⁰ After winning the Palme d'Or at that year's Cannes Film Festival, the film earned \$24 million in North American theaters.

Sex, lies, and videotape held the promise that oddball, intelligent, low-budget films by young directors could be profitable, and the movie helped position Sundance as the launch pad for such breakout successes. Perren writes that “*sex, lies, and videotape* served as both an example and a model for the future of the low-budget film scene” because it demonstrated the commercial potential for “quality” specialty cinema as an alternative to B-grade independent films and Hollywood blockbusters.¹¹ The film's success at festivals and in theaters also established Miramax as a shrewd company that could market and advertise unusual material in such a way that it shaped what counted as “cool,” “artistic,” and “edgy” in the cinema at the time. Sundance, Miramax, and *sex, lies, and videotape* mutually reinforced their respective identities, and all three were “indie.” Indie was smart, indie was slick, indie was young, indie was commercial.

However sudden this conjuncture appeared, a longer process laid the groundwork for this turning point and, more specifically, for New Line's creation of Fine Line. Several small, mostly New York-based distributors focused on offbeat films in the 1970s, such as Cinema 5, and other independent companies and studio specialty divisions fostered a space for “alternative,” “artistic,” “quality” cinema in the 1980s, including Cinecom, Circle Releasing, Island Pictures, United Artists Classics, Orion Classics, and others.¹² Distributors such as these shaped specialty cinema with critical and financial hits such as *Blood Simple* (1984), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), *A Room with a View* (1986), and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). Thus, while it remains true that 1989 set the stage for a new era of independent film, the industrial and artistic accomplishments of the previous decade laid a fertile ground upon which Sundance, Miramax, and Steven Soderbergh could achieve such success and attention.

The formation of Fine Line also drew on the work and accomplishments occurring in independent film through the 1980s, marked particularly by Deutchman's appointment as division head. During the 1970s, Deutchman attended Northwestern University and worked as a programmer for a film society there. After graduating, Deutchman was employed at Cinema 5, where his duties included working on acquisitions for the company, designing advertising materials, and handling financing, among other tasks. Cinema 5 released *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Pumping Iron* (1977) during his time there. Deutchman joined United Artists Classics in 1981, where he worked on the marketing of such films as *Diva* (1981) and *The Last Metro* (1981). Deutchman cofounded Cinecom in 1982, a company designed to operate in the same specialty arena as Cinema 5 and United Artists Classics. Cinecom enjoyed a remarkable run with an eclectic mix of art house fare through the 1980s. The company handled reissues like *Metropolis* (1927), documentaries like *Comic Book Confidential* (1988), socially conscious dramas like *El*

Norte (1983), and performance films like *Stop Making Sense* (1984) and *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987). The company scored a big hit with the period drama *A Room with a View*, which earned over \$20 million at the box office and \$4 million in profit for Cinecom in 1985.¹³ The film won multiple BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards, including Best Picture, Best Actress, and Best Costume Design, and several Academy Awards.

Deutchman left Cinecom to form the Deutchman Company in March 1989, a consulting firm that assisted independent filmmakers and distributors with production and marketing. Deutchman's work in this capacity put him at the center of the independent cinema "boom" in 1989–90, most conspicuously because Miramax hired him to aid in the launch and release of *sex, lies, and videotape*. From May through July 1989, Deutchman advised Bob and Harvey Weinstein about how Miramax might coordinate press coverage of the film, how the company should handle print and trailer advertisements, and how it should handle publicity related to the film's appearance at Cannes.

Deutchman wanted to push the film as "sexy," though perhaps with more restraint than the final ads displayed. In one memo, for instance, Deutchman advised that the key art for the film should be, "Simple, clean, classy, good use of the attractive faces, sexy without going overboard."¹⁴ Deutchman continued to uphold this notion of classiness as he helped Miramax adjust the trailers for the film. In another memo he stated that the trailer should emphasize the film's entertainment value, "without crossing the line to make the film look like it's smutty, or silly or shallow," which elicited an extremely defensive response from Harvey Weinstein.¹⁵ By July, however, Deutchman wrote, "I think the final trailer is terrific," and that he was "very fond of" the print ad layout.¹⁶ These discussions help illustrate Deutchman's approach to marketing specialty cinema: as "classy" and "sophisticated" and avoiding sensationalism. These exchanges foreshadow some of the ways Fine Line would differentiate itself from Miramax.

Deutchman first connected with New Line in an official capacity while working as the producer's representative for Whit Stillman's debut, *Metropolitan*. New Line acquired the film's distribution rights after it gained significant attention at the 1990 Sundance festival. New Line then hired Deutchman to plan the film's marketing and distribution.¹⁷ New Line released the film in late summer 1990, and it earned over \$1 million as it played through the fall.¹⁸ Deutchman consulted on several other New Line films through that season, including *Pump Up the Volume*.

To the extent that New Line was considered "The House That Freddy Built" in the early 1990s, Fine Line significantly complicated that understanding.¹⁹ When New Line launched Fine Line and hired Deutchman, the company issued a press release that aimed to discursively establish Fine Line's industrial identity and the division's contribution to the legend of New Line Cinema.²⁰ First, the press release

established Fine Line's pedigree by publicizing Deutchman's lengthy history in specialty cinema and connecting the division to previous New Line projects, including *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*. It detailed that Liz Manne, who had worked at the Deutchman Company and Cinecom and had launched important films in those positions, would play a key role at Fine Line. The press release also suggested that Fine Line and New Line had a synergistic organizational relationship that would maximize their individual capabilities. And the announcement referred to the contemporaneous market for "indie" cinema as "emerging," "expanding," and capable of reaching a new "plateau." In this regard, the press release fell in line with public discourse about "indie" as a burgeoning commercial market and demonstrates that New Line intended to react strongly and quickly to this new landscape for specialty films.

Shaye asserted that Fine Line simply extended New Line's long-term strategy of cultivating "niche" audiences with "niche" films, but admitted that, recently, New Line had been devoted to more "commercial" films like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *House Party* (both 1990).²¹ In this regard, Shaye and the press coverage discursively aligned Fine Line closely with the overall shift in the entertainment media business at this juncture, which increasingly targeted multiple, distinct audiences while also trying to attract general audiences. Moreover, Shaye's comments suggest that the creation of Fine Line represents a strategic move to *enhance* New Line's efforts to enter mainstream cinema by cordoning off resources unrelated to that effort. Almost but not quite a paradox, Fine Line expanded the niches for this niche company at the same time that the division allowed New Line to move beyond niche movies.

Fine Line quickly assembled a robust roster of films, many inherited from New Line, comprising English-language productions that ranged greatly in quality.²² The New Line transfers included *The Rapture* (1991), *Hangin' with the Homeboys* (1991), and *Shadow of China* (1989). But Fine Line also inherited Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and acquired Hal Hartley's *Trust* (1990) and Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990). These three films helped establish a formula for Fine Line, namely, offbeat, English-language films by auteurs with established reputations. Although Fine Line did not follow this template in every case, enough of the company's films conformed to this model that it distinguished the division during the first years of the 1990s. Fine Line continued in this vein through 1991, assembling a slate that included Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1991), Ken Loach's *Riff-Raff* (1991), Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1992), Spaulding Gray's *Monster in a Box* (1992), Hal Hartley's *Simple Men* (1992), and Whit Stillman's *Barcelona* (1994), along with films by emerging directors, including *Proof* (1991), *Swoon*, and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993). Although several of these films performed badly at the box office, en masse they bolstered Fine Line's reputation as a solid force in specialty cinema.

“A PERFECT FINE LINE MOVIE”:
THE PLAYER AND PRESTIGE

Two films in particular, however, made Fine Line’s first years especially auspicious, *My Own Private Idaho* and Robert Altman’s *The Player* (1992). Together, they established Fine Line’s industrial identity and reputation for high-quality, English-language cinema. Fine Line acquired *The Player* in February 1992 and released it to much fanfare in April. An internal memo declared that *The Player* “has overnight become our most important film of the year.”²³ Whereas Miramax, Sundance, and *sex, lies, and videotape* all helped define one another, *The Player* helped define Fine Line and cement the company’s relationship to the larger film industry. It was sophisticated without being aesthetically demanding. With only English-language dialogue, it required no subtitles. It featured numerous recognizable performers and stars. It came from an established auteur, and indeed the film reestablished Robert Altman as a visionary director perhaps even more than it established Fine Line’s industrial reputation.²⁴ Such characteristics marked the film as “quality” cinema, but in just the sort of way that made it feasibly accessible to broader audiences.

Based on a novel by Michael Tolkin, *The Player* is a dark comedy that tells the story of a scruple-less Hollywood executive, played by Tim Robbins, who gets embroiled in covering up a murder he commits. The film presents a deeply cynical and satirical picture of the business machinations and cultural behaviors of Hollywood workers. It features numerous scenes of writers pitching stories of questionable value to calculating producers, producers sabotaging one another’s careers, and other Hollywood workers engaging in professional and personal gossip. Numerous stars appear in short cameo appearances throughout the film, including John Cusack, Anjelica Huston, and Burt Reynolds; megastars of the era Julia Roberts and Bruce Willis also appear in a film-within-the-film at the end as emblems of commerce trumping creativity in Hollywood.

These cameos, as well as the level of detail found in *The Player*, allow it to appear as a convincing portrayal of Hollywood. Simultaneously, the film’s cynical plot and tenor denounce Hollywood’s norms and priorities. Although the film’s critical stance can be attributed to the writer and director, this sense of disapproving authenticity also aligns with Fine Line’s identity within movie culture. *The Player* and Fine Line alike projected an intelligent alternative to the excesses, vapidness, and crass commercialism of Hollywood, while simultaneously upholding a cinephilia strong enough to be concerned with and critical of movies in the first place.

Fine Line made a splash immediately upon acquiring *The Player* in January 1991, with publications reporting that the company got the film for around \$5 million, beating out multiple Hollywood studios as well as Miramax in a bidding war for the film.²⁵ Some coverage expressed “surprise” that it was Fine Line, and not

New Line, that took the film, and indeed there was debate between the companies about which would distribute *The Player*.²⁶ Just as important, public discussions pointed to Fine Line's emerging identity as distinct from New Line. One news article quoted Deutchman as saying, "We think 'The Player' is a perfect Fine Line movie."²⁷ Fine Line quickly began developing a strong legend of its own.

Because Altman had organized publicity events while Fine Line was still acquiring the film, the company had to work quickly to put together its own, organized promotion and release strategy. Fine Line planned for a highly tailored platform release of the film on a handful of screens in New York and Los Angeles, then to widen the release to two hundred more theaters after a few weeks. Early promotional work included print advertising aimed at the "upscale audience" so frequently invoked in public and internal discussions about Fine Line.²⁸ In addition, the company planned to have Altman appear at public events in more than ten major cities.²⁹ In this approach, characteristic of specialty films, Fine Line drew on the cult of auteurism as part of its marketing.

Fine Line also did massive outreach to media figures and outlets.³⁰ The company held multiple screenings for newspaper, magazine, and television critics, also a typical promotional activity for "quality" films. It coordinated with dozens of publications and television programs in attempts to have these venues cover some aspect of the film, whether it was an interview with Altman, a bio piece about one of the actors, or a behind-the-scenes account of the production of this behind-the-scenes film. On this front, Fine Line's promotional reach was wide-ranging and included industry-oriented publications like *Variety* and *Premiere*; high-end venues like *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and the *Charlie Rose* show (1991–2017); and more mass-market publications and programs like *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsweek*, and *Nightline* (1980–).³¹

Altman's auteur status played a key role in the marketing of *The Player*, but the posters for the film focused mainly on its dark comic tone, its reflexivity vis-à-vis the movie business, and the ensemble cast. Fine Line created different posters and print ads as the film's theatrical run extended through the summer of 1991, as a means of keeping the film "visible."³² They all displayed a celluloid strip tied into a noose hanging above a silhouetted Los Angeles skyline, suggesting the film's connection to movies and moviemaking and giving a winking sense of danger. In later versions of the poster, Tim Robbins appeared lounging in the crook of the noose, wearing a suit and talking on a cell phone. These later posters and some newspaper ads also featured pictures of many of the cast members, rather than just their names, as well as glowing quotes from reviews. The posters featured several different catchphrases, including "Everything you've heard is true!" suggesting that the film provided an accurate and scandalous view of Hollywood. Some newspaper ads featured the phrase "The stars are out in your neighborhood!" similarly suggesting that *The Player* provided intimate access to the secluded world of moviemaking.

The trailer features numerous short moments from the film that convey its humor, its mysteriousness, and its negative assessment of creativity (or lack of it) in Hollywood. It interweaves a narration of the film's premise with snippets from many of the film's different "pitch" scenes, colliding the voiceover with adjectives and references used by the characters in an ironic montage of phrases. It also showcases several of the film's cameos, including Malcolm McDowell, Cher, and Nick Nolte. A television trailer uses similar devices, but, instead of narrating the premise of the film, it quotes numerous positive reviews for the film, alternating between positive phrases from the reviews, such as "masterpiece," "smart," and "sophisticated," with those found in the film, including "funny" and "we're going to have to have a little sex in this picture." Thus this television trailer appealed to viewers as savvy, in-the-know, discerning consumers whose tastes rise above the clichés found in typical Hollywood films.

Supported by this marketing and numerous positive reviews, *The Player* did well when it debuted. As planned, Fine Line expanded the film's release to a few hundred screens after a few weeks, and it earned \$2.4 million in less than three weeks. For context, seven Hollywood releases grossed more than \$100 million each that year, but *The Player's* returns certainly compared well to other indie films of the time. *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instance, grossed just over \$2 million during its entire theatrical run. Internal memos and public reporting indicate that Fine Line hoped *The Player* would break out beyond the limited market for specialty films. However, press coverage predicted the film would play well to cinephile audiences on the coasts but "die in the heartland."³³ Another story in the *Los Angeles Times* carried the title "Sure, It's Juicy in Hollywood but How Will it Player in Peoria?"³⁴

In fact, when Fine Line first released *The Player* in April in selected theaters in Los Angeles and New York, it also released the film on around twelve screens in Denver to see whether it could succeed in a "mainstream" media market in "middle America."³⁵ Fine Line held advance screenings for newspaper critics in the area, and coordinated reviewers to interview Altman as a means of gaining their support.³⁶ In addition to placing ads in area newspapers, as well as on local radio, television, and cable stations, the company held several free promotional screenings in local theaters and distributed tickets to local film society members. The insights provided by these experiments in Denver were apparently quite detailed, and Fine Line learned that the film "could achieve a solid following in upscale suburban theaters, but in blue collar neighborhoods this black tale of Hollywood would fall flat."³⁷ The film's audience was shaped by income, it seemed, prompting Fine Line to attune its distribution plan to the class compositions of cities and particular neighborhoods.

Fine Line expanded *The Player's* release in May to include theaters that Deutchman said were "hand-picked by New Line's distribution department in zones where we think we can make money" and that avoided "marginal areas."³⁸ Specific sites that proved successful included Washington, DC, Dallas, a suburb north of

Detroit, a theater outside Chicago that *Variety* called an “upscale suburban venue,” and, despite previous conjecture about the film’s potential, Peoria.³⁹ This expansion into additional theaters took place during the exact moment of the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992, following the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. *Variety* reported that *The Player*’s run in Los Angeles “was, of course, interrupted because of the curfew” imposed in that city due to the public violence.⁴⁰ Such timing appears conspicuous in light of *The Player*’s depiction of Hollywood as a cutthroat fantasyland wholly detached from reality, a reality that now included massive social unrest just down the road from real Hollywood studios. Moreover, the film succeeded in “upscale” theaters across the country, at a physical and cultural remove from areas like South Central Los Angeles.

Ultimately *The Player* played in over 430 theaters around the country and earned more than \$21 million, making it Fine Line’s biggest hit until *Shine* displaced it in 1996.⁴¹ *The Player* stood as one of the most successful specialty films of 1992, beating other noteworthy films such as *El Mariachi* and *Reservoir Dogs*, but behind *Howards End*. With its reputation well established, Fine Line endeavored to earn *The Player* additional prestige and awards. The film was selected to play in competition at that year’s Cannes festival in mid-May, when it was still in its theatrical run in the United States. The film received a standing ovation when it screened at the festival, and Robert Altman won the Best Director prize and Tim Robbins won Best Actor.⁴² *The Player* continued to earn acclaim during the award season in 1993. It won the Best Director and Best Film awards at the New York Film Critics Circle Awards, as well as Golden Globes for Best Comedy or Musical and Best Actor for Tim Robbins. It also got Best Feature from among the Independent Spirit Awards, and author Michael Tolkin won a Writers Guild of America Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Further, the film was placed on more than one hundred film critics’ lists of the best films of 1992.⁴³

With the award season in mind, Fine Line re-released *The Player* in twenty-five cities across the United States during the holiday season of 1992.⁴⁴ An internal memo from February 1993 stated: “The re-release is not making as money as we had hoped [*sic*], but it is definitely having its intended effect of keeping the film in the minds of Academy voters. The award season is almost over, and the results so far have positioned the film as a favorite in most of the major categories for the Oscars.”⁴⁵ Fine Line also released the film as a double feature with New Line’s *Glen-garry Glen Ross* in select Los Angeles theaters just prior to the Academy Awards, and advertisements declared it was, “the most acclaimed double feature in town!”⁴⁶ Moreover, Fine Line delayed the home video release of *The Player* to match with the lead-up to the Academy Awards in March.⁴⁷

The film was nominated for Oscars in Best Directing, Best Editing, and Best Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published. Some in the press treated it as a snub that the Academy did not nominate the film for Best Picture. One writer opined that Miramax’s hit *The Crying Game* had displaced the film in

this category and bemoaned this “single most outrageous oversight in this year’s Oscar competition.”⁴⁸ This writer also suggested that Fine Line’s independence from—and the film’s critical stance toward—Hollywood had also contributed to the Academy’s choice not to nominate the film for Best Picture. Ultimately, *The Player* earned no Academy Awards.

Nevertheless, *The Player*’s critical and financial success bolstered Fine Line’s standing within the industry. By August 1992, *Variety* reported, “Fine Line has already risen to the top of its field as a distributor of sophisticated American art-house films.”⁴⁹ Likewise, in a memo about *The Player*’s award season successes, Deutchman signaled Fine Line’s importance in expanding New Line’s cultural legitimacy: “We have delivered what we promised in terms of profile and prestige.”⁵⁰ With *The Player*, Fine Line found an early hit that reflected the company’s intentions. It was a critical success that gained *some* interest beyond the specialty film market, but still encountered limitations with more general audiences and acceptance within the mainstream industry.

THE NEW QUEER CINEMA MARKET

The other early win for Fine Line was *My Own Private Idaho*, which contributed to the company’s industrial legend by signaling Fine Line’s inclination to work with queer cinema. Fine Line, in fact, helped construct and popularize the new queer cinema during this time. In 1991 and 1992, the division released a handful of films made by gay directors that centered on queer male characters, including *Edward II* and *Swoon*. The company continued its specialization in queer cinema through the following decade with such films as *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1997), *Trick* (1999), *Before Night Falls* (2001), and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), among others.

The marketing and distribution of *My Own Private Idaho*, *Swoon*, and *Edward II* occurred amid a flurry of filmmaking heralded as the New Queer Cinema by B. Ruby Rich in an essay published in the *Village Voice* and reprinted in *Sight and Sound*.⁵¹ Looking at the way films like *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Poison* (1991), and *The Living End* (1992) gained attention at international film festivals, Rich also discussed Fine Line’s *My Own Private Idaho*, *Edward II*, and *Swoon* in her account of this new cinema, which explored sexuality in novel and provocative ways. Rich’s article brilliantly contends with the institutional contexts in which these and other queer films were produced and viewed. But she attends more closely to the festivals than to the companies that acquired, marketed, and distributed these films. It is thus important to see how Fine Line shaped a public image for this new cinema and for queerness in cinema culture.

Notably, Rich’s work uses the term “queer” to describe a variety of sexual minorities and anti-heteronormative sexualities and practices—as well as films that depict such figures and practices. She deploys the words “gay” and “lesbian”

too, but uses “queer” in ways that appear to encompass these other descriptors. While some object to the way “queer” in such usage overlooks the particularities of and differences among a huge range of sexual practices and positionalities, it is important to note that Rich’s essay vitally participated in the conceptualization of “queerness” over time in relation to discourses of homosexuality, gayness, and lesbianism.⁵² My use of “queer” largely takes its lead from Rich’s in order to maintain historical fidelity in signaling a variety of non- and anti-normative sexual positionalities and films that convey them. Just as important, it is crucial to see how “queer,” “gay,” and related terms were deployed by Fine Line, in the public discourse about its films, and in relation to those involved in making and distributing these films. Fine Line and the films it released contributed to a shifting vocabulary about sexuality in the media during the 1990s.

Fine Line was not alone in releasing queer films in the 1990s, as other specialty distributors, such as Zeitgeist, Orion Classics, and especially Strand Releasing, released queer films during the decade that gained attention in the press, including *Jeffrey* (1995). Miramax, too, released Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* to much fanfare in 1992 for its “secret” of portraying a transgender character in a prominent role. *The Crying Game* also earned Miramax numerous awards and significant box office revenue in 1992 and 1993, the same years when critics and scholars held up *My Own Private Idaho*, *Edward II*, and *Swoon* as evincing the new queer cinema wave.

For Fine Line, films by and about queer subjects were part of its larger effort to distribute intelligent, alternative, and critical films. Yet the way the company discussed these films internally, advertised them publicly, and released them in theaters demonstrates a complicated contribution to the new queer cinema aesthetic and market for queer films. As Katherine Sender has discussed, the 1990s were an important time for the construction of “gay” and, to a lesser extent, “lesbian” as cultural and commercial entities through the work of ad agencies, magazine publishers, and related circulating media texts.⁵³ Conforming well to Sender’s analysis, Fine Line demonstrated a flexible and negotiated approach to presenting queer material for cinema audiences from a variety of social positions, backgrounds, and identities. Using an approach similar to what Sender has found in other realms of media culture, Fine Line blended “business” with “politics,” even if the company treated the two as independent in its internal communications.⁵⁴

New Line became involved in the production of *My Own Private Idaho* in 1990, prior to the founding of Fine Line. New Line had some background in queer cinema, having worked on films like *A Very Natural Thing* (1974), *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), and, in a very different register, the movies of John Waters. Although *Torch Song Trilogy* proved to be a financial dud, New Line had high expectations for it and released it with ambitions for awards season.⁵⁵ It appears that New Line’s interest in *My Own Private Idaho* was related to its efforts to produce more films with recognizable stars in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including *No Holds Barred*

(1989) and *Suburban Commando* (1991) with Hulk Hogan, and *Heart Condition* with Denzel Washington. In fact, New Line committed to producing *My Own Private Idaho*, budgeted at \$2.5 million, only after River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves joined the project.⁵⁶ Reeves's stardom had grown following his appearances in *River's Edge* (1986), *Parenthood* (1989), *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), and *Point Break* (1990). Phoenix was also a major teen idol, having appeared in a variety of Hollywood films as well as smaller dramas like Nancy Savoca's *Dogfight* (1991). As a pair, Reeves and Phoenix endowed *My Own Private Idaho* with recognizable names and a sense of youthful hipness.

My Own Private Idaho tells the story of two sex workers: Scott, who comes from a privileged background; and Mike, who is destitute, suffers from narcolepsy, and is in search of his mother, played by Reeves and Phoenix respectively. It has a loose, picaresque structure that accounts for the characters' encounters with both male and female clients around Portland, and follows them as they search for the mother in Idaho and Italy. The film's quiet, meditative tone echoes Van Sant's earlier film *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and is interspersed with more rambunctious scenes with various clients and with a gaggle of fellow hustlers and their leader, Bob, who is modeled on Shakespeare's Falstaff character. *My Own Private Idaho* also features several surreal vignettes, often occurring when Mike experiences visions during narcoleptic episodes. The film opens, for instance, with Mike wandering on a desolate, two-lane road in a barren landscape, presumably in Idaho, and hallucinates about his mother; in another such scene, Scott appears on the cover of a porn magazine and comes to life and speaks directly to the camera.

Deutchman had worked with queer cinema during his time at Cinecom, which distributed films like *Parting Glances* (1986), *Maurice* (1987), and *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984). Despite Deutchman's and New Line's previous work with queer film subjects, however, Fine Line's handling of *My Own Private Idaho* reveals a complex treatment of queerness in relation to specialty cinema. Fine Line appeared to value queer cinema because of an imagined overlap between the genre and indie film more broadly. Ron Becker has observed comparable logics at work in 1990s television programming, as "network executives incorporated gay and lesbian material into their prime-time lineups in order to attract an audience of upscale, college-educated and socially liberal adults," a formulation that sounds conspicuously like portraits of the indie film audience of the time.⁵⁷ In Fine Line's case, however, it seems the company valued artistic distinction and other qualities of "indieness" more highly than it did queerness, however much those qualities might overlap.

One sees these presumptions play out in Fine Line's handling of *My Own Private Idaho* from the very start. An internal memo indicates, for instance, that prior to the film's release, Fine Line thought that the director and stars offered "a great package" but that "the subject matter makes it a very tough sell."⁵⁸ Fine Line primarily conceived of *My Own Private Idaho* as an indie picture with a solid artistic

pedigree and treated the film's queerness as a commercial hurdle that needed to be overcome.

Fine Line launched *My Own Private Idaho* with a highly active festival run. Although the film was not accepted at Cannes, it gained praise and awards when it played at the Venice, Toronto, Chicago, and Deauville festivals in September and October 1991. Fine Line did not, however, enter *My Own Private Idaho* in festivals specifically dedicated to gay and lesbian films. When the film was not entered in the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film/Video Festival, the festival's director expressed disappointment with Fine Line and Van Sant. "Private Idaho is a gay film and they're not looking at the audience that first embraced Gus," the festival director said, referring to Van Sant's *Mala Noche* (1986), which had played at the festival previously.⁵⁹ The film's publicist, Mickey Cottrell (who also appears in the film as one of the clients), complicated the issue by saying, "The distributor doesn't want the film positioned as a gay film. . . . Then many people would be frightened away. It's better to have the critics say how wonderful it is in dealing with gay characters."⁶⁰ Thus, in its festival run, *My Own Private Idaho* was identified as indie *and* queer, with queerness being the secondary trait.

Fine Line initially placed the film in two theaters in New York City, where it did well on a per-screen average, and then expanded it to more than seventy screens around the country after a few weeks.⁶¹ The company spent \$1.5 million on newspaper, magazine, and television advertising and an additional \$350,000 on other marketing activities, including media appearances by the stars and a premiere screening and party attended by many young celebrities.⁶² Some of Fine Line's advertising for the film deflected attention from the film's sexual content and instead focused on its stars and auteur. A one-sheet, for instance, did not allude to the characters' work as prostitutes but rather played up the class differences between Scott and Mike.⁶³ Newspaper advertisements for the film likewise avoided reference to the characters' sexuality and featured bold close-ups of the two main stars and pull quotes from the film's many positive reviews. Print ads for the film also featured the slogan "Wherever, Whatever, Have a nice day," suggesting a Gen-X, slacker sensibility that aligned with the star personae of the lead actors.

In contrast, the theatrical trailer showcases moments when the characters engage romantically with both male and female characters. It also depicts several surreal interludes from the film, including a barn falling from the sky onto a highway. The trailer plays up the stars and emphasizes auteurism by noting that the film is "from the director of *Drugstore Cowboy*." The trailer ties this all together by highlighting moments from the film that suggest that family, and a search for belonging within a family, is the film's central theme. This includes interactions between Scott and his father, Mike's dreams of his mother, and dialogue in which Mike directly states that he wishes he had a normal family. For all that the trailer indicates that characters engage in nonheteronormative sexual behaviors and

gestures toward the film's stylistic oddities, it appears to qualify these markers of queerness and indieness with a conventional and universalizing ideology of "family" as a normative social formation. From another perspective, however, the film and the trailer's invocation of family resonated with contemporaneous discourses about "family of choice" that were prominent in the LGBTQ community.

Press coverage consistently scrutinized the film's representations of and relation to sex and sexuality. In some cases, the press considered these issues in relation to commercial and industrial considerations, such as when one reviewer asserted, "The biggest commercial gamble [Van Sant] takes is making his lead character gay. . . . For all the advances gay culture is making toward integrating with mainstream society, gay themes still aren't exactly box-office magic."⁶⁴ Another article noted that "Hollywood actors are notoriously paranoid about playing gay roles" and that Van Sant had to get the script directly to Phoenix because his agent refused to show it to the actor.⁶⁵ The press universally felt compelled to identify the actors as straight, and one writer even referred to them as "macho."⁶⁶ The critics frequently lauded the actors for taking the roles, as though doing so were a sign of bravery. After the film performed well at the box office, one commentator noted, "The fact that Reeves and Phoenix are playing bisexual and gay street hustlers, respectively, isn't hurting the film commercially."⁶⁷

The press consistently identified Gus Van Sant as "openly gay," with one story referring to him as "matter-of-factly gay."⁶⁸ When asked about the film's sexuality, however, the director was slippery and unproscriptive. He told *The Advocate*, "I think it would be odd to pigeonhole it as a gay film." Van Sant was similarly ambiguous in defining the characters, telling *The Advocate*, "I don't see [the characters] as gay or straight."⁶⁹ On occasion, he gestured toward the film's social relevance, in one case saying, "That's a good thing about filmmaking—you can comment on social issues and bring things up for discussion that people tend to shy away from." Then he quickly universalized this statement by adding, "Everyone can listen to a good story."⁷⁰

Reviews of *My Own Private Idaho* focused on elements that endowed it with artistic distinction as a "quality" film and thus helped to define the film as "indie." Critics held up Van Sant as a visionary auteur, and some compared him to David Lynch, John Waters, Jim Jarmusch, and the Coen brothers.⁷¹ Critics praised the film's acting and especially described River Phoenix's performance as exceptional.⁷² Many reviews gestured at its cultural prestige by discussing its use of Shakespearean elements, while others compared it to the works of Dickens or *Of Mice and Men*.⁷³ But reviewers commonly discussed these points of artistic "quality" alongside a concern with the film's queerness, holding *My Own Private Idaho* up as a representative text for understanding contemporary queer identity, the real-life queer community, and the politics of such representation. Several critics took issue with the film's representation of sexuality as problematically vague or unrealistic, and specifically noted its lack of reference to AIDS.⁷⁴

Cumulatively, however, the reviews were not able to pin down the sexuality of *My Own Private Idaho*. The film's fluid sexual identity was especially noted by the reviewer for *Gay Community News*: "Part of the trouble in looking at *My Own Private Idaho* as a 'gay film' is that it isn't a gay film, at least not in the usual sense of that over-used and under-explicated term."⁷⁵ He added, "Here we have an openly gay filmmaker who is avowedly not very interested in what is traditionally seen as a gay male sensibility and who has made a film that deals with some aspects of male homosexuality in a manner that is quite unlike what would be done by other gay or straight directors." Thus, for this reviewer, *My Own Private Idaho* was notable for explicitly expanding the bounds of male queer representation.

As the film entered the end of its theatrical run in February 1992, it had earned \$6 million at the box office and nearly \$1 million in pay television and other ancillary media revenues.⁷⁶ Fine Line expected to make over \$2.5 million in profit.⁷⁷ In addition, Phoenix won the Best Actor Award from the National Society of Film Critics, and the film won an Independent Spirit Award. Its success at festivals, in theaters, and with critics helped establish Fine Line as a strong force in the realm of specialty cinema, and, like *The Player*, it signaled the division's overall business strategy. A Fine Line memo from the end of 1991 asserted: "This is one inherited film [from New Line] that is a perfect example of everything a Fine Line film should be—a true art film that has promotable elements. . . . The most important aspects of the film were the director (almost always the case with a Fine Line film), the fact that it was different from anything else in the marketplace, and the fact that the stars gave us access to levels of press that seem unimaginable for a small independent film."⁷⁸ By this point, Fine Line estimated, *My Own Private Idaho* had become "the most profitable specialized film of the year" and was Fine Line's "first certifiable hit."⁷⁹

Fine Line picked up *Swoon* and *Edward II* in November 1991, as *My Own Private Idaho* was still playing in theaters.⁸⁰ The company handled these two films differently than it had *Idaho* in terms of business strategy and marketing. Directed by established gay auteur Derek Jarman, *Edward II* had already earned accolades at the Venice Film Festival when Fine Line acquired the film's North American theatrical rights.⁸¹ The film is adapted from Christopher Marlowe's play of the same title and dramatizes the political consequences of Edward's love affair with another nobleman. The film colors this narrative with stylistic oddities and anachronisms, especially in its costumes and music. A Fine Line memo identified *Edward II* as an "openly gay" film by "well-known British filmmaker Derek Jarman, who is dying of aids [*sic*]."⁸² By early 1992 the company's plans with the film were self-reflexive in regard to its queer subject. Indeed, by that point Fine Line was *responding* to press coverage that connected the company with a new wave of gay cinema. "[*Edward II*] should be the biggest 'downtown' film of the year," an internal memo noted, "getting major coverage in the gay press, the alternative press, and even in some mainstream press. Some publications are planning

stories about a new ‘trend’ toward ‘gay films’ breaking out into the mainstream, with ‘Idaho’ as the prime example. ‘Edward’ will be the focus of a lot of those articles, and Fine Line is being positioned as being on the cutting edge of marketing in that niche.”⁸³

This memo suggests that “New Queer Cinema” was crystallizing as an identifiable cinematic phenomenon due to an interaction among film festivals, film critics, and Fine Line and some other distributors. For its part, Fine Line initially worked in queer cinema as part of its practice of distributing modestly budgeted, artistically distinct, nonmainstream films, but as public discourse around queer cinema coalesced, the company took a more direct, self-conscious approach toward these films; this activity in turn helped the new queer cinema further cohere. Cultural politics impacted Fine Line, even while the company’s contribution to New Queer Cinema was conceived as “business” more than “politics.”

This memo makes it clear that Fine Line’s work in queer cinema aimed to appeal to viewers beyond an imagined gay audience. A later memo about *Edward II* made this intention still clearer: “Indications are very strong from the press, with the possible exception of the notoriously homophobic New York Times, which has yet to see it. . . . In the gay community, the release of this film is being greeted like the second coming. Our positioning at this point is to see how far we can cross it over to straight audiences without losing the core. The NY Times will probably be the key to whether that will be possible.”⁸⁴

Fine Line’s marketing for *Edward II* neither emphasized nor avoided the film’s sexual subject matter. The trailer highlights the film’s connection to the Marlowe play, with the narration calling it a “one of the jewels of the Elizabethan theater” and the imagery identifying it as a British costume drama with anachronistic flourishes. The trailer also highlights many scenes of kissing, as between Tilda Swinton and a man, but also kisses between male characters. The posters for the film centered on Swinton, and also highlighted that the film was by Jarman and adapted from the Marlowe play. In these ways, the promotion for *Edward II* situated it as a refined, sophisticated drama with a link to cultural heritage while also containing queer romance.

Critics locked onto the film’s queerness and asserted that it was a commentary on contemporary sexual politics and homophobia. In describing the film, they used words like “ideological statement,” “political,” and “audacious.”⁸⁵ Contrary to Fine Line’s concerns, the review in the *New York Times* leaned toward praise and stated that the “movie is a tract against the oppression of homosexuals through the ages, filmed by a director who is himself openly gay and living with AIDS.”⁸⁶ This connection to the AIDS epidemic and contemporary social activism about LGBTQ issues was magnified by the film’s inclusion of Annie Lennox performing “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye,” a song originally released as part of the *Red Hot + Blue* benefit album, proceeds from which went to organizations supporting HIV and AIDS awareness.



FIGURE 17. Focusing on the romance between Leopold and Loeb, *Swoon* won the Cinematography award at Sundance in 1992.

Edward II never gained the attention or financial success of *My Own Private Idaho*. The film's revenues dropped quickly after its first week of release, and by the end of its theatrical run it had not cleared \$1 million.⁸⁷ This was likely one of several factors that prompted Fine Line to adjust its strategy when it released *Swoon* later in the fall. Produced on a small budget and shot in 16-millimeter black-and-white, *Swoon* is a dramatic rendering of the Leopold and Loeb murders that focuses on the pair's romantic relationship. First-time director Tom Kalin had developed the film independently, but Fine Line joined with American Playhouse to provide additional funds for the film's completion.⁸⁸ *Swoon* gained attention when it played at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, where it was viewed in relation to Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, also playing at the festival, as well as *Poison* and *Paris Is Burning*, which had been at Sundance the previous year.⁸⁹ *Swoon* earned the Sundance award for Best Cinematography and won the Caligari Award at the Berlin Film Festival in February. In March, the film was chosen to play in the New Directors/New Films Series run by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art.

Although *Swoon* attracted such positive attention, including a positive review in the *New York Times*, Fine Line was cautious with it. One memo, written just prior to the film's theatrical release, stated: "We expect very big results from our first few weeks, and in major city situations. However, we are being realistic about how far this film can go, and are therefore keeping expenditures *very low*. This is a publicity driven film for a very specific and small audience. We'll make money on it, but it is inherently limited."⁹⁰

Guided by this conception of *Swoon* and its audiences, Fine Line was more direct in advertising the film's queerness than it had been with *My Own Private Idaho* and *Edward II*. Deutchman complained that the MPAA process for approving trailers meant "there was no way in the world that they were going to allow

us to be so overt about the gayness in the movie.”⁹¹ But the company used queer-ness as a salable feature of the film nevertheless. The trailer intersperses multiple scenes from the film with single-word intertitles that read “Geniuses,” “Murderers,” “Jews,” and finally “Queers.” The trailer enlivens these elements with a fast-tempo jazz song, giving the ad an upbeat, even humorous tone. Likewise, the film’s poster displays close-ups of the two lead actors, attended by the labels “Genius,” “Jew,” “Murderer,” and “Queer.” Directly invoking “queer” rather “gay” or “homosexual,” Fine Line’s ads directly reflect the fluctuating discourse around sexuality at the time. Both negative and positive reviews of *Swoon* noted the way the film used the Leopold and Loeb story to critique homophobia and other forms of prejudice against social “outsiders.”⁹²

Although *Swoon* was only a moderate success, it remained a touchstone for critics, commentators, and scholars looking for innovative representations of queerness in American cinema. Indeed, with *My Own Private Idaho*, *Edward II*, and *Swoon*, Fine Line made queer cinema a discernable aspect of its operations while helping queer films achieve greater cultural prominence. The company elevated queerness as a defining aspect of specialty cinema during the indie boom of the 1990s, and queer films remained a commercial focus for Fine Line until its dissolution.

NOT COOL

With its offbeat subject matter, dialogue-driven script, and a few recognizable faces from Hollywood, *sex, lies, and videotape* provided an aesthetic model for indie cinema in the 1990s. The film’s small budget, tight production schedule, and festival circulation provided an optimal business plan for specialty films, as well. One can see these formal and industrial strategies play out in any number of Fine Line releases, including *My Own Private Idaho*, *Night on Earth*, *Household Saints* (1993), or *Barcelona*. Yet a wave of films threatened to change the character and financial ambitions for specialty cinema as the 1990s went on. Alisa Perren observes that the indie cinema scene shifted toward a “cinema of cool” in the mid-1990s, with smaller-budgeted films, such as *Clerks*, made by male directors that focused predominantly on younger, quirky, verbose male figures.⁹³ A preponderance of the cinema of cool took on a film noir-ish character, and some of the movies even veered into action film territory, such as Robert Rodriguez’s *El Mariachi*. That film gained much attention for the director’s young age, the DIY production techniques employed by Rodriguez and his crew, its incredibly small budget, and its unusually well-choreographed action sequences. This film, *Clerks*, and others created a cultural narrative according to which one could make a hit film with credit cards, loans from family and friends, and little to no formal training in filmmaking—especially if one was a Gen-X male.

More than anyone, Quentin Tarantino embodied and incited this generic shift within indie cinema. Tarantino quickly gained widespread attention for directing *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992, which was successful on home video, and for writing the similarly violent, noir-infused *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). This streak reached a zenith with *Pulp Fiction* in 1994, which earned over \$100 million in North American theaters following a savvy marketing campaign from distributor Miramax.⁹⁴ Tarantino's films and screenplays appeared alongside a number of other modestly budgeted crime films at the time, including *El Mariachi*, *Kalifornia* (1993), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993), and, later, *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (1995) and *The Usual Suspects* (1995), which all added guns, crime, and grim plots to the flavor of indie cinema. This neonoir tendency continued in specialty cinema through the end of the decade, launching the careers of several other young male directors; cases include Danny Boyle's *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996), the Wachowski siblings' *Bound* (1996), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Hard Eight* (1997), Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), and Christopher Nolan's *Following* (1998) and *Memento* (2000).

Although the cinema of cool gained a lot of attention, it did not eliminate the continuing "cinema of quality." Perren cites Miramax's *The Piano* (1993) as a prime example of this ongoing trend. Under Deutchman's continued leadership through 1995, Fine Line deliberately abstained from the cinema of cool, and especially from neonoir, films. This was partly a matter of financial strategy, as Deutchman believed that the division should largely avoid trying to match the rapidly escalating acquisition prices that films were fetching in festival markets.⁹⁵ In a memo that described the division's upcoming plans for 1993, Deutchman wrote: "Our major competitor, Miramax, is aggressive to the extreme, which makes for a difficult equation—on the one hand it means that we have to be just as aggressive in order to compete, and on the other hand we can't allow their craziness to make us as rash as they sometimes can be."⁹⁶

Deutchman also noted that the financial success of indie films like *The Player* had prompted the major studios to move into the specialty cinema business and that they, along with Miramax, "contributed to the spending spree" that was raising prices in that market.⁹⁷ Those working at Fine Line perceived how the indie boom of the early 1990s was inciting a shift in Hollywood's strategy regarding specialty cinema and the niche markets it served. Yet, as it entered the mid-1990s, Fine Line continued to focus on modestly budgeted, English-language films that had potential to extend the bounds of the art house market but never competed directly with Hollywood.

This financial plan was paired with an aesthetic agenda that contrasted with the cinema of cool and neonoir dramas. In addition to saying that a number of recent specialty film hits were "sensationalistic or wildly audacious or both," the business plan for 1993 states: "The relative success of such extremely violent films as 'Reservoir Dogs' and 'Bad Lieutenant' is not relevant because I think that there is a

limited appetite for such films among serious moviegoers, and that appetite is further dampened by bad word-of-mouth for both films.”⁹⁸ This assessment displays a miscalculation about the kinds of specialty films that would become the biggest breakout hits. Fine Line remained committed to providing those whom it viewed as “serious moviegoers” with auteur-driven dramas.

Yet, at the same time that Fine Line flopped with movies like Van Sant’s *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993), violent neo noir films like *Pulp Fiction* garnered nearly Hollywood-level revenues. Moreover, many other companies took part in the cycle of violent neo noirs. October Films released *Killing Zoe* (1994) and *The Last Seduction* (1994). Miramax handled almost everything related to Tarantino, including *Four Rooms* (1995) and *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996). Hollywood studios distributed some violent neo noir films too, such as *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* from Warner Bros. and *Out of Sight* (1998) from Universal. Even New Line gained substantial revenues with the grim crime drama *Seven* (1995). Amid this increasingly competitive trend, pressure mounted for Fine Line to create another breakout hit like *The Player*. But in the mid-1990s the company stuck with less flashy dramas such as *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994), *Death and the Maiden* (1994), and *Total Eclipse* (1995), which did not gain the attention that other companies’ films did at the time.

The division broke this mold with *Hoop Dreams*, a three-hour documentary about two high school basketball players living in economic difficulty in the Chicago area. The film was produced over several years on a small budget that included financing from the Public Broadcasting System and the MacArthur Foundation.⁹⁹ Fine Line acquired it for less than a half million dollars in March 1994, following the film’s appearance at Sundance, where it won the Audience Award.¹⁰⁰ Fine Line was one of at least six distributors that vied to acquire it, making this a bit of a coup for the company.¹⁰¹

Documentaries were not a major element of the specialty film scene in the mid-1990s, so Fine Line’s work with *Hoop Dreams* was even more noteworthy. Deutchman said that *Hoop Dreams* entailed “the most complex marketing scheme we’ve ever pulled off.”¹⁰² The press noted not only that the film was a documentary but that it was unusually long and depicted social conditions that were not typical for art house cinema at the time, specifically young Black men playing basketball in “the inner city.”¹⁰³ Fine Line endeavored to build on the critical momentum the film attained, first at Sundance and then in October when it was chosen as the closing film at the New York Film Festival.

But elements of the marketing plan for *Hoop Dreams* deviated strongly from a more typical publicity campaign for a specialty film. In addition to placing ads in newspapers and on cable to attract “upscale, educated, discriminating movie consumers,” Fine Line secured a sponsorship for the film from sportswear company Nike.¹⁰⁴ Fine Line also attempted to draw on corporate “synergy” with Turner Broadcasting following Turner’s purchase of New Line in 1994. In addition

to cable, the Turner empire included the Atlanta Braves baseball team and the Atlanta Hawks basketball team, and Deutchman thought this offered opportunities for promoting *Hoop Dreams* to general sports fans.¹⁰⁵ Ironically, Fine Line got support from the Turner group only *after* securing the deal with Nike.¹⁰⁶ *Hoop Dreams* gained backing from the NBA as well, and trailers for the movie were shown in stadiums during games for the Hawks and the Golden State Warriors. Nike covered the expenses of promoting the film through radio campaigns around the country in which the stations gave away tickets to the film, soundtrack CDs, and Nike shoes.¹⁰⁷

Although corporate promotions, cross branding, and endorsements were common with Hollywood films, such deals were uncommon for specialty cinema. In a move perhaps even more unusual, Fine Line used Nike's sponsorship to engage in a targeted, grassroots marketing plan with local groups and communities. With Nike's support, Fine Line set up a call-in system that community groups could use to request tickets to the films. In addition, the company mailed fliers to thousands of schools, churches, and fraternal organizations.¹⁰⁸ Fine Line, with additional support from *Sports Illustrated*, also distributed thousands of classroom study guides to teachers and students, particularly aiming to reach teenagers in the Chicago area.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the marketing and promotion of *Hoop Dreams* represent an odd mixture of corporate synergy across multiple venues and participants and guerilla-style marketing. Fine Line incurred \$1.6 million in traditional print and advertising costs while spending only \$300,000 on other publicity and educational outreach.¹¹⁰

Hoop Dreams did well in theaters, initially playing in two and then expanding to nearly fifty theaters across the country after a couple of weeks. By the time it ended its theatrical run, the film had earned nearly \$2 million in theaters.¹¹¹ In a survey of forty film critics in the United States, *Hoop Dreams* was ranked the highest of all the year's films.¹¹² Siskel and Ebert gave the film two thumbs up, while Kenneth Turan called it a "landmark of American documentary film."¹¹³ Encouraged by critics' universal praise, Fine Line engaged in an intensive advertising campaign to get *Hoop Dreams* nominated for Academy Awards. In multiple ads in Hollywood trade magazines, the company pushed the envelope by campaigning for Best Picture, in addition to or in lieu of Best Documentary. In the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, Fine Line showcased *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* and *Death and the Maiden* alongside *Hoop Dreams* under a banner reading "For Your Consideration," and it specifically held up *Hoop Dreams* for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Editing, Best Cinematography, Best Score, and Best Original Song.¹¹⁴

Fine Line reached out directly to Academy members, sending around six thousand letters to specific individuals.¹¹⁵ The first of these letters urged, "It is, in part, because of [its] unprecedented reception that we ask you to consider and vote for 'HOOP DREAMS' in the Best Picture Category" and then directed the member to special Academy screenings of the film as well as to the theaters in Los Angeles

and New York where the film was still playing.¹¹⁶ Subsequent letters, mailed to thousands of Academy members, included videotapes of *Hoop Dreams* with the assumption that many of them had not seen the film in a theater.¹¹⁷ These letters asked, "Can a documentary film be nominated for Best Picture? The answer is YES . . . with your help."¹¹⁸ The company expanded the film's theatrical run to more than two hundred theaters in February 1995, before the announcement of Oscar nominations, by which point it had earned over \$3 million.¹¹⁹

This extraordinary effort was for naught. The *Chicago Tribune* reported, "Not only was [*Hoop Dreams*] ignored for the Best Picture nomination, for which it was a long shot candidate, but it was not even among the five nominees in the Documentary category."¹²⁰ The press treated it as a "shocking" snub that the film was overlooked for both Best Picture and Best Documentary. Some blamed the system by which the Academy nominated documentaries.¹²¹ Others blamed those Academy members who voted in the documentary category, which had a history of members overlooking popular and financially successful films.¹²² Interestingly, one article cited Fine Line's "brash" effort to get the film nominated for an Oscar, a tactic regularly used by Hollywood studios and independent distributors alike.¹²³

Hoop Dreams proved to be Fine Line's last great success under Deutchman's leadership. Although untypical of other specialty films at the time, the film was another example of Fine Line taking a niche film and extending its reach to new and bigger audiences. After winning a single Oscar in the editing category, *Hoop Dreams* played in theaters into the early summer of 1995 and earned nearly \$8 million at the box office, surpassing the revenue of Michael Moore's previous breakout documentary, *Roger and Me* (1989).¹²⁴ The film also sold well on home video, and in a sort of homecoming, PBS aired *Hoop Dreams* in 1995, followed by a reunion segment detailing what happened to the film's subjects following the production.¹²⁵ In summer 1995, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences modified the way documentary films can be nominated for an Oscar, apparently in response to the press coverage of *Hoop Dreams*.¹²⁶

MID-DECADE SHIFTS FOR FINE LINE AND SPECIALTY CINEMA

Ira Deutchman was dismissed as the specialty division's president as he and other Fine Line workers were in the middle of packing VHS tapes of *Hoop Dreams* to mail to Academy voters. The *Los Angeles Times* called Deutchman's departure "abrupt."¹²⁷ Rumors had circulated a year earlier that Deutchman might leave the company after distributing an unimpressive slate of films in 1993 and after *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* received a negative reception at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, but at that point he managed to sign a contract for an additional three-year term.¹²⁸ Yet, aside from *Hoop Dreams*, Fine Line continued to struggle in 1994 with films like *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* and *Death and*

the Maiden. The company's floundering contrasted sharply with Miramax's success with *Clerks*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Crow* (1994) from its Dimension division.

One report suggested that executives at Turner Broadcasting were dissatisfied with Fine Line's performance under Deutchman's leadership.¹²⁹ Whether or not it was a matter of Fine Line's new corporate situation, Deutchman's departure coincided with dramatic shifts in the indie film scene in the mid-1990s. Miramax and other independent distributors were achieving big hits, and Hollywood was transforming the industry with the creation of several specialty divisions. A story from 1996 noted, "Executives and agents say there has been a subtle shift in the kinds of independent films being distributed, a shift marked by more expensive productions, more mainstream films with top actors and a new awareness, even among the most feisty independent producers, of creative boundaries."¹³⁰

The scale of the market appeared to grow—or be inflated by the ambitions of companies working in the domain—and the pressure to create big hits out of specialty films was intense. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* earned over \$200 million in 1994, for example, a film that Fine Line had lost to Polygram/Gramercy. That company also scored with *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), a queer Australian road movie that would have fit well within Fine Line's catalog. Yet, if specialty cinema proved lucrative at this time, it was mainly the larger companies that benefited. As Perren details, many smaller, boutique distribution companies floundered and failed under the pressure of companies like New Line and Miramax, now part of major conglomerates, and even stronger companies like Goldwyn fell apart in the changing market.¹³¹ English-language specialty films *could* make blockbuster revenues, but not for everyone and not for Fine Line.

New Line changed the direction of its specialty division, appointing Ruth Vitale as Fine Line's president. Vitale was already an established industry executive, having worked at several media companies before joining New Line in 1992 as a senior VP of acquisitions. Moving to Fine Line, Vitale brought members of her New Line staff with her. Under her leadership, Fine Line appeared to take an approach more resembling New Line's business model at the time, which was becoming increasingly "commercial," as detailed in the previous chapter. The press talked about how Fine Line would be "much more aggressive" in the market.¹³² The division would release ten to twelve movies per year, half of which it planned to develop and *produce*, while also continuing to acquire films at festivals and film markets. Further, the types of films the division planned to produce were much larger and more expensive than previous Fine Line films, comparable to previous New Line films like *Corrina, Corrina* (1994) and *Don Juan de Marco* (1995).¹³³ The budgets for Fine Line films of this caliber were expected to be as high as \$15 million, considerably more than any of the division's previous acquisition or production costs.¹³⁴ Signaling the division's move toward the mainstream in both practical and symbolic terms, Fine Line opened a branch office in Los Angeles. The changing needs of the corporation appeared to reshape how heterogeneous Fine Line films would be.

As the division aimed for larger films with broader appeal, some working at the companies raised questions about what differences there would be between New Line and Fine Line moving forward. Similar questions had occasionally cropped up in the press in the past as far back as *The Player*, and Deutchman once noted that “New Line’s product in the last quarter of ’92 looked suspiciously like Fine Line Product.”¹³⁵ But Fine Line’s change in direction in the mid-1990s is more comprehensible if considered in light of the changes occurring at New Line after Ted Turner purchased the company. With New Line producing more populist comedies like *The Mask* (1994) and more films with notable stars like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), Fine Line’s films would remain smaller and more niche *in comparison*.

Fine Line continued distributing dramas from notable auteurs, like *Total Eclipse* from Agnieszka Holland and *Kansas City* from Robert Altman (1995), and queer films such as *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* and *Nowhere* by Greg Araki (1997). Yet Fine Line films also ventured into the noir cycle and also released several straightforward, middle-of-the-road films with bigger-name Hollywood stars. In the crime drama area, Fine Line released *Little Odessa*, starring Tim Roth and which won the Silver Lion awards at the Venice International Film Festival in 1994. It distributed the romantic drama *Frankie Starlight* (1995) with Matt Dillon and Gabriel Byrne, the romantic comedy *Pie in the Sky* (1996) with John Goodman, the drama *Carried Away* (1996) with Dennis Hopper and the romantic comedy *Feeling Minnesota* (1996) with Keanu Reeves, Vincent D’Onofrio, and Cameron Diaz. These films were narratively straightforward and formally unremarkable. They were inexpensive films within conventional genres, and all were failures at the box office.

Under Vitale, Fine Line also worked on some “edgy” indie films with provocative content and themes, an area of specialty cinema that Deutchman had avoided. In this regard, Fine Line appeared to take a cue now from competitor Miramax’s strategy of seeking publicity through controversy. As one example, Fine Line released *Gummo* in 1997, Harmony Korine’s directorial debut after writing *Kids*, which, as Perren explains, gained a notorious reputation. Although *Gummo* was less successful than *Kids* financially, it gained attention for its depiction of young people engaging in socially aberrant behavior. In many ways *Gummo* continues a long history of art cinema that depicts provocative themes, narratives, and characters. One might compare the film’s focus on social outsiders living in poverty to John Waters’s films in the 1970s, though *Gummo* has none of Waters’s knowing humor. Critics and other tastemakers both celebrated and renounced *Gummo* when it played at film festivals, and it earned praise from some reputable filmmakers like Gus Van Sant and Werner Herzog. While the look, feel, and dramatic content of *Gummo* is not unprecedented, it was unusual amid Fine Line’s catalog to that point.

One gets an even clearer sense of Fine Line’s mixed pursuit of prestige and scandal in the second half of the 1990s by comparing *Shine* and *Crash* (1997).

Whereas *Shine* had all the hallmarks of a traditional “quality” film, Cronenberg’s *Crash* developed a scandalous public reputation comparable to Miramax’s *Kids*. *Shine* is a biographical film about Australian pianist David Helfgott and dramatizes the personal and psychological challenges he faced in his childhood, teenage years, and as an adult; three different actors play Helfgott at these different stages, with Geoffrey Rush playing him as an adult. After depicting challenges he faced throughout his life, the last portion of the film turns upbeat and uplifting. The adult Helfgott finds a community of support at a local restaurant, where he plays piano on a regular basis and finds a romantic partner. The film closes with Helfgott performing at a “comeback” concert, where he is met with cheers from an enthusiastic audience.

Shine had many elements that could be found in other recent critically acclaimed specialty films. Fine Line had released a handful of films from Australia previously, including *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1993), *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1993), and *An Angel at My Table*. Miramax also had a run with Australian specialty films at the time, including *Strictly Ballroom* (1993) and *The Piano*. *Shine* is best compared to Miramax’s *My Left Foot* (1989), starring Daniel Day Lewis in a biographical drama about the artist Christy Brown, who struggles with cerebral palsy. Both films draw inspiration from real-world male figures who display creative talent in the face of disability and other challenges. Both films feature dynamic performances from male actors who have no disability, and critics celebrated both actors for convincingly embodying a character with physical and psychological differences from themselves.

Fine Line promoted *Shine* as a prestige picture with cultural importance through its connection to the arts, but also as a film that had universal appeal through its story of overcoming adversity. Whereas the trailer focused on Helfgott’s piano playing, social oddness, and conflict with his father, the poster and print ads for the film conveyed uplift and optimism with pictures of Geoffrey Rush appearing jubilant. Fine Line acquired *Shine* at the 1996 Sundance festival, following a bidding war with Miramax. A Fine Line executive said at the time, “It’s a brilliant film with Oscar-caliber performances.”¹³⁶ Fine Line campaigned heavily for the film with critics, members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and other awards institutions throughout the awards season of 1996–97.¹³⁷ Both Rush and the film’s director did hundreds of interviews throughout the year and mounted other promotional events with Academy members, critics, and other high-powered film industry workers.¹³⁸

Shine earned over \$35 million in theaters around the world and appeared on hundreds of US critics’ top-ten lists.¹³⁹ The film was nominated for seven BAFTA awards, winning in the categories of Best Actor and Best Sound; it was nominated for eleven Australian Film Institute Awards, winning nine; it was nominated for five Golden Globe Awards, winning one, again, in the Best Actor category. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director,

amid intense competition with films like Miramax's *The English Patient* (1996), Gramercy's *Fargo* (1996), and October Films's *Secrets and Lies* (1996). *Shine* won only a single Oscar, in the Best Actor category for Geoffrey Rush, while Miramax won the night with *The English Patient*, which received nine Oscars.

Shine's circulation through culture contrasted markedly with Fine Line's much-anticipated and much-discussed film from the same period, David Cronenberg's *Crash*. Fine Line acquired the North American theatrical rights to *Crash* while it was still in development in 1995, and it was regarded at the time as one of the "hottest projects" available in festival markets.¹⁴⁰ Based on the novel by J. G. Ballard, the film tells the story of several people who form something of a sex cult aroused by car crashes. A number of Hollywood and indie film stars joined the project, including James Spader in the lead male role, Holly Hunter, Rosanna Arquette, Elias Koteas, and the lesser-known Deborah Unger.

The press treated the film as provocative before its premier at Cannes, with one article predicting, "controversy may follow Cronenberg's dark and erotic 'Crash.'"¹⁴¹ When *Crash* did screen, reports indicated that some in the audience walked out and many who remained booed during the credits.¹⁴² Although *Crash* played in competition, it did not win any of the festival's conventional awards. Instead, the jury, which was headed by director Francis Ford Coppola, gave the film a Special Jury Prize for "audacity, originality and daring."¹⁴³ Coppola stated that "certain members of the jury abstained [from voting] very passionately, but we felt it was important to give an award to a film even though, in trying to find some truth in the human condition, it offended—in the great tradition, as we know."¹⁴⁴ Todd McCarthy's review after the Cannes screening was negative and doubtful of the film's financial potential.¹⁴⁵ Fine Line even considered reselling *Crash* to another distributor, given the reaction it had garnered at Cannes.¹⁴⁶

Crash's notoriety continued to grow when the MPAA rated it NC-17. By 1996, distributors commonly appealed NC-17 ratings or agreed to make edits in order to receive an R rating, as they regarded the NC-17 as harming a film's potential box office and video revenue, especially given that chains like Blockbuster Video refused to carry any NC-17 films. Yet, in a turn away from its tradition of respectability and prestige, Fine Line accepted the rating without contest. Ruth Vitale was reserved: "By accepting the NC-17 rating, we are acting in a responsible manner. . . . NC-17 means no one under 17 years of age should be admitted. This is a film that was made by adults for adults." Cronenberg appeared to be pleased with the rating on artistic grounds. "It's perfect," he said, "because it means I don't have to cut anything and that's the way I like it."¹⁴⁷ Contrary to Miramax's historical practices, Vitale asserted that Fine Line would not challenge the rating in order to drum up public discussion of the film.¹⁴⁸ One story made a point of distinguishing Fine Line's work with *Crash* by noting that Miramax would no longer release NC-17-rated films because that was the policy of parent company Disney, though Miramax's owners occasionally created loopholes in this policy.¹⁴⁹

Crash provoked strong, highly uneven reactions outside the United States. In the United Kingdom, for instance, there was debate as to whether the film would receive any rating certificate at all following numerous newspaper editorials and reviews that blasted the film as immoral pornography.¹⁵⁰ Several politicians weighed in on the debate, some calling for local theaters to never screen it.¹⁵¹ As a result of this discourse, *Crash* struggled to find a distributor in the United Kingdom, and the film performed badly when it finally did get a theatrical release from Columbia TriStar in that territory in June 1997, more than a year after it appeared at Cannes and following its release in almost all other major film markets around the world.¹⁵²

However, *Crash* was unusually successful when it played in French movie theaters, though Fine Line did not hold the distribution rights to that country.¹⁵³ *Crash* was a Canadian production that had received state support, but the film's Canadian distributor withheld it from the Toronto International Film Festival, which often serves as a platform for launching specialty and foreign films in the North American market.¹⁵⁴ Advertising in Canada centered on Cronenberg as an auteur and highlighted the controversy around the film, and *Crash* did well at the Canadian box office, earning \$1.4 million in its first month.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, *Crash* was recognized with six Genie awards in November 1996, given by the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television to recognize excellence in Canadian cinema.

Fine Line originally planned to release *Crash* in the United States in fall 1996, simultaneously with the Canadian release, but the company held off. New Line owner Ted Turner so objected to the film on moral grounds that he resisted the idea of releasing the film at all.¹⁵⁶ "I personally was appalled and am appalled by it," Turner said.¹⁵⁷ What began as a crisis regarding a film's content soon entailed a crisis between specialty cinema and Hollywood, between independent distribution and corporate media. Naomi Klein invoked the issue of Turner and *Crash* in an article that criticized "corporate censorship" in media and the arts.¹⁵⁸ Cronenberg discussed Turner's meddling in similar terms: "Turner was not supposed to be involved. To me this illustrates the potential danger of feisty, independent studios like New Line and Miramax used to being 'Disney-fied' and 'Turner-ized.'"¹⁵⁹

Statements and editorials like these assessed the fluctuating relations between specialty cinema and Hollywood. Alisa Perren discusses how the film industry settled into a "three tier" system in the 1996–97 period, encompassing the Hollywood majors, studio-based indie firms like Miramax and Fox Searchlight, and true independents like Strand Releasing.¹⁶⁰ Thus, the discourse around *Crash* occurred in the greater context of a shifting logic of indie cinema in both artistic and industrial terms. Indeed, *Crash* is emblematic of these tensions as it got caught up in them, rhetorically and industrially. Turner's reaction to *Crash* occurred during the same period when Turner Broadcasting was merging with Time Warner. As discussed in chapter 3, there was discussion at this juncture that Turner might sell New Line, and Fine Line along with it, as part of the overall deal in merging

with Time Warner. Thus, it is possible that Turner's public outcry about *Crash* was fueled, at least in part, by his desire to gain leverage by distancing himself from New Line. Whether or not this is the case, it is striking that *Crash* came to symbolize an antithesis to corporate cinema at the very moment when New Line's relationship to Hollywood was in significant flux.

Eventually, Fine Line released *Crash* in March 1997. Reports indicated that Turner had been overruled by Shaye and Lynne, who, according to Cronenberg, were inspired by the film's solid performance in Canadian and French theaters.¹⁶¹ When *Crash* did appear, one article noted, "Crash finally hits U.S. movie theaters Friday, carrying a lot of baggage."¹⁶² *Crash* was greeted with wildly mixed reviews from critics with major US newspapers, many of whom invoked the film's troubled reputation. Fine Line placed the film in around 350 theaters in various cities, far fewer than the 1,000 that the company had originally planned.¹⁶³ Liz Manne blamed the NC-17 rating for the scaled-back release as well as for the limited and negative coverage the film received in the press.¹⁶⁴

Fine Line's marketing and publicity neither fully rejected nor completely embraced *Crash's* notoriety. The US trailer opens with a quote from a review—"A cool, rigorous film exploring a link between SEX and CAR CRASHES"—followed by a montage of moments that display exactly those two activities, while narration suggests the way the film explores fetishistic sexualities. After the narration highlights the director, the cast, the film's connection to the original book, the screen is filled with text describing the film's unusual award at Cannes.

Despite Fine Line's tempered marketing, *Crash* was still consigned to the identity it had developed over the previous year. Some critics still claimed that Fine Line courted controversy with the film. Kenneth Turan wrote, "It's amusing to note that great pains are being taken to label this film as controversial," since, in his view, "frank indifference is the most likely reaction to 'Crash.'"¹⁶⁵ Ultimately, Americans' view of the film was not particularly animated at all, and the energy around the controversy was already spent by the time it got to US theaters. The film made \$3.4 million in the United States, but more than \$20 million internationally, making *Crash* a marketing *and* financial failure for Fine Line.¹⁶⁶

FINE LINE FADES TO BLACK

Each in its own way, *Shine* and *Crash* made a mark on the independent cinema scene in 1996 and 1997. But Fine Line no longer occupied the place of importance that it once had within this sector of the film industry. At the beginning of the decade, Fine Line had rapidly and boldly established a public legend as *the* major new specialty film company. It successfully launched a number of distinctive, heterogeneous films. It contended particularly well against Miramax in the first years of the 1990s. But Fine Line dwindled significantly in the second half of the decade. Vitale continued to push the division's mandate and identity further away from its

beginnings, at least rhetorically. In 1996, for instance, she significantly discounted the company's attachment to independent cinema and showed disregard for specialty films. "I don't consider us to be an independent film company," she said. "We're kind of beyond that now. We're part of Ted Turner and all of that, so we are much more part of the studio system than an art house entity. You know, we're not making movies for a million dollars any more—that's what I kind of consider independent film . . . for the most part we're producing and financing our own movies that are upward of \$10 to \$20 million."¹⁶⁷ Vitale cited *Twelfth Night* (1996) and *Mother Night* (1996) as evidence of Fine Line's new, significant production capacity. Yet these films earned less than \$1 million in North American theaters and the press described both films as "flops."¹⁶⁸

Nor was Miramax completely untroubled at this juncture. It had ongoing issues with parent company Disney, for instance, such as with the Weinsteins's decision to release *Kids* separately from Disney with an NC-17 rating.¹⁶⁹ Yet Miramax's overall slate became much larger than Fine Line's, and it continued to release well-regarded and largely financially successful indie hits. In addition to the Oscar-sweeping *The English Patient*, the company released *Basquiat*, *Emma*, *Trainspotting*, *Swingers*, and *Sling Blade* through the summer and fall of 1996. A fall 1996 story in *Variety* was generous toward the increasingly unguided Fine Line in its assessment: "While others like Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight's New York Office, and October Films vie to compete in the art house genre, Fine Line and Miramax remain at the top. If the companies were heavyweights, Miramax would likely be the reigning champion and Fine Line a scrappy contender."¹⁷⁰

In truth, Miramax dominated the specialty cinema scene through the end of the 1990s. In 1997, the company released Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy*, which earned over \$10 million; Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, which earned over \$70 million; the British period piece *Wings of the Dove*, which earned over \$10 million in the United States; and the Japanese film *Shall We Dance?*, which earned nearly \$10 million in North American theaters. Moreover, that film spawned Miramax's English-language remake, which earned over \$150 million in 2004. The year 1998 was even more notable for Miramax, with *Life Is Beautiful*, which earned over \$150 million and three Oscars, and *Shakespeare in Love*, which earned nearly \$300 million worldwide and nine Oscars. Miramax sustained nearly this level of achievement with *The Cider House Rules* (1999), *Chocolat* (2000), *Amélie* (2001), and the blockbuster *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001).

The entire specialty cinema sector diminished between 1997 and 1999, with many more indie films performing badly than achieving outlying success.¹⁷¹ Already operating as an underdog in this context, Fine Line similarly had a couple of triumphs but more commonly released films that fizzled and faded quickly. The most successful of these were typically made by established auteurs, including Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), John Waters's *Pecker* (1998), and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Besieged* (1999). But

even these films never approached the success of *The Player*, and the vast majority of Fine Line releases from 1997 through 1999 made less than \$1 million.

New Line replaced Ruth Vitale with Mark Ordesky as Fine Line's president in 1998. Liz Manne also left; at that point she was the division's longest-serving executive.¹⁷² Ordesky's appointment and Manne's departure had immense symbolic and practical importance for the division thereafter. It signaled New Line's decreasing valuation of specialty cinema. Whereas Fine Line spent \$8.6 million in advertising in 2001, it spent only \$1.7 million in 2002.¹⁷³ Ordesky had joined New Line in the late 1980s and became New Line's head of acquisitions in 1995. Notably, he had acquired several recent Fine Line films, including *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Deconstructing Harry*.¹⁷⁴ But he was also responsible for New Line's run of films with Jackie Chan, beginning with *Rumble in the Bronx* in 1995, an indication of his interest in poplar genres and mainstream cinema and also in creating international business opportunities.¹⁷⁵

Despite his new role with Fine Line, Ordesky continued operating from his Los Angeles office and, more tellingly, remained the head of acquisitions and coproductions for New Line.¹⁷⁶ Under Ordesky, Fine Line reflected, in its own way, two forces that were significantly shaping the larger media business at the turn of the millennium: increasing globalization and the continuing growth of cable as a site for "serious" audiovisual entertainment. Soon after attaining his position, Ordesky formed the Fine Line International division, devoted to finding foreign partnerships and assisting with foreign acquisitions and presales. This effort had mixed results overall, but the successes it brought helped sustain the company's presence in the specialty cinema market.

In 1999, for instance, Fine Line partnered with Good Machine on a two-picture deal with Danish director Lars Von Trier.¹⁷⁷ The film that resulted from this arrangement was *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), a deconstructive musical melodrama that starred Icelandic music star Björk as a struggling single mother who is losing her eyesight.¹⁷⁸ Shot on digital video, the film mixes realist immediacy with fantastical song and dance numbers. The film premiered at Cannes and won both the festival's Palme d'Or award and its Best Actress award for Björk's performance. The fanfare around the film continued when one of the songs was nominated for an Oscar, which Björk performed at the ceremony in an outlandish, swan-shaped gown. In addition to this public recognition, *Dancer in the Dark* earned over \$40 million.

Other Fine Line auteur-driven hits from the period include Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls* (2001) and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Sea Inside* (2004). In addition to these international endeavors, Fine Line joined with Time Warner partner HBO in 2003. At the same time that the cable channel was expanding in the area of original, adult-oriented, sophisticated programming like *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *The Wire* (2002–8), it produced films in the "specialty" vein and needed a partner with experience in this area. The results were occasionally noteworthy,

with Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) winning the Palme d'Or and Best Director prizes at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, and *Maria, Full of Grace* (2004) also winning awards at multiple festivals and attaining a respectable audience in the United States and abroad.

New Line effectively shuttered Fine Line through the creation of another specialty division in 2005, Picturehouse, which was directly partnered with HBO.¹⁷⁹ Ordesky's continuing duties at New Line took precedence over his work at Fine Line, particularly as he became involved in the development and production of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3) in August 1998, acting as one of the executive producers of those films. New Line focused on the three films composing *The Lord of the Rings* as it entered the new millennium, and they are the primary focus of the following chapter.

One Franchise to Rule Them All

New Line and *The Lord of the Rings*

It was as good as a Hollywood movie. February 29, 2004. Los Angeles, California. Interior: Kodak Theater. The Academy Awards. Men uniformed in tuxedos, women in unique and opulent gowns. Medium shot of Steven Spielberg, on stage addressing the thousands sitting in the hall and the nearly 44 million viewers of the live broadcast. He lists the nominees for the final category of the night, Best Picture, which includes *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Master and Commander* (2003), *Mystic River* (2003), and *Seabiscuit* (2003). But first on his list is *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), the third film in New Line's trilogy of spectacular fantasy films, which has already earned ten Oscars earlier this evening.

Spielberg opens the envelope. "It's a clean sweep," he says, and announces that *Return of the King* has won an eleventh Oscar, Best Picture of the Year for 2003. Director Peter Jackson and artistic partner Fran Walsh go to the stage, joined by more than a dozen others involved in the making of the film, including cast members Ian McKellen, Elijah Wood, and Liv Tyler. New Line cochairs and co-CEOs Bob Shaye and Michael Lynne stand directly behind Jackson as he gives his acceptance speech. It is a culminating moment, it seems, for these and an immense number of other people who've teamed together for nearly five years in the production, marketing, and distribution of three of the most successful movies in Hollywood history. It is *the* high point, certainly, in the story of New Line Cinema.

Based on the swords-and-sorcery novels by J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* movies aim to speak mythically. Set in a fantastical world filled with magic and monsters, the films tell an ostensibly timeless tale of friendship, romance, challenge, loss, and miraculous triumph. This Academy Awards ceremony also seeks to operate mythically. It is a moment when Hollywood projects to the world its institutional legitimacy through a recognition of values like creativity, artistry,

glamour, and prestige. For this moment, New Line Cinema is at the top of the heap of the Hollywood studios. For those who worked to make and distribute the *Lord of the Rings* films, the night provides a grand conclusion to a narrative that began six years earlier.

Of all the films discussed in this book, the *Lord of the Rings* movies are the most wrapped up in a legend-building enterprise through which the film industry seeks to write its own story and shape future historical accounts of its activities. Stories about the trilogy's wayward journey through development, epically scaled production, technological innovations, and groundbreaking use of new distribution platforms are too numerous to detail or even cite extensively. Such tales circulated simultaneously with the films' production and release, in medias res, and abundant promotional discussion even preceded the making of these films. At every turn, the discourse about *The Lord of the Rings* set an agenda for how the films would be understood later, and people working on them circulated a considerable amount of this discourse. It was *marketing*.

The producers and marketing staff behind *The Lord of the Rings* made innovative use of the internet, then still a novel vehicle for movie promotion, especially in the delivery of behind-the-scenes information about the films. Part of the ingeniousness of the marketing of *The Lord of the Rings* was the way it successfully generated a discourse among everyday people who, through online blogs, chatrooms, and discussion boards, repeated key elements of the producers' preferred narrative about the films. Like a widespread case of logorrhea—a condition of excessive talkativeness—countless fans contributed to a wave of speculation and reaction regarding the films. This was a case where the industry's hopes for so-called “guerilla” or “grassroots” marketing appeared successful on an international scale.

This chapter contributes to the legend of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as an exceptional achievement in filmmaking. Due to the extensive writing already published on these films, however, the chapter adheres to certain limits.¹ Specifically, this chapter is interested in the way the *Lord of the Rings* films relate to New Line Cinema as it entered the twenty-first century. The trilogy served, both accurately and not, as a key to understanding the company's industrial practices and status as well as its cultural identity and significance during that era. As discussed in chapter 3, New Line developed largely apace with sweeping structural changes in Hollywood over the course of the 1990s. For New Line, this entailed a logic of incorporative heterogeneity. It continued to add different genres to its repertoire, and with its new corporate situation in the 1990s, these films and genres generally had larger budgets and greater potential for wide, general audiences. For the larger media industry, incorporative heterogeneity entailed the big companies bringing disparate cinematic and televisual business models and genres into a larger corporate structure. Disney held ESPN and Miramax, Time Warner had HBO and New Line, and so on. A handful of conglomerates pursued global audiences with

blockbusters and simultaneously pursued smaller, distinct viewerships with niche cable channels and specialty cinema.

As New Line proceeded into the twenty-first century, it came to embody the tendencies of Conglomerate Hollywood even more than it had before.² Having established an odd but powerful position within the American media business by the turn of the millennium, New Line—like Hollywood more generally—was shaped by deregulation, globalization, and digital technologies.³ As the media conglomerates achieved both vertical *and* horizontal integration, Hollywood movies were often part of larger franchises that spread across media forms and exhibition platforms and manifested in additional commodity forms like toys, clothing, and games. As described in chapter 2, the Hollywood studios followed “franchise” logics by the 1980s, and New Line engaged in multimedia franchising in its own way. Conglomerate Hollywood amplified such practices and made them even more fundamental.

The Lord of the Rings serves as an exceptionally successful embodiment of all these phenomena. But like New Line Cinema, *The Lord of the Rings* is at once representative of broader tendencies in the media industry and unusual in its success. Like New Line Cinema, *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates the rules of the game *from the perspective of the winner*, which is not typical for players of the game.

This chapter illuminates the ways the *Lord of the Rings* films reflected an unusual leap in scale for New Line, and yet came about through industrial practices and cultural logics that the company had developed over decades. These films, in other words, were not as innovative for New Line as one might suspect. This chapter examines how the same principles that define the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (deregulation, globalization, digital technologies, and multimedia franchising) also affected New Line’s larger slate of films in the late 1990s and 2000s. Doing so places the *Rings* trilogy within a legible industry context and, further, reinforces the idea that *The Lord of the Rings* was atypically successful. Indeed, this chapter examines some major disappointments for New Line that used similar strategies, including *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) and *The Golden Compass* (2007). The chapter closes with a tale of even more spectacular failure, when Time Warner radically downsized New Line Cinema, effectively making it a minor sublabel operated under the Warner Bros. studio umbrella.

PLAYING BY THE RULES WHEN THERE ARE NO RULES

The “merger mania” in the media industry in the 1990s did not slow down; indeed, the multiple deregulatory acts of the US government in the 1990s set the stage for what was arguably an even more intense wave of mergers and acquisitions in the early 2000s.⁴ Among telecom and cable companies, AT&T acquired Media-One in 1999 for more than \$60 billion. Viacom completed a merger with CBS in

2000. The same year, French water company Vivendi bought Canadian beverage company Seagram, which owned Universal Pictures and its theme parks, for more than \$30 billion, forming Vivendi Universal. General Electric (GE), which already owned NBC, bought a majority share of Vivendi Universal in 2003 to form the combined NBC Universal media conglomerate, only to have Comcast, the largest cable company in the United States, buy a majority of NBC Universal from GE in 2009. The media and communications industries thus achieved increasing levels of vertical and horizontal integration, and multiple enormous companies had the means to produce multiple forms of entertainment media and to distribute media texts in multiple, parallel venues and formats.

The largest deal was Time Warner's acquisition by internet service provider America Online (AOL) for around \$164 billion, which thrust New Line Cinema yet again into a new corporate position.⁵ Fueled by Americans' increasing use of the World Wide Web as a medium for accessing information, entertainment, and retail transactions, AOL had grown immensely over the course of the 1990s; whereas the company had 1 million subscribers in 1994, it had more than 6 million by mid-1996.⁶ By the time it bought Time Warner in 2000, AOL had more than 20 million subscribers and held the top position in the internet service industry.⁷

Part of the fever-pitch public discussion of all things digital and the "dot-com economy" entailed debates about the place of film and television companies in an increasingly digitized, online world. Rumors regularly circulated in the late 1990s that "new media" companies would merge with "old media" companies. One article in 1999, for instance, asserted that "observers of new media are convinced that a takeover of a traditional entertainment company cannot be far off, with AOL, Yahoo and Microsoft often mentioned as potential acquirers of CBS, the NBC unit of General Electric, Time Warner, or even Walt Disney."⁸ There was equally avid discussion about how "traditional" media companies sought to use the internet, particularly as audiences for broadcast television declined and internet usage continued rising.⁹

In this context, the press treated the AOL and Time Warner merger as a stunningly massive shift in the composition of the media business. A press release announcing the merger highlighted the combined stock value of AOL Time Warner: \$350 billion. "The merger will combine Time Warner's vast array of world-class media, entertainment and news brands and its technologically advanced broadband delivery systems," the press release stated breathlessly, "with America Online's extensive Internet franchises, technology and infrastructure, including the world's premier consumer online brands, the largest community in cyberspace, and unmatched e-commerce capabilities."¹⁰ Statements such as these laid bare the ideals of synergy, whereby a single corporation could maximize value through pairing hardware with software, infrastructure with content, new media with old.

Although news coverage about the merger highlighted the new conglomerate's holdings in multiple media, including magazines like *Sports Illustrated*, cable

stations like the Cartoon Network, and movies from Warner Bros., it was rare to find New Line prominently mentioned.¹¹ The snubbing in the press is notable because New Line had regularly partnered with AOL on promotional efforts since 1997—one of the few movie companies to do so—and had forged a multimedia marketing deal with AOL in 1999.¹² Nevertheless, the AOL Time Warner merger put New Line in a precarious position. AOL placed all its newly acquired divisions under scrutiny and, in early 2001, forced New Line to take part in “corporate-wide cutbacks that resulted in 120 [New Line] staffers being laid off . . . 16% of their workforce.”¹³ That AOL spared Warner Bros. from conducting any similar cuts suggested that the conglomerate’s leadership saw flaws in New Line’s operations and, further, was playing favorites among the two cinema divisions.¹⁴

New Line’s uncertain position within AOL Time Warner and its second-rate position vis-à-vis Warner Bros. guided much of the press about the company through the early 2000s. When New Line had major flops like *Little Nicky* (2000) and *Town and Country* (2001), the press was especially dubious about New Line’s future, with some speculating that AOL Time Warner would sell it or dissolve it into Warner Bros. Such assessments weighed heavily on news coverage in 2000–2001 about the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the grandest and most expensive production in the company’s history. Just before the release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *Variety* asserted the film was “an acid test of New Line’s ability to pull its weight within the AOL Time Warner empire, and to justify its continued existence as a quasi-independent unit.”¹⁵ Such rhetoric set the stage for the industrial narrative that involved massive risks and challenges for New Line and situated *The Lord of the Rings* as either the company’s salvation or its demise.

OLD LINES AND NEW LINES

Amid the corporate changes New Line underwent in this moment, the company remained eclectic and opportunistic. Between 1998 and 2008, New Line continued to be associated with horror films, Black films, and populist comedies featuring male buffoons, as well as some “indie” films and prestige pictures from auteur directors. The company was largely successful with these genres through this period. Continually extending its logic of incorporative heterogeneity, New Line also experimented with some more conventional fare like adult dramas and kid-friendly comedies with higher budgets, higher production values, more special effects, and famous stars. New Line thus differentiated itself from corporate sibling Warner Bros. and other big studios by holding on to films and genres *slightly* less typical for Hollywood, but it also broached Hollywood’s terrain to varying results.

In the area of horror, New Line recycled its existing intellectual properties and also innovated with new series. In most cases, the company’s millennial horror films displayed more formal stylishness than its earlier films had, making use of computer-generated imagery, spectacular set pieces, and stunt work. *Jason X*,

released in 2001, was the tenth film in the *Friday the 13th* series and was notable for mixing the slasher formula with science fiction. New Line sustained the Freddy Krueger character with the film *Freddy vs. Jason* in 2003, in which the similarly indestructible supervillains squared off. With *Freddy vs. Jason*, New Line splurged on a \$28 million production budget, reflected in the film's polished aesthetic.¹⁶ The mash-up of two venerable franchises succeeded in attracting an audience of horror fans and others, earning over \$80 million at the box office.¹⁷ New Line continued the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise with two more films, a formally slick and immensely successful remake of the original film in 2003, and a less successful prequel to this remake in 2006.

New Line forged new ground in the horror genre with the *Final Destination* film series, which consisted of five films released between 2000 and 2011. The premise of the first film, extended through the sequels, is that a character has a premonition of a massive, violent accident in which many people die; this is a spectacular highlight of each film, a grand set piece with shocking deaths. After avoiding this fate, the film follows the “surviving” characters, who subsequently die in different, extraordinary ways due to their having “cheated” death previously. These sequences play out like gruesome Rube Goldberg machines, with many elements working sequentially to kill someone; in this regard, the series anticipated the *Saw* (2004) franchise that began a few years later. These sequences make extraordinary use of both practical and computer-generated effects, giving the *Final Destination* series the look of other spectacle genre films of the time. New Line released these films in the post-winter holiday season or in late summer, counterprogrammed against dramas and comedies such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *The Recruit* (2003), and *The Pink Panther* (2006).

New Line also continued distributing films featuring predominantly Black casts and which often contended with race and Blackness. The company continued releasing comedies, including *Next Friday* (2000) and *Friday After Next* (2002), the sports film *Love and Basketball* (2000), and action films like *Turn It Up* (2002) and *All about the Benjamins* (2002). New Line distributed Spike Lee's eleventh feature film, *Bamboozled*, in 2000, which featured an ensemble cast that included Damon Wayans and Jada Pinkett Smith. Although a financial failure, the film is remarkable for its critique of representations of Blackness in film and television. *Bamboozled* stands out on New Line's slate because it was a serious, auteur work rather than a more conventional Black comedy or drama. New Line supported the film with provocative print ads, internet banner ads, and a trailer that invoked minstrelsy.

New Line also continued making unpretentious, populist comedies through the 2000s, many of which featured juvenile men engaging in crude, socially outrageous behavior. In addition to two Austin Powers sequels (1999, 2002; discussed in more detail below), New Line released the sequels *Dumb and Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd* (2003) and *Son of the Mask* (2005), neither of which featured

the original stars. New Line's noteworthy original comedies from the period are *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) and *Wedding Crashers* (2005). Both films were rated R, and the press at the time singled *Wedding Crashers* out for contributing to a "return of the R-rated comedy."¹⁸ Whereas *Wedding Crashers* features a white male duo played by well-known comedy stars Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn, *Harold and Kumar* features two people of color in the lead roles, John Cho and Kal Penn. The actors play Harold and Kumar, respectively, two highly educated professionals who smoke a lot of marijuana. The film's loose plot involves the two attempting to get food at White Castle, and many ridiculous vignettes occur that revolve around the pair being inebriated. The film thus sought broad audiences with its unassuming material and simultaneously continued New Line's consistent use of ethnic and racial minorities in prominent parts.

Yet some of New Line's work in comedy looked quite conventional by Hollywood standards and featured bigger budgets, bigger stars, grander scales, and more accessible premises. In this context, *Elf* (2003) illustrates the extent to which New Line's comedies of the 2000s aimed squarely for the cultural mainstream. Indeed, *Elf* had been a Disney project before New Line picked it up.¹⁹ The film stars Will Ferrell, who had previously been part of the regular cast of *Saturday Night Live* and appeared in many movie comedies of the era. Ferrell plays Buddy, a human who, due to a fluke accident, was raised at the North Pole among Santa's elves; veteran comedian Bob Newhart plays his elfin adoptive father. Buddy travels to New York City to establish a relationship with his biological father, played by James Caan. The film's comedy relies largely on the fish-out-of-water premise. Buddy's height and childlike demeanor stand out amid the diminutive elves at the North Pole, for instance, and he likewise appears out of joint when he maintains his belief in Santa Claus in the face of the unbelieving, cynical people he encounters in New York.

With its PG rating, star cast, clean humor, and high-quality visual effects, *Elf* sought general audiences when New Line released it in November 2003 as counterprogramming to the R-rated action film *The Matrix Revolutions*. The film had a production budget of \$30 to \$35 million, and New Line spent the same amount to advertise the film.²⁰ It was a massive success, earning more than \$170 million in North American theaters.²¹ A New Line executive pointed to the film's broad appeal: "The film performed far beyond studio expectations and brought in moviegoers from age 8 to 80."²² An especially positive review of the film asserted, "'Elf' possesses all the potential longevity of 'A Christmas Carol,' 'A Christmas Story' or (dare we say it?) 'It's a Wonderful Life.'"²³

Elf represents millennial New Line at its most accessible, certainly compared to its other comedy films. But the company also released several dramas during this period, some of which sought prestige, while others appeared as conventional as any other Hollywood movie. Both before and after the AOL-Time Warner merger, New Line was generally spending more on production budgets and on

stars' salaries. Thus, a sizable number of its dramas resembled the bigger-budgeted prestige pictures released by Miramax during the second half of the 1990s, such as *The English Patient* (1996). Fine Line at this time was greatly diminished in its operations, which opened opportunities for New Line to handle specialty films, albeit larger in scale. The company, for instance, continued its relationship with director Paul Thomas Anderson, releasing his film *Magnolia* in 1999, which earned numerous Golden Globe and Academy Award nominations but did not do well at the box office. Although Columbia distributed the film, New Line also produced Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love* (2002), a romantic drama that won the Best Director award at Cannes.

Yet a preponderance of New Line's "quality" films and more conventional dramas failed to garner substantial recognition or financial success, perhaps because they were attempts at being more mainstream, middle-of-the-road fare. Films in this vein include *Thirteen Days* (2000) with Kevin Costner, *Life as a House* (2001) with Kevin Kline and Kristin Scott Thomas, and *Birth* (2004) with Nicole Kidman. New Line attached the first trailer for *The Fellowship of the Ring* to *Thirteen Days* in an odd attempt to gain audiences for the historical drama based on the high anticipation for the fantasy film. New Line had two substantial hits, however, both directed by Nick Cassavetes, first with the Denzel Washington drama *John Q* in 2002, then with *The Notebook* in 2004, a romantic drama adapted from the novel by Nicholas Sparks and featuring rising stars Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams.

But many of New Line's more conventional dramas failed to distinguish themselves. Most notorious was *Town and Country* (2001). The company had begun development of this romantic comedy as early as 1997, and attached Warren Beatty to star in the project along with Diane Keaton, Andie MacDowell, and Goldie Hawn.²⁴ The production encountered numerous problems, however, including missing footage and script rewrites, which led to multiple production delays and ultimately "caused the film to nearly double its shooting schedule."²⁵ By spring 1999, the film's budget, originally planned at \$35 million, had exceeded \$80 million, and production delays forced the company to reschedule the film's release eleven times.²⁶ When New Line finally released *Town and Country* in spring 2001, it earned \$6.7 million, making it such a massive failure that one reporter called it "a far greater flop than Beatty's infamous 'Ishtar.'"²⁷

This film followed in the wake of *Little Nicky*, a supernatural comedy starring Adam Sandler. That film's budget reached \$80 million as a result of its ensemble cast and extensive special effects, and New Line also spent \$35 million on marketing, yet the film earned only \$45 million in US theaters as 2000 came to a close.²⁸ Thus, a year before the release of *Fellowship of the Ring*, the company had such a bad run that the *Los Angeles Times* feared it "may be about to relive its darkest hour," referring to New Line's disastrous fall 1996.²⁹ The failure of *Town and Country* and *Little Nicky* put even more pressure on New Line to win big with *The Lord of the Rings*.

NEW LINE'S INTERNATIONAL,
SPECTACULAR FRANCHISES

In the late 1990s and into the 2000s, Hollywood focused more than ever on franchise films that (1) sought international revenues and (2) used computer-generated imagery and effects to support their fantastical plots and action sequences. New Line likewise bolstered its international operations and made more fantastical, effects-driven films. Although the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is defined by its transnational character, it is important to consider this aspect in the context of New Line's long-standing international operations. The company *began* by distributing foreign films in the 1960s and continued to do so through the 1970s. New Line continued its international trade throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in some cases gaining production financing through territorial presales and distributing a small number of its films to international markets.

New Line expanded its international footprint dramatically in the years immediately preceding *The Lord of the Rings*. In particular, the company made a major international push with two films in 1999—*Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* and *Rush Hour*, two movies with “broad appeal” that helped New Line's international division reach nearly \$300 million in revenues that year.³⁰ The company gave the Austin Powers sequel “the biggest marketing effort New Line has ever put behind a movie internationally,” and the film earned \$103 million abroad and \$205 million in the United States.³¹ In addition, the film's soundtrack album went double platinum and featured the original track “Beautiful Stranger” by Madonna, which topped the charts and played regularly on MTV. The following sequel, *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002), made more than \$210 million in North America and more than \$80 million internationally.³² Thus, although the *Austin Powers* films played better in North America, markets outside the United States played a crucial role in their success.

The *Rush Hour* series deployed and innovated upon many strategies previously used by New Line. The films feature Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker, continuing New Line's practice of making films with racial minorities in lead roles, and mixing silly comedy with Hollywood-style action cinema. In a report given to Time Warner executives in 1998, Shaye characterized *Rush Hour* as a franchise-in-the-making that extended the company's previous efforts, referring to Chan as a “talent franchise.”³³ New Line had worked previously with Tucker as well, first on *Friday* in 1995 and then on *Money Talks* in 1997, also a multiracial action comedy. *Rush Hour* also inherited *Money Talks* director Brett Ratner, who had a background directing music videos and who would direct the next two *Rush Hour* films. In a high-concept way, one could say that *Rush Hour* is “*Friday* meets *Police Story 2*.”

Like many buddy action films, *Rush Hour* forces two police officers with different backgrounds and sensibilities to work together. Tucker plays Detective James Carter, a Los Angeles cop with a penchant for disobeying procedures; Carter is

paired with Detective Lee, played by Chan, when Lee is brought in from Hong Kong to help rescue the daughter of a Chinese diplomat. In addition to featuring several action sequences with cars, guns, and explosions, the film highlights the two stars' established screen personae, with Lee engaging in deftly executed stunts and Carter adding gestural comedy and perpetual banter. At times the film creates comic friction based on the characters' different cultural backgrounds, as when Carter yells at Lee when first meeting him, as though shouting would help Lee understand the English language (which he already does). At other times the characters engage in dynamic acts of teamwork, such as in one sequence in which they fight off goons hand-in-hand, spinning each other around to punch and kick their assailants in tandem. In moments like these, *Rush Hour* uses the idioms of action cinema to transverse racial, ethnic, and national differences.

Advertisements for *Rush Hour* emphasized the distinctiveness of the stars and the incongruities between them. The film's posters, for example, featured both actors smiling jovially, suggesting the film's lighthearted, comic tone, and showed one of them making martial arts hand gestures; in one version Tucker does so, and in another it is Chan. The film's trailer likewise points toward the stars' personae, with a narrator stating, "The fastest hands in the East meet the biggest mouth in the West." Thus, the promotional efforts for *Rush Hour* relied on simplistic understandings of Asian-ness and American-ness, the latter associated with Black identity in this instance, at the same time that they suggested that the disparities between the two might be overcome.

New Line released *Rush Hour* in September 1998, on a weekend without any major releases from the Hollywood studios. The film broke box office records for fall releases, a feat one journalist attributed to the film's PG-13 rating and accessibility to broad audiences. The same writer noted that the "Tucker-Chan pairing is unique in matching two nonwhite stars," an aspect that allowed the film to cut "across demographics, attracting urban and ethnic audiences, young males and families alike."³⁴ Indeed, *Rush Hour* appears to have realized New Line's ongoing efforts to make films that held simultaneous appeal for specific devoted viewers and for so-called mainstream audiences.

Rush Hour earned \$145 million in the United States and \$103 million internationally; the film did especially well in East Asian markets.³⁵ New Line produced the first sequel with a much larger budget. Indeed, the first film's success empowered both Chan and Tucker to demand much higher fees.³⁶ The sequel broadened the series' international scope as well, with the production and narrative taking place in both Hong Kong and Los Angeles. Joining the cast was Chinese star Zhang Ziyi, who had recently gained international fame after appearing in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). New Line "premiered" the film on a United Airlines flight from Los Angeles to Hong Kong as a part of a cross-promotional deal with the airline and the Hong Kong Tourism Board.³⁷ This marketing gimmick presaged the deal struck between New Line and Air New Zealand in late 2002, which resulted in

two passenger jets being covered in imagery from *The Lord of the Rings*.³⁸ Air New Zealand also used the slogan “Airline to Middle Earth.”

Although plans for a third film in the *Rush Hour* series occurred before the second film came out, *Rush Hour 3* did not appear until 2007. The press held the film up as proof that Hollywood was dominated by sequels and franchises, as it joined films like *The Bourne Ultimatum* and *Spider-Man 3* for being another “third” in a series released in 2007.³⁹ The film’s budget reached \$140 million, as lavish as any Hollywood blockbuster at that time.⁴⁰ Impressively, Tucker negotiated to receive 20 percent of ticket sale grosses.⁴¹ Terrible reviews and the lag between the films affected *Rush Hour 3*’s performance. Despite earning over \$250 million in theaters worldwide, the film ultimately failed to recoup its production and marketing costs.⁴² Nevertheless, the *Rush Hour* series earned \$846.8 million globally, with international markets playing an important role in its success.⁴³

Prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, several other New Line franchises participated in Hollywood’s increasingly noticeable shift toward fantastical genres with abundant special effects. One can look to George Lucas and Twentieth Century Fox’s re-release of the original *Star Wars* films over the course of 1997, with new digital effects added, as an instigating precursor to numerous film series that followed, including the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy that appeared in 1999, 2002, and 2005. In addition to space operas like these, the increasing sophistication of computer-generated imagery (CGI) provided the aesthetic innovations that supported the rise of the swords-and-sorcery genre and comic book adaptations. Alongside *The Lord of the Rings*, Warner Bros.’s *Harry Potter* series took off as a wildly successful fantasy franchise across the globe, made prominent use of CGI, and, in addition to the eight films that were released between 2001 and 2011, had innumerable manifestations in cross-promotional paratexts and consumer merchandise. The simultaneous success of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in late 2001 initiated a wave of fantasy pictures that continued through the 2010s, including the *Percy Jackson* book adaptations from Twentieth Century Fox (2010, 2013), Warner Bros.’s three films based on *The Hobbit* (2012, 2013, 2014), and Disney’s *Maleficent* films (2014, 2018), among many others.

The *Harry Potter* films especially inspired studios to make fantasy films based on young adult book series, which typically featured children as the protagonists. In addition to New Line’s *The Golden Compass* in 2006, key examples include Paramount’s *Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004), Twentieth Century Fox’s *Eragon* (2006), and Disney’s three films based on *The Chronicles of Narnia* books (2005, 2008, 2010). As a genre, such effects-laden, magic-filled films can be traced as far back as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) or *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), but the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* movies gave the genre a new prominence in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Superhero films also became staple tentpoles for Hollywood. Prior to the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, which initiated the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), two

other Marvel comic adaptations set the conditions for the subsequent dominance of CGI-driven superhero movies: *X-Men* in 2000, followed by *Spider-Man* in 2002. Both films launched film trilogies and provided narrative and aesthetic models adopted by later superhero films. Both also used plentiful CGI and CG effects to depict the fantastical abilities of the various superheroes; *Spider-Man* swinging among skyscrapers, or the *X-Men* character Cyclops shooting lasers from his eyes. *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* thus made CGI and CG effects a central element of the genre, and their success in theaters inaugurated the superhero film as a Hollywood genre aimed at global audiences.

New Line also ventured into making fantastical genre films driven by action and special effects, anticipating the company's work with *The Lord of the Rings*. New Line had notoriously failed with previous attempts in the action genre, namely *Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Last Man Standing* in 1996; and the company's first big-budget science fiction film, *Lost in Space*, fizzled in theaters and on home video in 1998. Nevertheless, the company continued working in this vein throughout the millennial period. It released the CGI-heavy, noir-infused psychodrama *Dark City* in 1998, which resembled *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999) and *The Matrix* (1999) in themes and style, and released *The Cell* in 2000, a psychological horror film with science fiction and fantasy elements. A year before the release of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, New Line acquired *Dungeons and Dragons* for around \$10 million as a pickup.⁴⁴ But, like many previous swords-and-sorcery films, *Dungeons and Dragons* was a failure.

The film featured African American actor Marlon Wayans in one of the lead roles, not a typical choice for the fantasy genre at the time but more typical of New Line's releases. Indeed, New Line's most notable effects-driven hits before *The Lord of the Rings* featured Black protagonists, specifically the comic book adaptations *Spawn* (1997) and *Blade* (1998), the latter of which propelled the creation of sequels that appeared in 2002 and 2004. Michael Jai White played the main character in *Spawn*, while Wesley Snipes played the *Blade* character; although Snipes was a well-established star, having appeared in numerous major films like *New Jack City* (1991) and *Demolition Man* (1993), his portrayal of a superhero still made *Blade* unusual. Thus, *Spawn* and *Blade* resembled the *Rush Hour* films in that all were mainstream Hollywood pictures with broad appeal starring people of color.

While *Blade* could rely on the name recognition of its main actor, *Spawn* drew on the established popularity of the fictional antihero, who had generated around \$35 million dollars in revenues from comics as well as action figures and related toys.⁴⁵ As with many New Line releases seen as "edgy," such as *Seven*, or shrewdly engaged with popular culture, like the video game adaptation *Mortal Kombat* (1995), New Line's adaptations of the *Spawn* and *Blade* comics were connected in the press to the tastes of Michael De Luca, then New Line's head of production.⁴⁶ Yet both *Spawn* and *Blade* appeared before *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* re-established



FIGURE 18. Featuring African American actor Michael Jai White in the lead role, *Spawn* is a comic book adaptation that uses computer-generated imagery and effects to represent the character's superpowers.

superhero films as a lucrative genre. Nineties-era series like *Batman* experienced diminishing popularity and box office returns, while many analogous works in the genre simply failed, such as *The Rocketeer* (1991), *The Shadow* (1994), *Judge Dredd* (1995), *The Phantom* (1996), and *Steel* (1997). Thus, *Spawn* and *Blade* aspired to a certain mainstream generic appeal and multimedia franchise possibilities yet faced challenges.

Like other comic book adaptations from the period, *Spawn* features numerous action sequences, including vehicle chases, gunfights, and physical melees. In addition to the practical effects used in these sequences, *Spawn* makes distinctive use of computer-generated effects and imagery, which were continually refined in Hollywood films following the success of *Jurassic Park* in 1992. Specifically, the *Spawn* character has a magical, living cape that moves semiautonomously. In this manner, *Spawn* aligned with other films of the period by using CGI to represent the supernatural or fantastical.

New Line released *Spawn* in late summer 1997, and released *Blade* during the same period in 1998. *Blade* had a comparable production budget of \$40 million, but would far surpass *Spawn* in popularity and revenue, making \$131 worldwide.⁴⁷ The *Blade* character is a sword-wielding vampire hunter who is himself part vampire, making both the film's villains and hero capable of superhuman physical feats. The plot is straightforward, as *Blade* hunts down, fights, and kills a cult of vampires who wish to destroy humanity. Stylistically, *Blade* blends tropes from crime dramas, martial arts films, and horror cinema. Its dynamic fights and other action sequences are supported at times with computer-generated imagery and effects, as when *Blade* leaps from one building to another.

Blade earned an R rating from the MPAA because of its bloody violence, and New Line promoted the film as a dark, violent, supernatural action film with horror movie elements. The trailer, for instance, features numerous quick-cut snippets from the film's fights, but also signals the appearance of vampires as well as Blade's supernatural abilities. The film was successful, and by the time New Line released *Blade 2* in 2002, the sequel was already primed for more mainstream success. By this point, *X-Men* had become a major hit and demonstrated that superhero films could attract big, international audiences. Further, *Blade 2* was released amid concurrent publicity for the *Spider-Man* film, which would go into theaters only two months later.

Unlike *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*, *Blade 2* was rated R and featured at least as much violence as the first film had. In this respect, even as it participated in a mainstream Hollywood genre, these films were "edgier" when compared to other superhero films of the time. Nevertheless, New Line courted an even larger audience. At the film's premiere, Bob Shaye signaled his hopes that the film would have broad appeal. Asserting that *Blade 2* "may not be a movie for everybody, but it comes close," Shaye said the film would appeal especially to people who liked comic books.⁴⁸ When the film did indeed perform remarkably well in its opening weekend, one story cited it as demonstrating innovations in film franchising as an artistic *and* business practice: "Originally typified by cheap, inferior knockoffs, the sequel has become a higher art form as studios realize that careful follow-ups can practically turn into a license to print money."⁴⁹

Hyperbolic to be sure, assessments like that nevertheless speak to the dominance of franchising in the film business in the early 2000s and New Line's role in this development. Further, *Blade 2* followed the theatrical release of *Fellowship of the Ring*, and in this context helped to center New Line in Hollywood at the time. Although troubled by production difficulties, the third film, *Blade: Trinity*, earned over \$120 million, contributing greatly to the \$400 million earned by the *Blade* series in total.⁵⁰

As evidenced by the continuing success of the *Austin Powers*, *Rush Hour*, and *Blade* series, New Line increasingly strove to create big-budget, Hollywood-style franchises before and alongside the company's work with *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps nothing reflects New Line's unlikely transformation from the 1970s to this moment more than the multimedia franchising of John Waters's *Hairspray* (1988) into a Broadway musical in 2002, which won eight Tony Awards and spawned a big-budget film remake in 2007. Where New Line had once been in the business of releasing anti-mainstream films like John Waters's *Female Trouble* (1974), and later broached more conventional audiences with Waters's *Hairspray* in the late 1980s, now the company molded this work to attract audiences in the symbolic cultural center of the United States.

In this context, *The Lord of the Rings* appears as a kind of logical, albeit extreme, continuation of New Line's path through history and movie culture. The *Lord of*

the Rings franchise conformed so well to the conventions of Hollywood blockbusters of the time that many, if not most, audiences would likely have considered it a defining component of Hollywood at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Like the *Star Wars* prequels, like the *Matrix* films, like the *Harry Potter* series, like the *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* series, the *Lord of the Rings* films featured massive budgets, star casts, and abundant and spectacular CGI and CG effects. Like those other series, *The Lord of the Rings* made more money in international markets than in the United States and did exceptional business on home video, especially DVD. Likewise, these films were fully intertwined with countless franchise paratexts beyond home video, including video games, board games, action figures, and other toys. In the millennial swirl of global, multimedia franchises from Hollywood, *The Lord of the Rings* might seem normal, expected, and unnoteworthy in its appearance and achievements. It was a Hollywood product through and through. Yet the franchise did innovate within Hollywood and certainly represents innovations on New Line's part, even while the production and release of the *Rings* films attest to New Line's historical business practices and cultural sensibilities.

LORD OF THE DEALS: ACQUIRING AND FINANCING *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

The genesis of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is well documented in both the popular press and film studies scholarship. Properly assessing the importance of these films to New Line, however, requires some rehashing of the tale. The way New Line acquired the property, financed it, and participated in its production is as remarkable as any film industry legend. New Line's work on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy reflected practices and strategies the company had developed and used for decades, arguably since its very inception in 1967. Although the way New Line acquired and financed *The Lord of the Rings* appears remarkable, these accomplishments were characteristic of New Line's industrial behavior, particularly as it had operated as an independent distributor prior to being enveloped in Time Warner. The project was the result of opportunistic eclecticism but on a Conglomerate Hollywood scale.

The financing and production of *The Lord of the Rings* involved an intricate web of international players, to such an extent that one can properly understand the films as "transnational," and were symptomatic of the transnational way Hollywood operated in the 1990s. In 2001, the same year that New Line released *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell published a landmark analysis of Hollywood's contemporaneous stage of globalization. In *Global Hollywood*, these authors note that, as of the 1990s, Hollywood operated "globally" through its exploitation of the international division of labor in the cultural sector.⁵¹ Engaging with concurrent debates about national identities in world cinema, the writers look at how Hollywood uses

the transnational mobility of capital to exploit site-specific economic, labor, and cultural policy conditions. Among other strategies at the turn of the millennium, Hollywood used different countries' state-sponsored support for domestic film-making for its own benefit. Hollywood produced many films abroad, often called "runaway productions" in the press, and in some cases these countries treated these Hollywood films as "national," homegrown productions. In a related vein, film industry historian Tino Balio described Hollywood's globalization in the 1990s: "[The Hollywood studios] upgraded international operations to a privileged position by expanding 'horizontally' to tap emerging markets worldwide, by expanding 'vertically' to form alliances with independent producers to enlarge their rosters, and by 'partnering' with foreign investors to secure new sources of financing."⁵² Hollywood went global, in other words, by more aggressively exporting its films internationally, by purchasing or forming deals with media distributors in other countries, and by attracting international private capital.

It is important to remember that "runaway productions" were not new to the 1990s, and that the American movie business has operated in definitively international ways throughout its history.⁵³ Moreover, some have cogently critiqued the *Global Hollywood* argument, especially for painting a distorted, top-down picture of the international trade in film and media that does not account for the ways that local media workers assert industrial and cultural agency.⁵⁴ Yet the *Global Hollywood* thesis holds up unusually well when considering the financing of the *Lord of the Rings* films. While the *Lord of the Rings* deal reflects characteristics of "Global Hollywood" in the 1990s, it also encapsulates New Line's historical practices as an independent distributor.

Thus, it may not be surprising that this tale begins with New Line's fellow minimajor at the time, Miramax. As of 1997, Miramax was working with director Peter Jackson and his partner Fran Walsh to develop films based on the Tolkien novels. Film producer Saul Zaentz held the film rights to the trilogy, and Miramax optioned those rights in 1997.⁵⁵ Zaentz, who had worked with Miramax on *The English Patient* (1996), had produced a 1978 cartoon based on the *Lord of the Rings* novels, a production that failed at the box office. As an epically scaled fantasy narrative, *The Lord of the Rings* might seem an odd film for Miramax to develop. But, at the time, the company was seeking out larger films with larger production budgets, much as New Line was. Jackson might also look odd in this mix, as the director had handled only small-budget horror and art house films. But Miramax had released Jackson's film *Heavenly Creatures* in 1994, and subsequently the director had a first-look deal that obligated him to work with Miramax on any *Lord of the Rings* project he might produce.⁵⁶

After more than a year of development, Miramax and Jackson were at loggerheads about how to move forward. Miramax wanted to squeeze all three books into a single film, while Jackson wished to make two movies.⁵⁷ Miramax's cautious treatment of the project should be seen in the context of the Weinsteins'

continuing difficulties with corporate parent Disney, which set a cap of \$75 million on the division's production budgets.⁵⁸ Stalled in this way, Miramax gave Jackson three weeks to find another studio to produce the films.⁵⁹ Some reports indicated that Jackson took the project immediately to New Line, while others have it that New Line was the *last* studio Jackson approached after being rejected by all the others.⁶⁰ In either case, the meeting between Jackson and Shaye was fateful—and widely reported as a key element of the trilogy's genesis myth. Jackson showed Shaye a proof-of-concept sizzle reel that detailed how his production company, Wingnut, would handle making the films as well as how his digital effects company, WETA, would produce the films' special effects. Seeing this odd project as a rare opportunity for New Line, Shaye agreed to produce three movies based on the three novels.

Whereas Miramax was hindered by its situation within the Disney corporate empire, New Line still operated with relative autonomy from Time Warner, particularly because it had secured its own massive credit source earlier that year.⁶¹ Thus, in a bizarre fashion, it was New Line's *independence* that allowed it to engage in the Hollywood-esque production of *The Lord of the Rings*, whereas Miramax's *imbrication* within Hollywood stymied its efforts, among other factors. Despite the long-standing rivalry between the two companies, New Line paid the Weinsteins \$12 million to obtain Miramax's option for *The Lord of the Rings* and to cover development costs that Miramax had incurred.⁶² In return, New Line owned all the existing material. As an additional part of the deal, New Line gave the Weinstein brothers executive producer credits on the films and, in a move that would have enormous consequences later, provided the Weinsteins with 5 percent of the films' theatrical gross. The deal also made Saul Zaentz an executive producer on the films and provided him with comparable residuals.⁶³

New Line came into *The Lord of the Rings* as an outsider, as just one of several parties drawing from an existing intellectual property. This move can be compared to the company's work on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, where it did not develop or own the intellectual property but rather was able to capitalize on it as one of many franchise partners. Further, and also comparable to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *The Lord of the Rings* was not necessarily a clear mainstream hit that would appeal to broad audiences. True, the book series had sold over 50 million copies at the time New Line signed on to make the films.⁶⁴ But the swords-and-sorcery genre was *not* a primary genre for Hollywood franchises in the late 1990s or early 2000s, and the genre had more often failed at the box office than succeeded in the previous two decades. Compared to contemporaneous Hollywood blockbusters and franchises, such as the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy of films, *The Lord of the Rings* was not a slam-dunk property in a reliably successful genre.

The *Lord of the Rings* films were New Line's largest production by a large measure. According to early reports, New Line allotted more than \$130 million to make all three films.⁶⁵ But later articles stated that New Line planned to spend

between \$270 and \$300 million on all the pictures, or around \$90 to \$100 million per movie.⁶⁶ The press always treated the budget for *The Lord of the Rings* as impressive, with one article characterizing the production as “the biggest budgeted venture in Hollywood history.”⁶⁷ Discussion of these budgets was typically paired, however, with talk of how unusual this scale of filmmaking was for New Line Cinema. News coverage positioned *The Lord of the Rings* as an incredible “gamble” for New Line that deviated from the company’s past work in modestly budgeted films in reliable genres.⁶⁸ Thus, while it is likely that it cost around \$300 million or more to produce the three films in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the public discussion of the films’ cost was an element of the greater legend building around the films and New Line Cinema.

The production of *The Lord of the Rings* was unusual for Hollywood films. New Line agreed that Jackson would shoot the films in his native New Zealand and that all three would be shot back to back, as one continuous production. There was a risk in shooting all the films at once. If the first film failed at the box office, it would be nearly impossible for the next two to succeed. The press focused on this element of the production and thereby made “risk” a key component of the trilogy’s production myth. New Line was seen to be making an all-or-nothing bet.

But handling the production this way could have economic benefits. Shooting the films consecutively meant that the cast and crew would have a streamlined and uninterrupted workflow, harnessing the momentum of the production without incurring new startup costs. Actors would remain within the terms of a single contract and be limited in their ability to renegotiate following the release of the first or second film. Further, shooting in New Zealand with a New Zealand crew reduced travel costs. Finally, New Zealand’s highly varied landscapes meant that the films could depict a range of areas in the fictional Middle Earth setting while incurring minimal travel expense.

When *The Lord of the Rings* began production in 1999, New Zealand had a miniscule film industry. The country’s cinema gained some international recognition when the domestic hit *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1981) became the first New Zealand film to go to the Cannes Film Festival, followed by *Utū* and *Vigil*, which played at Cannes in 1983 and 1984, respectively.⁶⁹ New Zealand film received more international attention with the success of *The Piano* (1993). Although officially an Australian production, *The Piano* was shot in New Zealand and directed by New Zealand-born Jane Campion. *The Piano* was followed by the international success of *Once Were Warriors* in 1994, which was distributed in the United States by Fine Line Features and was the first film to gross more than \$6 million in New Zealand.⁷⁰ Some of the most popular New Zealand media productions of the 1990s were, however, Hollywood productions. Specifically, the syndicated show *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–99) and its spinoff *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1996–2001) were shot in New Zealand and featured New Zealand actors. Both programs were produced by the US company Renaissance Pictures, owned by Sam Raimi, and distributed by Universal.

New Line's decision to shoot *The Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand had economic benefits far beyond reduced travel expenses.⁷¹ Indeed, the interaction between New Line, the New Zealand government, and related institutions was crucial to the financing and production of the trilogy. The country created the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) in 1978 as a financial institution with cultural objectives, namely, to formulate and promote New Zealand national and cultural identity in the cinema.⁷² At the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, the NZFC provided grants to independent local productions that served this cultural mission, and it also oversaw the financing of international coproductions between New Zealand and partnered nations.⁷³

Further, the NZFC provided tax breaks for private investment in media production. One section of the Income Tax Act, as the commission described it, "provides for a one-year, 100 percent write-off for investment in the production of films which have 'significant New Zealand content.' The one-year write-off is only available for a film certified by the Film Commission as a 'New Zealand film.' In order to obtain this certification, it must be demonstrated that the film has 'significant New Zealand content' according to the criteria set out in [the] New Zealand Film Commission Act 1978."⁷⁴ Section 18 of the act listed as factors in assessing this "New Zealand content": the film's subject, the locations where it is made, the nationalities of the labor, the nationalities of the copyright holders, and the source of the money.⁷⁵

These policies set the stage for an intricate financing arrangement that significantly benefited New Line. Although publicly disclosed budget numbers for film productions are often imprecise, in this case they help provide a basis for understanding the *Lord of the Rings* deal, which was detailed in an article in the *New Zealand Listener* in October 2000.⁷⁶ New Line, the rights holder to the *Lord of the Rings* films, sought a business partner in New Zealand to finance the actual making of the movies, and it found one in the Bank of New Zealand (BNZ). BNZ temporarily purchased the rights to *The Lord of the Rings* from New Line and created a subsidiary company responsible for financing the production of the trilogy at a cost of roughly \$300 million dollars. Thus, during the production process, *The Lord of the Rings* qualified as a domestic "New Zealand film" because a New Zealand company held the rights, because the films were shot there, and because the majority of the crew was local.

With the BNZ funding the production, New Line set about securing additional revenue streams from the films, and did so in ways that, again, recalled the company's history as an independent distributor as well as its then place in Hollywood. First, New Line presold the distribution rights for the films in different markets across the world, using the Cannes Film Festival as a primary site for attracting these international sources of financing.⁷⁷ Deals like these were typical for New Line from the very start, though none had ever reached this scale. "New Line financed the film," Kristin Thompson writes, "in traditional independent fashion by preselling the foreign distribution rights."⁷⁸ As a miniscule distributor in the



FIGURE 19. Shot in New Zealand, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy uses the country's landscapes to represent the fantasy world of Middle Earth.

1960s, New Line acquired many of its films at Cannes; attending the festival market was part of the company's yearly activities and brought it into contact with numerous foreign distributors. In the 1980s and early 1990s, New Line made it a regular practice to presell its films to foreign distributors, along with television and home video companies in the United States and abroad.

In a stockholder memo from 1990, Shaye emphasized that New Line's international division "provides an important function in the pre-sale of our up-coming productions, as well as the management of the distribution of our product to markets overseas. From this operation, not only do we obtain further stability for our productions and marketing independence, but we gain valuable world-wide insight into prospective production decisions."⁷⁹ This passage reads as especially prophetic regarding *The Lord of the Rings*, given the multiple ways the film's financing, production, and distribution were transnational. Again in a 1998 report to the company's corporate parent, Time Warner, Shaye emphasized territorial presales' critical importance for the company, situating presales first among several strategies for "managing risk aggressively."⁸⁰ Thus, although New Line had much greater financial reserves to draw on when it produced *The Lord of the Rings*, it accessed a consistent, definitively international strategy to make the trilogy.

Yet another element of New Line's prefinancing of the films speaks to its position as a Hollywood studio. As part of its deal with Zaentz and Miramax, New Line obtained all merchandizing rights for consumer products related to the *Lord of the Rings* films and secured franchise partners while the films were in production.⁸¹ As this book amply shows, New Line was aggressive and often innovative in forging franchises, going back to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. But the company reached new, extreme levels of franchise arrangements with *The Lord of the Rings*. By the time *Fellowship of the Ring* arrived in theaters in December 2001, more than forty companies had licensed *The Lord of the Rings* for use in a wide range of



FIGURE 20. The decision to shoot the films in New Zealand created financial benefits for New Line Cinema.

assorted goods.⁸² Despite the film's PG-13 rating, violence, and dark imagery, New Line developed a two-stage merchandising plan, with some toys aimed at kids in the four- to seven-year-old range and another group of toys for children seven and older.⁸³ Many of these products were thus aimed at younger consumers, including video games, toys, collectibles, and trading cards.⁸⁴

The company scored an early deal in mid-2000, more than eighteen months before the release of the first film, with Marvel Enterprises' subsidiary Toy Biz for the trilogy's "master toy license," which included "action figures, dolls, marbles, 'plush' toys, flying toys and watches."⁸⁵ Toy Biz paid New Line between \$20 and \$25 million for the license, and New Line would also receive 14 percent of wholesale revenues.⁸⁶ In addition to toys, video games, and trading cards, New Line licensed *The Lord of the Rings* for such varied products as "Cadbury's chocolate bars; Alternative Software mouses, mouse-mats and screen-savers; Samuel Eden socks and slippers; Ravensburger jigsaw puzzles; . . . and Downpace 'sculpted plastic and ceramic drinkwear."⁸⁷ New Line partnered with Burger King on a \$20 million cross-promotional deal for *Fellowship of the Ring* and a \$70 million deal with electronics company JVC that covered all three films.⁸⁸

New Line made most, if not all, of these deals at the same time that the BNZ subsidiary was financing the trilogy's production, meaning that New Line was generating revenue from the films while having directly invested very little. This revenue, combined with the territorial presales, covered an immense amount of the production costs. In late 2000, Michael Lynne reported that New Line had secured "close to \$180 million in international guarantees" through its territorial presales.⁸⁹ This revenue, combined with merchandising licensing revenue and the New Zealand tax incentives, would, he said, keep New Line's financial exposure on *The Lord of the Rings*' production budgets "to not more than \$20 million a picture."⁹⁰

The final piece of the financing puzzle placed New Line firmly within Global Hollywood. Lynne stated that New Zealand tax breaks would contribute about

“\$10 million–\$12 million per film,” or between \$30 and \$36 million to the total cost of the *Lord of the Rings* production.⁹¹ This amount, equal roughly to 10 percent of the production budget for the entire trilogy, would have been significant. Yet other reporting on this deal suggests that the New Zealand government, using taxpayer monies, contributed much more to the making of *The Lord of the Rings*. Since the films were treated officially as a “New Zealand production,” the Income Tax Act dictated that BNZ receive a 33 percent tax write-off on the films’ cost. Given the films’ combined cost of \$300 million, BNZ got to write off \$100 million in taxes. Effectively, the New Zealand government subsidized the Bank of New Zealand in exactly this amount. By this accounting, New Zealand taxpayers paid for one-third of *The Lord of the Rings*—the entire cost of one of the films. New Zealand paid for a Hollywood blockbuster, and New Line got it for free.

Just as *The Lord of the Rings* achieved a new scale of filmmaking for New Line, so too did the company’s tightfistedness reach new extremes. This deal was fundamentally transnational in its blend of private capital and state funds. *The Lord of the Rings* was at times a New Zealand product, and at other times, and in the last instance, it was a commodity owned and sold by New Line Cinema, one piece of a United States–based media conglomerate that operated around the world. New Line had engaged in the international cinema trade since it started distributing Czech films to college campuses in 1967. With *The Lord of the Rings*, the company reached an unexpectedly grandiose zenith in its use of these practices.

The financing of *The Lord of the Rings* might appear unsavory, as everyday citizens paid for an entire Hollywood film. But according to other interpretations of the deal, it benefited New Zealand culturally and economically. Kristin Thompson’s study of the *Rings* franchise emphasizes that the trilogy boosted New Zealand employment and tourism and “rebranded” the nation’s image, and she makes passing reference to “a controversial tax scheme” that benefited New Line.⁹² A good portion of news coverage about the production likewise pointed to the films’ benefits to New Zealand. A story in the *Waikato (New Zealand) Times* estimated that the Queenstown economy “was boosted by \$15 million during filming. Wellington gained a record \$450 million profit from film companies this year. More than 1,700 people were on the project’s payroll—98 per cent of those were New Zealanders. Use of New Zealand’s picturesque scenery, from Hinuera in the Waikato to Alexandra in the South Island, will bring tourism gains.”⁹³

Without question, *The Lord of the Rings* significantly raised New Zealand’s international profile. The country and its landscapes were heavily promoted within and in association with the films, such as in the “New Zealand: Home of Middle Earth” campaign that the New Zealand government trademarked and used. Further, the *Lord of the Rings* production sparked an influx of investment into the media sector of the nation’s economy, and Peter Jackson used these films to augment his special-effects company, WETA, and its infrastructure.⁹⁴

All the same, the entire deal raises questions about cultural and economic globalization, about public cultural policy, and about the role and power of

nation-states in relation to the transnational flow of private capital. In fact, New Zealand finance minister Michael Cullen and other figures in the country *did* raise these questions. Their criticism of the way *The Lord of the Rings* used state funds led to a transformation in New Zealand's film support mechanisms. Multiple parties also disagreed with the way that the massive revenues generated by the films were distributed, including Peter Jackson and Saul Zaentz. In the end, the impressive negotiation that produced these films and their success in theaters and on home video had some negative consequences for the very network of agencies and people that made the project happen.

Perhaps most important, the story of the *Lord of the Rings*'s financing contributed to the legend of both the films and New Line. The public discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*' budget spoke to the "risk" that New Line was taking on this intellectual property. At the same time, public discussions of the budget also signaled to potential audiences that they could expect films of epic scale and top-notch production values. The discussions about the international presales, merchandising deals, and tax incentives spoke more directly to fellow industry players and suggested that New Line had maintained its practice of being cost-conscious in making the trilogy. At one point during the films' production, *Rings* executive producer Barry Osborne tried to deflect attention from the continuous reporting about the budget: "I think talking about exact budget numbers throws the attention away from the project."⁹⁵ What Osborne missed here was the fact that the budget for *The Lord of the Rings* played an integral part in defining the project as a cultural phenomenon. Amid the pervasive discussion of New Line's risk and the trilogy's budget, *Variety* asserted in May 2001 that "at this stage, anything less than the highest grossing film of all time would seem like a disappointment."⁹⁶ This sentiment was typical of the discourse around *The Lord of the Rings* in the industry and popular press. Like the first act of a Hollywood movie, the protagonists had been singled out and presented with once-in-a-lifetime challenges of unprecedented proportions. Audiences of this legend-in-the-making could eagerly watch the outcome over the next two acts.

FANTASTIC MARKETING

The production of *The Lord of the Rings* was inventive on many levels, but in order to entice audiences to see the films, New Line also innovated its marketing activities. As Suzette Major has written, New Line had to draw two specific groups to the movies: people who were already fans of Tolkien's books and those who were unfamiliar with them.⁹⁷ To attract general audiences, New Line engaged in many traditional forms of marketing and publicity. In addition to the cross-promotional deals with Burger King, JVC, and other franchise partners, New Line spent around \$50 million in such conventional advertising venues as trailers and print ads for *Fellowship of the Ring*.⁹⁸ Kristin Thompson indicates that the company spent an additional \$31.4 million on traditional ad buys for the second film in the series, *The*

Two Towers.⁹⁹ While the scale of these promotional campaigns might have been novel for New Line, such expenditures were typical of Hollywood blockbusters.

Much of the traditional publicity, including trailers, print ads, and publicity junkets, endeavored to convey the notions of “journey,” “fellowship,” and “family.” Through the repetition of these themes, the promotional campaigns for *The Fellowship of the Ring* and the entire trilogy sought to blur distinctions between the films’ narrative and the process through which they were produced. In advance of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for instance, publications signaled the “epic” challenge of making the films, quoting performers whose statements aligned with the “war story” trade narrative described by John Thornton Caldwell.¹⁰⁰ One story, noting actor Viggo Mortensen’s especially physical role in the film, reported that he had lost a tooth in the process. The same article connected Peter Jackson to the film’s diegetic world in saying that the “bearded and portly director . . . was as barefoot as a Hobbit during recent interviews.”¹⁰¹

Such homologistic discourses were especially pronounced around the time of the final film’s release. In an interview with the *Liverpool Daily Post*, for instance, actor Elijah Wood said, “Going on this journey with a fellowship of people and returning having grown and changed. Being so immersed in my life in New Zealand and Middle Earth I didn’t know what my own life meant any more, which is kind of similar to what [my character] Frodo goes through.”¹⁰² Likewise, in a short speech given at the world premiere of *The Return of the King* in Wellington, Robert Shaye stated: “At the end of our trailer for *Return of the King*, it’s written that it is ‘the end of the journey.’ When I first saw that trailer, the copy-line reminded me of an old and wise adage . . . ‘The journey is the destination.’ How apt that thought is for all of us, and what an odyssey it has been. . . . And, I don’t think this journey of *The Lord of the Rings*, for us, will ever conclude.”¹⁰³ Sometimes even film critics joined in. In her review of *The Two Towers*, for instance, Manohla Dargis wrote that attending a screening “comes with the feeling that we’re doing more than simply watching a film but have, rather, embarked on an epic journey with like-minded travelers.”¹⁰⁴

However, the more innovative and arguably more effective marketing for *The Lord of the Rings* occurred online. Indeed, the internet played an unusually important role as a platform for promoting the films and harnessing participatory fan activity that was shaped into publicity for *The Lord of the Rings* and for New Line. In a May 1999 report, Shaye predicted that “the internet will grow into a powerful and vastly popular tool for targeted, low cost marketing and consumer data gathering. This includes trailers, chat rooms, and eventually even the possibility of market research on the web.”¹⁰⁵ This was an accurate forecast of exactly the way the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy gained immense publicity over the Internet. It also recalls New Line’s history of engaging in highly targeted marketing for its niche films on college campuses and elsewhere.

Shaye's optimism about the internet's commercial potential was typical in the movie industry at the time. An article in *Variety* from 2000 summed up this online potential: "Netizens are the dream moviegoer—endlessly loyal, with enough expendable income to cough up the coin to see a movie several times."¹⁰⁶ Such thoughts were propelled by the exceptional internet promotion for the low-budget horror film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The film presents itself as an assemblage of "found footage" taken by three film students who search in the woods for evidence of the "Blair Witch." In the year leading up to its release, a cryptic and gloomy website presented audio and video snippets, still images, and other textual material that played the film straight as featuring historically real people and events. This website, along with promotional "documentaries" on television, created intense hype around the film, which earned around \$30 million in its first weekend of wide release; eventually it made \$200 million in total. Thereafter, the website for *The Blair Witch Project* was held up as a signal example of how companies could use the internet as a cost-effective means of publicizing movies to a huge number of people.¹⁰⁷

New Line actively used the internet to promote its films prior to *The Lord of the Rings*. It was especially strong in this regard with *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, for which the company organized an advertising partnership with AOL. This promotion entailed a highly developed website that included "Austin Powers news, exclusive photos, trailer downloads, [and] memorabilia." Further, New Line held a dozen advanced screenings for the film in cities around the country and sold tickets exclusively to AOL subscribers through that company's Moviefone.com website.¹⁰⁸ Just two months before AOL purchased Time Warner, New Line again worked with AOL to promote *The Spy Who Shagged Me* on home video. New Line's online work with the Austin Powers sequel was so successful, in fact, that one journalist paired it with *The Blair Witch Project* as another "movie energized by the Web" in 1999.¹⁰⁹

New Line began publicizing *The Lord of the Rings* online long before the films entered theaters. Just months after AOL merged with Time Warner in 2000, New Line secured "The Lord of the Rings," as well as the titles of each of the books and upcoming films in the trilogy, as AOL keywords. A New Line marketing executive announced at the time, "We will be using the Internet significantly to maintain our audience and keep them up-to-date with what will be coming."¹¹⁰ The company put a behind-the-scenes promotional trailer for the trilogy on the Web on April 7, 2000, and 1.7 million people downloaded it within the first day, nearly doubling the number that had watched the trailer for *The Phantom Menace* in the same time.¹¹¹ In early January 2001, New Line significantly updated the official website for the trilogy, www.lordoftherings.net, adding a large amount of new content, new interactive functionality, and augmented participatory elements. Press reports claimed that the website would now have new "video and audio clips, an

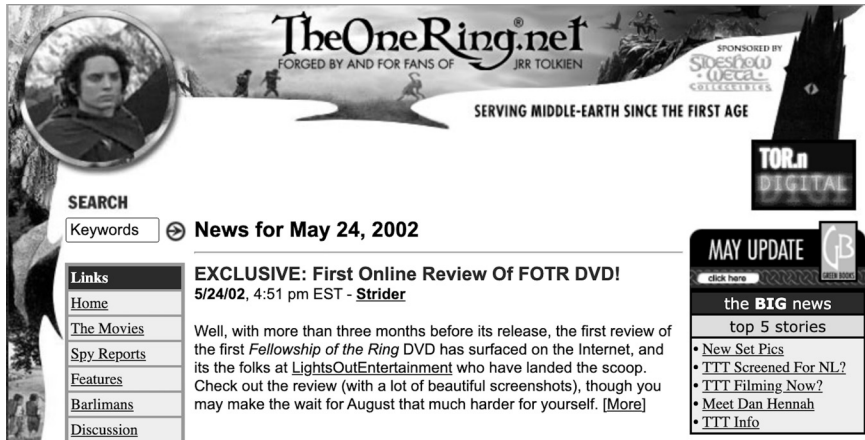


FIGURE 21. The J. R. R. Tolkien fan website TheOneRing.net played a crucial role in building hype for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy while the movies were in production.

interactive map of Middle Earth, chat rooms, screen savers, interviews with cast members, links to other Tolkien sites,” and behind-the-scenes material from the trilogy’s production.¹¹²

Peter Jackson and his team were highly involved in marketing and promoting *The Lord of the Rings* online, as they generated and made available material from the films’ production. Moreover, Jackson delivered much of the information about the films on the official and other websites. By providing abundant but curated access to information about the films’ making, Jackson and New Line helped create the sense that online viewers had exclusive information, helped connect the journey in the narrative of the films to the “journey” of their creation, and perhaps most important, helped appease fans of the novels, people with especially high expectations who might be skeptical about the adaptation process.

In fact, New Line partnered with fan-operated websites to generate and circulate publicity for the films. A year before *The Fellowship of the Ring* was released, there were “at least 400 fan sites exclusively devoted to the production. Many of them feature countdowns to the first film’s opening and list not just how many days remain, but hours, minutes, and, yes, seconds.”¹¹³ Key among these fan-run sites was www.TheOneRing.net, which launched in 1999 as a site for fan-generated news about the production, unsanctioned pictures of the production, and reports about other topics related to *Lord of the Rings* fandom.¹¹⁴ After dealing with a number of conflicts between the website’s owners, New Line, and members of the production team, New Line allowed one of the website’s managers to visit the set, speak with some of the actors, and post a detailed report on her experience. Having achieved this legitimacy, TheOneRing.net provided a semiregular flow of information and rumor that fueled fans’

The screenshot shows the Ain't It Cool News website interface. At the top left is a navigation menu with links for COOL NEWS, CONTEXT, REVIEWS, LIVE CHAT, FORUMS, MULTIMEDIA, and CONTACT. Below this is a search bar and a 'More AICN' dropdown. The main content area is titled 'LATEST NEWS' and dated 'Sunday, December 16, 2001'. It features several news items: 'Story #11,000 - Harry Checks Out LORD OF THE RINGS: FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING!!!', 'Moriarty's FOTR Review!!!', 'LORD OF THE RINGS Contest!', and 'Tenacious D Contest Here!!!'. On the right side, there are links for 'Harry was bored with Soderbergh's OCEAN'S ELEVEN', 'AfricaAICN: 8 Mile; Ali; PatientAbuse; Idols; Amanda; Mr Bones; FlyingOverPurgatory; Calabash African Film Festival', and 'Harry reviews Cameron Crowe's VANILLA SKY!!!'. The top right corner has an 'AOL 6.0 click here' link, and the bottom right features a 'Play webMillion.com' advertisement with a photo of a man wearing sunglasses.

FIGURE 22. Reactions to *Fellowship of the Ring* posted to the movie fan website Ain't It Cool News just before the film's theatrical release in North America. Previously, amateur critic and website founder Harry Knowles had published a report from the set of the trilogy.

interest and, in doing so, served as a de facto source of publicity and marketing for New Line.

Another major locus of online hype around *The Lord of the Rings* was Ain't It Cool News (AICN; www.aint-it-cool-news.com). Founded by Harry Knowles in 1996, AICN quickly gained a following as a place for amateur film reviews, speculation about upcoming films, and behind-the-scenes reports about films currently in production, often provided by anonymous sources. Although AICN was not devoted exclusively to *The Lord of the Rings*, it was an important site of fan discourse about fantastical movies and other “geek” genres. As Kimberly Owczarski has written, AICN gained the anxious attention of Hollywood executives, as the site occasionally appeared to have direct effects, both positive and negative, on movies' box office performance.¹¹⁵

Kristin Thompson notes that Knowles and Peter Jackson had established a correspondence years before the making of *The Lord of the Rings* and that Jackson was forthcoming with Knowles about the production. Given the reputation AICN had acquired in the industry, New Line was initially concerned about this communication, but the company subsequently relented because the publicity AICN offered about *The Lord of the Rings* proved so positive.¹¹⁶ Eventually, Knowles went to New Zealand and New Line permitted him to “hang around the sets during the final days of shooting and to attend the wrap party.” In return for such access, the *New York Times* reported, New Line “was rewarded with a multipart, near book-length series of gushing reports that Mr. Knowles filed on his site and that were linked to dozens of other movie and Tolkien sites.”¹¹⁷ Although later set visits from AICN staff were not met as warmly as Knowles's, the positive publicity and sense of authentic insider information provided AICN with credibility at the same time the site appealed *Lord of the Rings* fans.

Using the internet in this fashion allowed New Line to reach fans *internationally* in a more direct and financially efficient way than would have been possible through conventional marketing and advertising. In this respect, the online marketing for *The Lord of the Rings* aligned with the international aspects of the production itself. Yet, also like the production, coordinating the international scope of the trilogy's advertising was not a simple, one-directional endeavor but another instance of New Line employing partnerships that relieved the company of many direct responsibilities. When New Line presold the distribution rights to the trilogy in various international markets, it also provided those distributors with some control over the local promotion of the films. New Line supervised these promotional efforts, with considerable input from director Peter Jackson as well, but they were directly handled by the different distribution partners.¹¹⁸

Publicity activities varied considerably in different locations, ranging from placing toys inside candies in Italy to installing a "Hobbitland" space in a department store in Madrid.¹¹⁹ Because of the way New Line worked with but ultimately relied on the marketing efforts of the film's different international distributors, *Variety* observed, the marketing for *Fellowship of the Ring* was "akin to a guerrilla campaign fought by a loose network of local tribes with an unrivaled knowledge of the terrain. . . . The result is a handcrafted approach to marketing that would be impossible for a studio to achieve."¹²⁰

This story differentiated between New Line's scrappy, patchwork global campaign and the unified, centralized approach that a bigger studio could manage, and specifically contrasted New Line with Warner Bros.' work on the first *Harry Potter* film, which came out only weeks before *The Fellowship of the Ring*. But that was not the only item that drew comparisons between New Line and Warner Bros. or between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. Much of the discussion focused on *The Fellowship of the Ring* and New Line's standing within AOL Time Warner. The press also noted that *Harry Potter* received much more public support from AOL Time Warner executives than *The Fellowship of the Ring* got.¹²¹ Considerable press coverage discussed *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *Harry Potter* as competing with each other, and it commonly divided the films' audiences based on age and maturity.¹²² One article quoted numerous fans anticipating the films, with younger kids commonly identifying with the younger characters in *Harry Potter*, while a *Lord of the Rings* fan quipped, "It's like comparing . . . 'The Cat in the Hat' and Hamlet' [or] 'Judy Blume' and 'Shakespeare.'"¹²³ And although executives from both New Line and Warner Bros. largely downplayed the competition between the movies, New Line executives occasionally sought to distinguish the films. One asserted, "Warner has concocted a more Disneyesque property with 'Harry Potter.' It's a good film, but it's for kids. . . . Ours is hipper, cooler. It's the best of independent cinema."¹²⁴

The executive's invocation of "independent cinema" signals another major element of New Line's promotion of *The Lord of the Rings*. In addition to the themes of

“journey” and “fellowship,” New Line publicized the films as prestige pictures with artistic distinction. As the article noted, “Lord of the Rings’ . . . is being pitched as the work of a visionary filmmaker, the end-product of more than six years of obsession by Peter Jackson . . . there’s real anticipation, especially after the screening of footage at Cannes, that the trilogy could be, despite earlier misgivings, creatively exceptional.”¹²⁵ New Line’s efforts to associate *The Lord of the Rings* with artistic quality and cultural prestige grew as the films garnered positive critical attention, financial success, and widespread popularity after their theatrical and home video releases. Indeed, the *Lord of the Rings* films proved to be a rare exception among big-budget fantasy genre films in achieving success in all these areas.

Reviews of *The Fellowship of the Ring* fell in line with New Line’s promotion of the trilogy as prestige pictures. One critic returned to the comparison with *Harry Potter*: “Both movies are faithful to their origins, but one offers genuinely bold, imaginative filmmaking, the other a stodgy, sugar-coated crowd-pleaser.”¹²⁶ Comments like this suggest that New Line’s efforts to situate *Fellowship* as something “more” than a typical Hollywood-style fantasy film were actually bolstered by the proximity of its release to *Harry Potter* in winter 2001. Many reviews of *Fellowship* evaluated its faithfulness to the book, the scale of its action and special effects, and its appeal to general audiences and Tolkien fans alike; reviews were generally positive in all these assessments. Selling magic as Hollywood glamour and monsters as serious drama, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was an achievement in movie marketing, advertising, and publicity.

ACCOUNTING FOR SUCCESS

On their release in theaters in December 2001, 2002, and 2003, each of the *Lord of the Rings* films had sizable opening weekends, particularly for Christmastime releases. The films continued to earn significant money over subsequent weeks in January and even February; in industry jargon, the films had legs. The release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was notable for following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. But along with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Fellowship* appeared to benefit from being a fantasy film that fulfilled audiences’ desires for escapism. The movie set box office records in multiple countries and was the highest-grossing December release in North America, setting the stage for the next two films. As had been the case with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films in the 1980s, each of the *Lord of the Rings* films earned more than the previous installment, with *Fellowship* making \$867 million, *Two Towers* making \$921 million, and *Return of the King* making \$1.1 billion at the global box office.¹²⁷ *Return of the King* was only the second film in history to cross the \$1 billion mark, after *Titanic* (1997). Each film did exceptionally well in international markets, with each one earning two-thirds of its revenues outside the United States.¹²⁸ Global in its production, global in its marketing, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was likewise global in its box

office victory. New Line earned nearly \$1 billion in 2001, and more than \$400 million of that revenue came from outside the United States.¹²⁹ New Line was a globally successful movie studio.

The *Lord of the Rings* films were similarly remarkable in the home video market. Some at New Line attributed the films' snowballing theatrical revenues to the expansion of the different films' viewership via home video releases. Just as digital technologies impacted the films' aesthetics and marketing, so digital technology played a crucial role in *The Lord of the Rings* on home video. Specifically, the *Lord of the Rings* films benefited greatly from the advent of digital video discs, or DVDs. These films' DVD releases, in fact, became one of the defining elements of the entire franchise. The DVD format was launched in 1997 and was a boon to the movie industry for a number of reasons. First, it had anti-encryption software intended to thwart illegal copying of movies, and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act forbade individuals from cracking the DVD encryption. Second, DVD discs were cheaper to produce than VHS tapes, allowing studios to price them less expensively than VHS. Third, DVD was intended to be a sell-through commodity that could obviate the video rental business model, thus providing home video revenues more directly to the studios.¹³⁰ Yet, to consumers, DVD was promoted for its superior image quality, superior sound quality, and the inclusion of "bonus features," including commentaries by the director or other members of the crew, behind-the-scenes documentaries, deleted scenes and alternate endings, and in some cases entirely new or expanded versions of a film.¹³¹

As a division of Time Warner, which had played a central role in the development of DVD technology, New Line was an early adopter of the format. By the end of 1998, the company had nearly forty titles on DVD. New Line consistently augmented its DVD releases with various bonus features. For instance, the company placed numerous extras on the DVD release for *Next Friday*, including interactive storyboards.¹³² The disc also provided users with DVD-ROM access to recordings of the film's website and promotional emails that New Line had distributed, recycling promotional material into "bonus" entertainment on the DVD.¹³³ New Line also created a special label for some DVD releases, called Infinifilm, specifically intended by AOL Time Warner to encourage consumers to purchase rather than rent videos.¹³⁴

New Line scheduled its distribution of *The Lord of the Rings* on video in tandem with the films' theatrical releases. Each year, the company released the previous installment on VHS and DVD in the August leading up to the next film's release in December. So, for example, *Fellowship of the Ring* came out on VHS and DVD in August 2002, and *The Two Towers* arrived in theaters in December 2002. In this way, the home video releases maintained public awareness of the franchise as New Line sustained an active publicity campaign for the trilogy at multiple points throughout the year. Just as important, New Line released alternate cuts of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* on DVD with significant amounts

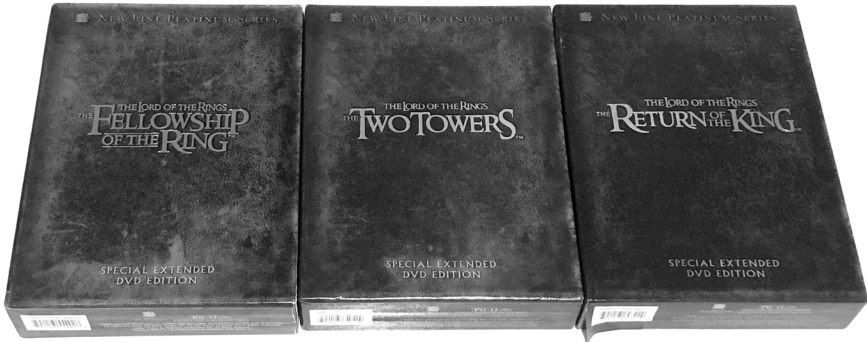


FIGURE 23. In addition to “standard” DVDs, New Line released “Special Extended DVD Editions” of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, effectively keeping different forms of the films in circulation throughout a calendar year. Photo by Suzanne Scott.

of footage not seen in the previous theatrical or video releases. The company released these “Special Extended” DVDs in November, following the previous August home video release; for *The Return of the King*, the company released the expanded version in December 2004, extending the tradition of a *Lord of the Rings* film appearing during the holiday season for one more year. For New Line, these alternate DVDs contributed to a perpetual cycle of distribution activity for *The Lord of the Rings* in multiple venues and formats from December 2001 through December 2004.

The promotional discourse about DVD as a platform for viewing movies matched well with the ways New Line promoted *The Lord of the Rings* DVDs. Just as DVD provided an enriched aesthetic experience, so too did these films represent technical and artistic achievements. Just as DVD provided “bonus” features, so too did these DVDs feature *new* versions of the films and copious behind-the-scenes material. Building on these notions, the publicity discourse around the extended DVD versions treated them as the most “authentic” versions of the films, as adaptations of the novels and as expressions of Peter Jackson’s artistic vision.

The Fellowship of the Ring earned around \$400 million in home video revenue, and *The Two Towers* earned \$343 million and *The Return of the King* \$310 million.¹³⁵ New Line sold the television rights for the films to AOL Time Warner’s broadcast division for \$160 million in a tidy bit of corporate “synergy.”¹³⁶ By 2005, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy had “made more than \$4 billion in retail sales from worldwide film exhibition, home video, soundtracks, merchandise and television showings, and cleared more than \$1 billion [in profit] for New Line after payments to profit participants.”¹³⁷ All the reporting celebrated the trilogy’s earnings as a triumphant outcome of a story of monumental challenge in the film business. From the very beginnings of this story in 1998, when the press had asserted that New Line was gambling on *The Lord of the Rings* after it acquired the project from Miramax,

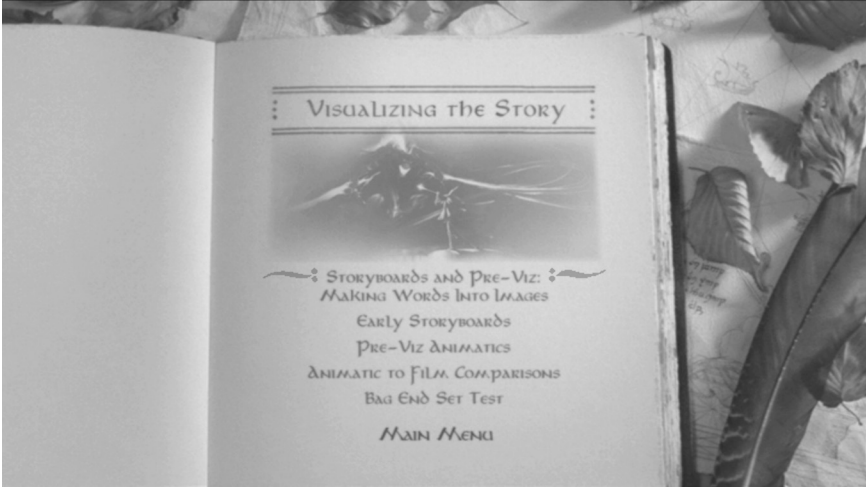


FIGURE 24. The Special Extended DVD Editions of the *Lord of the Rings* films featured alternate, longer cuts of the movies and copious “bonus features,” including behind-the-scenes material about the making of the films.

through the films’ marketing and release in theaters and home video, the entire project appeared to have done nothing but grow in stature and achievement.

Alongside the snowballing financial success of *The Lord of the Rings*, the films also gained increasing critical renown and prestige. These films present a rare, though not unique, instance among big-budget blockbusters in which critical acclaim and revenue grow apace with each other. *Rolling Stone* critic Peter Travers, for instance, named *Fellowship* the best film of 2001 before it had even been released in theaters, which helped set the trajectory for the franchise’s renown.¹³⁸ *The Fellowship of the Ring* was nominated for thirteen Academy Awards, an unusually high number that generated considerable positive press for New Line.¹³⁹ The nominations prompted the company to release two new television trailers for the film and also to campaign for the film among Academy voters in the industry trade papers and websites. The film won only four of these awards, for Best Cinematography, Best Makeup, Best Special Effects, and Best Original Score. But, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported, the fact that *Fellowship of the Ring* was even nominated for Best Picture, Best Director, and other top-tier awards established the film’s “artistic integrity.”¹⁴⁰

The same article noted that the Best Picture nomination “should also propel its domestic gross over the \$300-million mark,” suggesting the way the film’s critical appraisal supported its financial performance.¹⁴¹ *Fellowship of the Ring* was also nominated for four Golden Globes; awards from the WGA, DGA, and SAG; and twelve British Academy Film Awards. The critical reception of *The Two Towers* was not as exceptional as that for the first film, and it was nominated for six Academy

Awards and two Golden Globes; it won two technical Oscars, Best Sound Editing and Best Visual Effects. Some in the press commented on this lower number of nominations and noted that Peter Jackson was not nominated for Best Director.¹⁴² But Miramax's *Gangs of New York* (2002) was viewed as receiving a more serious snub, as it was nominated for ten awards but received none.

The Return of the King's eleven nominations for Academy Awards, among other honors, functioned like the victorious third act in a blockbuster narrative. The sweep of all major Oscars by *The Return of the King* appeared as a validation, even vindication, of the entire trilogy as an artistic *and industrial* achievement. With billions of dollars earned in multiple windows and markets and the most prestigious forms of acclaim awarded by Hollywood, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was a singular success for New Line.

ACCOUNTING FOR FAILURE

New Line tried to apply lessons that it ostensibly learned from *The Lord of the Rings* on several films that followed, but two of them, *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) and *The Golden Compass* (2007), turned out to be highly publicized failures. *Snakes on a Plane* continued New Line's decades-long tradition of making and marketing a horror film with campy, comic elements. More pertinently, the company took a cue from *The Lord of the Rings* and relied on the internet as a primary mechanism for publicizing *Snakes on a Plane*. It began developing the movie in 2004 as a pick-up from Paramount.¹⁴³ Early press coverage referred to the project as "odd" but also noted that Samuel L. Jackson would play the lead role.¹⁴⁴ Jackson, in fact, stated that he agreed to appear in the film only because of the unusual title.¹⁴⁵

Indeed, the high-concept title helped the film garner widespread attention on the internet far in advance of its release. In August 2005, screenwriter Josh Friedman wrote in a blog post about having been approached to do a pass on the screenplay, but mainly emphasized how much he loved the concept and the title.¹⁴⁶ In mid-December, *Variety* reported: "Though New Line has done no publicity and the thriller is eight months away from release, buzz has reached epic proportions. . . . The title alone has already inspired songs, merchandise and growing use of the phrase to signify something on the order of 'It could always be worse.'¹⁴⁷

Numerous parody songs, websites, and other manifestations of fan activity proliferated over the course of the year in advance of the film, leading the press to consistently refer to *Snakes on a Plane* as a "phenomenon."¹⁴⁸ At least one article compared *Snakes on a Plane* to *The Blair Witch Project* in its ability to build online hype for a film.¹⁴⁹ "Growing Internet buzz has made August's 'Snakes on a Plane' one of the summer's most anticipated offerings," an April 2006 story stated, and a later article declared, "New Line Cinema created a viral firestorm around its promotion for *Snakes on a Plane*."¹⁵⁰ In the wake of *The Lord of the Rings*, many in the film industry held high expectations for *Snakes on a Plane*. The hype around

the film grew so intense that New Line actually did reshoots of the film to accommodate fans' expectations; specifically, the producers added more gore, nudity, and cursing to ensure it received an R rating.¹⁵¹ The project thus responded in a relatively direct way to fan input via the internet, a seemingly ideal case of the "participatory culture" that Henry Jenkins described contemporaneously.¹⁵²

In addition to the online buzz, New Line used another form of promotion for *Snakes on a Plane* that also used digital technologies in interactive ways. The company worked with a tech company to create a system through which people could send personalized messages to one another's phones in the voice of Samuel L. Jackson.¹⁵³ Industry observers treated this gimmick as highly innovative, with one story stating that "studios agree the Snakes on a Plane campaign was by far one of the hottest they've seen this year."¹⁵⁴ New Line bolstered these novel forms of promotion with more conventional marketing tactics, spending around \$20 million on television and print advertisements.¹⁵⁵

Despite these efforts, however, *Snakes on a Plane* earned only \$15 million in its first weekend, half of what industry experts had projected, and eventually it earned around \$34 million in North America.¹⁵⁶ The film's financial performance was immediately positioned as a disappointment, prompting many writers to discuss the mismatch between the film's buzzy buildup and its actual performance. One Warner Bros. executive stated, "It's not enough to have just the cool promotion."¹⁵⁷ The *New York Daily News* claimed that New Line had "bungled" its handling of the film, which had an "Internet-only audience."¹⁵⁸ In short order, *Snakes on a Plane* came to symbolize the vagaries of using the internet for publicity and for gauging commercial potential, a kind of reversal of the legend around *The Blair Witch Project*.

Whereas *Snakes on a Plane* demonstrates a miscalculation regarding marketing, *The Golden Compass* was just a conventional box office failure. New Line modeled the film's financing, production, and distribution on *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, if New Line's post-*Lord of the Rings* plan truly was to continue making midsize genre films with the occasional large tentpole movie, then *The Golden Compass* was the company's first—and final—effort in this vein. The film is based on *Northern Lights*, the first book in a trilogy of young adult fantasy novels titled *His Dark Materials* by author Philip Pullman. By the time New Line acquired the property in early 2002, all three books had sold millions of copies and won numerous awards. *Northern Lights* in particular had won the 1995 Carnegie Medal, a British award specifically for children's books, as well as Children's Book of the Year at the 1997 British Book Awards.

The project held much promise, especially in the context of the movie business in 2002, when *Fellowship of the Ring* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* had done for the fantasy genre what *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* had done for superhero films. One news article from that year had the title "Studios Look into the Future, See Fantasy Films," and, as noted above, the Hollywood studios produced a string

of fantastical movies in the ensuing decade.¹⁵⁹ In the period leading up to the film's production, the *New Yorker* opined that the *His Dark Materials* novels had "acquired a following rivaling that of 'The Lord of the Rings,'" while the headline of a 2004 news story about the trilogy read, "Move over Harry Potter."¹⁶⁰

Like the *Harry Potter* books and films, *The Golden Compass* features a child protagonist, a twelve-year-old girl, who grows through her teenage years over the course of the novels. However, *His Dark Materials* is more morally ambiguous than the *Harry Potter* series, and the trilogy aims to level an allegorical critique of organized religion, contrasting in this way with the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Some in the press discussed this aspect of the books as a potential problem for New Line's adaptation, but one also asserted, "New Line executives don't sound afraid of any potential controversy about the films."¹⁶¹ Throughout the film's development, the press commonly discussed the author's negative feelings about organized religion as well as the anti-religion sentiments articulated in the book, presenting these elements as challenges that New Line needed to resolve.

This was not the only difficulty for *The Golden Compass*. New Line hired playwright Tom Stoppard to write the screenplay in 2003, and there were early indications that New Line was not entirely satisfied with the initial drafts.¹⁶² New Line engaged Chris Weitz to direct the film in May 2004. Weitz had written a number of successful Hollywood films but had only codirected comedies with midrange budgets, including *American Pie* (1999) and *About a Boy* (2002). Weitz disregarded Stoppard's previous drafts and worked on a new script that downplayed the story's anti-religious aspects.¹⁶³ However, after months of writing and development, including preliminary design and special-effects work, Weitz left the project in late 2004, having "concluded that he didn't have the expertise to tackle such a technologically difficult movie."¹⁶⁴

New Line struggled to find a new director throughout much of 2005 and signed the "comparatively unknown" Anand Tucker in August after weighing fifty other possibilities.¹⁶⁵ Yet, in another bizarre reshuffle, Weitz returned to *The Golden Compass* in May 2006 after Tucker left the project due to "creative differences."¹⁶⁶ Budgeted around \$180 million, production on the film began in September 2006 at Shepperton Studios. As it had done with *The Lord of the Rings*, New Line sought to cover its exposure on the film's budget through a variety of tactics. Shooting in the United Kingdom allowed the company to use a new tax credit system to support filmmaking.¹⁶⁷ Likewise, New Line worked with a local bank, the Royal Bank of Scotland, to co-finance the film.¹⁶⁸ Finally, as with *The Lord of the Rings* and many other films throughout its history, New Line raised production funds by selling the distribution rights to *The Golden Compass* in foreign markets. All told, New Line asserted that these financial arrangements covered around two-thirds of the film's production costs, or roughly \$120 million.¹⁶⁹ Like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Golden Compass* was transnational in its financing, production, marketing, and distribution, and also featured an international cast and crew.

As it had done with *The Lord of the Rings*, New Line began promoting *The Golden Compass* within the industry as a “quality” fantasy film that would make a big splash in the holiday season of 2007.¹⁷⁰ Such intraindustrial promotion sought to signal to other studios that New Line remained in the blockbuster game. The company used the internet for publicity as well, though not as extensively as it had for *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁷¹ But press coverage of the film continued to be uneven leading up to its release in theaters. Some positive accounts cited New Line’s success with *The Lord of the Rings* and Disney’s recent success with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005).¹⁷² However, the film garnered persistent negative reactions among religious organizations, which the press reported on widely. “A conservative Catholic organization,” one paper noted, “has urged a boycott of the film, accusing author Pullman’s source material of being anti-God and anti-Catholic. This in sharp contrast to the 2005 Disney film Narnia, which was embraced by Christian groups.”¹⁷³ After the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights called for a boycott, the ultraconservative organization Focus on the Family also attacked the film, the source novel, and New Line Cinema in an online article titled, “Sympathy for the Devil.”¹⁷⁴

The financial performance of *The Golden Compass* became a story of its own, with twists and turns that reflected the high stakes of the project as well as the variable ways in which its success or failure might be measured. The film only made \$26 million in North American theaters in its first weekend, a figure that the press negatively contrasted with the film’s \$180 million production budget, “with marketing adding tens of millions more” to the overall cost.¹⁷⁵ As of mid-January 2008, the film had made only \$67 million at the US box office, but some stories emphasized that it had made over \$315 million worldwide.¹⁷⁶ Yet this did not represent a success for New Line, as the company had sold those rights to foreign distributors. And although some reports indicated that New Line might still make a profit on the film, depending on home video revenues and television licensing, the film was widely regarded as a major flop.¹⁷⁷

Thus, *The Golden Compass* failed for New Line in exactly the opposite way that *The Lord of the Rings* succeeded. While the company may have funded the film in a way that characteristically reduced its direct financial risks, this same practice cut the company out of reaping any significant rewards. New Line had produced both *The Golden Compass* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in ways that were typical both of an independent distributor and of a Global Hollywood studio. But for such a strategy to work, the film had to succeed like a product of Global Hollywood. The *New York Times* scrutinized the importance of *The Golden Compass* for New Line: “New Line has recently had a harder time justifying its existence because of a string of flops. . . . Time Warner will decide in the coming months whether to renew the employment contracts of New Line’s chairmen, Robert K. Shaye and Michael Lynne.”¹⁷⁸

This kind of speculation was not new. It occurred in the wake of New Line's disastrous run in the fall of 1996, when Time Warner sought buyers for the company, and again following the AOL merger and the failure of *Little Nicky*. But in late 2007, the sentiment had a new resonance because of yet *another* ongoing industrial narrative in which New Line was embroiled. In a twist of dramatic irony, this other public narrative grew out of the financial success of *The Lord of the Rings* and the legend of industrial triumph that it generated.

In February 2005, Peter Jackson filed a lawsuit against New Line Cinema claiming that he had not received proper royalties for the *Lord of the Rings* films.¹⁷⁹ The issue related in part to New Line's status within AOL Time Warner and the conglomerate's position of being both vertically and horizontally integrated. According to one report, the suit alleged that New Line did not get fair market value when it sold a host of subsidiary rights to other elements of the AOL Time Warner empire, including home video, television, and music, but rather made deals that benefited the larger corporation.¹⁸⁰ Jackson and his representatives requested an audit of New Line's finances to assess whether the director had been paid fairly, and asserted that New Line refused to provide such an audit.¹⁸¹ Saul Zaentz had already sued New Line for similar reasons in 2004, but New Line had provided Zaentz with an audit and ultimately settled for \$168 million.¹⁸²

The situation with Jackson and New Line did not resolve so smoothly. New Line made no official comments about the case immediately after it was filed, but a public war of words ensued. The production of *The Hobbit* got caught up in the mix, too. Following *The Lord of the Rings*, it seemed apparent that New Line should want to extend this franchise, and fans of the films called for an adaptation of *The Hobbit*. Jackson publicly expressed interest in directing *The Hobbit* in February 2004, just as *The Return of the King* was headed to the Oscars.¹⁸³ Following the lawsuit, however, any production of *The Hobbit* was put in doubt. Press coverage linked the two issues directly, intensifying a narrative of creativity versus commerce, auteur versus studio.¹⁸⁴ In addition, a confusing rights issue also troubled any possible adaptation of *The Hobbit*, as New Line had the rights to *produce* a film based on the novel but MGM held the rights to *distribute* any such movie.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, New Line's option on the property required that production begin by 2009.¹⁸⁶ Despite these many issues, in October 2006 MGM announced a plan to partner with New Line on *The Hobbit*, and representatives for MGM also expressed interest in having Jackson direct it, which caused fans to celebrate.¹⁸⁷

New Line still did not want to hire Jackson, however. In November 2006, Jackson announced through TheOneRing.net that he was no longer engaged to direct *The Hobbit*.¹⁸⁸ His successful use of the fan website cast New Line in a negative light with the franchise's most vocal supporters. Fans railed against New Line on TheOneRing.net, which had been instrumental in promoting *The Lord of the*

Rings, and on many more websites like it.¹⁸⁹ TheOneRing.net even organized a campaign for fans to write letters to New Line asking that the company accept Jackson's request for an audit.¹⁹⁰

Shaye inflamed the situation with public comments he made in January 2007. “[Jackson] got a quarter of a billion dollars paid to him so far, justifiably, according to contract, completely right,” Shaye stated. “And this guy . . . turns around without wanting to have a discussion with us and sues us and refused to discuss it unless we just give in to his plan. . . . I don't want to work with that guy any more. Why would I? So the answer is he will never make any movie with New Line Cinema again while I'm still working at the company.”¹⁹¹

In a twisted way, the statement proved true: New Line did produce *The Hobbit* with Jackson directing, but only after Shaye left the company. For his part, Jackson insisted that his issue was with “the studio” and not a specific individual. He also said that “it is regrettable that Bob has chosen to make it personal. I have always had the highest respect and affection for Bob and other senior management at New Line and continue to do so.”¹⁹²

Shaye later softened his rhetoric in public discussions of his “personal quarrels” with Jackson.¹⁹³ A December 2007 press release announced that New Line and MGM would cofinance a production of *The Hobbit*, with the novel now split into two separate films, and that Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh would serve as executive producers.¹⁹⁴ New Line would handle the films' North American distribution, while MGM would distribute them internationally. Despite the problems between New Line and Jackson, MGM had remained committed to working with the director and informed New Line that it would not produce any version of *The Hobbit* unless Jackson was involved.¹⁹⁵

The press release announcing *The Hobbit* was notable for combining business and personal issues. It stated that the lawsuit between Jackson and New Line had been settled, and quoted Jackson as saying, “I'm very pleased that we've been able to put our differences behind us, so that we may begin a new chapter with our old friends at New Line. ‘The Lord of the Rings’ is a legacy we proudly share with Bob and Michael, and together, we share that legacy with millions of loyal fans all over the world.” Likewise, Robert Shaye asserted, “We are very pleased we have been able to resolve our differences,” similarly blurring business and personal issues.¹⁹⁶

Thus ended a multiyear legal dispute that played out in public as a war of personalities. Once again, New Line had taken part in a narrative about itself. In this case, however, New Line appeared as the villain largely because fans around the globe viewed Jackson as the singular force behind the beloved *Lord of the Rings* films. But the late 2007 press release offered New Line a way out. This moment promised fans that they could look forward to a return to the fantasy realm of Middle Earth. It told the media industry that New Line would rise to the challenge of producing a globally successful Hollywood blockbuster once again.

END OF THE LINE

New Line was thus in a characteristic state of flux as 2007 came to a close. The company had dominated the movie industry in the early part of the decade. However, it was also only just emerging from a protracted legal and public relations battle with Peter Jackson. There were real possibilities that it could close the decade just as powerfully as it had begun it, with the release of *The Golden Compass* and the promise of two films based on *The Hobbit*. Yet *The Golden Compass* proved to be a failure, and development of the *Hobbit* films continued to be troubled for several more years.

Given the many transformations New Line underwent from its inception in 1967 onward, and given the consistent public reporting about the company's slippery industrial position and unstable identity, it is not surprising that this dis-course persisted even in 2007. In February the *New York Times* titled an article "For New Line, an Identity Crisis."¹⁹⁷ Several New Line films had failed at the box office in 2006, and the company had some erratic business dealings after Shaye suffered a severe illness in 2005 with a lengthy recovery. The *Times* story pondered, "Would New Line try to repeat the success of *The Lord of the Rings* and make blockbusters aimed at global audiences, instead of 'the urban comedies and horror films of its past'?" Shaye split the difference, indicating that "the studio would continue to aim for its traditional zone of comedies and genre films, with a couple of high-brow dramas and one or two big-budget bets."¹⁹⁸

New Line celebrated its fortieth anniversary in fall 2007. The company threw a gala benefit with the Film Society of Lincoln Center. It also produced a forty-five-minute documentary about its history, hosted by Charlie Rose and featuring interviews with many of the directors and actors who had worked with the company. In this moment, it appeared that the company could look back on itself and make some claims about its role in American cinema over the past forty years. Nevertheless, a piece in the *Los Angeles Times* simultaneously observed, "New Line's biggest challenge is finding a way to focus its fuzzy identity."¹⁹⁹

Leadership at Time Warner held a distinct view of the company's identity. Company president Jeffrey Bewkes publicly referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as an "anomaly" for New Line and said, "The business they're in is a combination of all those 'little titles,' which add up to a steady stream for the indie business, and occasional but pretty regular big commercial franchises, like 'Rush Hour,' 'Lord of the Rings' or 'The Golden Compass.'"²⁰⁰ Bewkes accurately described the primary ways New Line grew over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, which in this book I have called opportunistic eclecticism and incorporative heterogeneity.

But Time Warner's attitude toward New Line soon proved to be much more critical. On February 28 and 29, 2008, press outlets announced that Time Warner would fold New Line into Warner Bros. Pictures, ending New Line's operation

as an autonomous unit.²⁰¹ Bob Shaye and Michael Lynne would leave the company, and hundreds of New Line staff would later be laid off. As a subdivision within Warner Bros., New Line would make fewer movies than it had previously and would stick to the “smaller, low-cost ‘genre’ horror and comedy pictures upon which it built its name.”²⁰² Jeffrey Bewkes stated that New Line must “focus on being an indie, rather than being halfway to a major.”²⁰³ Another dramatic irony, calling New Line “indie” at the same time Warner Bros. eliminated any possible independence it might still have within the giant media conglomerate.

The press covered the story like a drama, with headlines like “Bewkes Nukes New Line,” “New Line, Old Story: A Small Studio Falls,” and “New Line’s Leaders Are Ousted as Warner Studio Takes Control.”²⁰⁴ In her often-provocative industry blog *Deadline Hollywood*, Nikki Finke caustically described the move in personal terms: “Bob [Shaye] had a long and successful run: now it’s over because of hubris and karma.”²⁰⁵ She also released interoffice memos that announced the decision to New Line workers. In one of these, Shaye stated:

This is, of course, a very difficult and emotional time for all of us who have worked at New Line. . . . For our part, we will be stepping down as Co-Chairmen and Co-CEOs of New Line. This was a painful decision, because we love New Line and the people who work here have been like our second families. But we will be leaving the company with enormous pride in what all of us at New Line have accomplished together. From its humble beginnings 40 years ago, our studio has created some of the most popular and successful movies of all time. Those movies are a tribute to the amazing creative energy and entrepreneurial abilities of the talented people at New Line.²⁰⁶

In my interactions with Bob, he likewise expressed both immense pride in New Line’s history and deep sadness about the way his work with the company ended.

The possibility that New Line might get folded into Warner Bros. was not new, going all the way back to 1996. It seems possible that the success of *The Lord of the Rings* simply stalled Time Warner from carrying out the move sooner. But once it happened, the press attributed it to several factors. The disappointing performance of *The Golden Compass* was frequently mentioned. The decision was also linked to Bewkes’s larger efforts to cut costs across the conglomerate.²⁰⁷ Bewkes himself mentioned broad changes in the global film business and cited the increasing importance of international markets for Hollywood films. In a world where Hollywood made 70 percent of its revenues outside North America, New Line’s strategy of selling the international rights made less sense.

Bewkes also invoked “digital distribution” as a force that was transforming the industry.²⁰⁸ Indeed, the subsequent decade would see the rise of Netflix as a streaming service, followed by Amazon Prime Video and others. New Line’s demise as an independently operating studio thus lined up not only with “the great studio pullback of ’08” but also with a major transformation in the composition of Hollywood and its priorities.²⁰⁹ For forty years, New Line had grown, adapted, and

transformed in a movie business that likewise had grown and transformed, from the early days of New Hollywood through the formation of Conglomerate Hollywood. It epitomized so much of what made these industrial configurations distinct and noteworthy. As Hollywood transformed into a multimedia, franchise-driven, global business, New Line traveled in step and carved an industrial and cultural space of “niche” entertainment for “niche” audiences and beyond. It was a model of flexibility in an industry where flexibility only grew in value as an attribute. It was a model of avoiding financial risks while taking on offbeat, “risky” movies. It was a model of industrial creativity, even in the many cases in which its films lacked artistic creativity. It was a model of independence, even as “independence” became ensnared within the larger conglomerate Hollywood system. It was an irregular company within an incongruous culture industry.

Conclusion

Legends of the Film Industry

After 2008, New Line Cinema persisted as a small division within the Warner Bros. studio, itself a division within the Time Warner conglomerate (now Warner Bros. Discovery; the mergers never stop). This book details how, prior to this moment, New Line was defined by significant transformation over time, and shows also that its cultural and industrial identity was unstable at any given moment. Inheriting a distinctively mixed catalog accumulated over forty twisty years in film production and distribution, the post-2008 New Line Cinema maintained some fidelity to its former self, particularly as it continued to trade in humor, horror, and Hobbits. But the division also adjusted its strategies in keeping with the designs of its corporate parent and in line with larger trends in the media business.

Following the departure of Bob Shaye, Michael Lynne, and many others, Warner Bros. appointed Toby Emmerich as New Line's president and CEO. As with so many aspects of New Line's story, Emmerich's ascent to this position was unconventional; indeed, one wonders if there is such a thing as a conventional upward career path in the movie business. Emmerich joined the company's music department in 1992 and worked in that area for years. After he wrote and produced the film *Frequency* with New Line in 2000, the company appointed him as head of production in 2001, replacing Michael De Luca. Press reports suggested that the position would present a challenge for Emmerich and also noted how different his calm disposition was from his predecessor's.¹ New Line had a number of big hits under Emmerich's supervision, including *Elf* (2003), *The Notebook* (2004), and *Wedding Crashers* (2005). Although he was successful, some in the industry perceived Emmerich as deviating from New Line's established identity with such light material, pulling the company away from horror cinema specifically.² For some, Emmerich's rise to the top of New Line "was hard to fathom," as one report

noted, because he had approved the production of several flops, including *Son of the Mask* (2005).³

Despite the significant reduction in its financing, annual slate, and autonomy, Emmerich asserted that New Line would continue to operate in much the same way as it had. “So much of the company I’ve worked at for the past 16 years is being reconceived,” he said, “but I’m committed to maintaining New Line’s corporate DNA as a creative, aggressive entity. I plan to continue New Line’s long and productive history as a company that can create hits in new niches—whether it’s expanding the horror genre . . . or turning an R-rated comedy like ‘Wedding Crashers’ into a blockbuster.”⁴

Another article reported that New Line’s development would be “restricted to genre-specific material like horror, low-budget comedy and urban,” with “urban” serving as a codeword for “Black.”⁵ Seeking to eliminate redundancies with Warner Bros. and to cut costs across the conglomerate, Time Warner planned for New Line to scale back to six to eight pictures a year with budgets averaging \$30 to \$40 million.⁶ Hundreds of staff were let go, and about a decade later, in 2017, the New Line unit had only thirty-five employees.⁷

New Line gained positive press in 2010 for not only surviving the Warner Bros. takeover but actually flourishing.⁸ A number of hit films continued New Line’s shift toward more lighthearted fare. This run included romantic comedies like *He’s Just Not That Into You* (2009) and *Valentine’s Day* (2010), as well as high-profile films like *Sex and the City* (2008) and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (2008), both of which featured well-known stars and sizable production budgets.

As the decade proceeded, in fact, New Line produced a handful of spectacle-driven action films, including *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* (2012), *San Andreas* (2015), and *Rampage* (2018), all of which starred Dwayne Johnson, aka “The Rock.” As per New Line’s reorganization, the division served merely as a production company on these films, while Warner Bros. conducted all the marketing and distribution. Further, New Line’s spectacle films were generally smaller-scaled in comparison to Warner tentpoles of the period, such as *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) or *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). An exception to this was *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2012), a New Line production that cost nearly \$200 million and proved to be a massive failure even more severe than *The Golden Compass*.

New Line’s biggest movies were several films adapted from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, set in the same world as *The Lord of the Rings* and starring some of the same actors. Even after the verbal scuffles between Shaye and Jackson, the *Hobbit* adaptation remained troubled. MGM had lingering financial difficulties and the Writers Guild of America strike of 2007–8 delayed the crafting of a screenplay.⁹ Moreover, New Line was once again sued for not paying royalties properly from *The Lord of the Rings*, this time by the Tolkien estate, which sought to block production on *The Hobbit*, and the lawsuit was not settled until 2009.¹⁰ Further, the

project's creative control was jumbled. An initial plan in 2008 entailed Guillermo del Toro directing two films with Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh producing. Yet del Toro left the project in 2010 after two years of development work.

Jackson returned to direct, with a plan to make not two but three films based on this one book. Splitting single fantasy novels into multiple films became something of a trend in the 2010s, with the final *Harry Potter* novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, split into *Part 1* (2010) and *Part 2* (2011), the final *Twilight* book split into *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn—Part 1* (2011) and *Part 2* (2012), and the final book in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, *Mockingjay*, also split into two films (2014, 2015). The case of *The Hobbit* seemed conspicuous, however, as all those other examples had been planned as double films before filming began, whereas the third *Hobbit* film was split off after production had commenced.¹¹ Extending the novel in multiple ways, the *Hobbit* film trilogy added scenes and characters merely mentioned in the book, or in some cases mentioned in another work by J. R. R. Tolkien, or invented scenes and characters original to the films.

Production on the *Hobbit* films spanned many months in 2011–12, followed by additional shooting in 2013. Warner Bros. financed the films, spending nearly a billion dollars on the trilogy. This investment paid off. Following the pattern of the *Lord of the Rings* films, Warner Bros. released each *Hobbit* movie in mid-December in 2012, 2013, and 2014 consecutively. Each film earned around \$1 billion at the global box office, thus making this new trilogy match the \$3 billion theatrical take of the original trilogy, not adjusting for inflation. Also like *The Lord of the Rings*, Warner released extended versions of the *Hobbit* movies on home video. Although the *Hobbit* films were financially successful, they never generated the same sense of innovation and victory that New Line had achieved with *The Lord of the Rings* a decade earlier.

In fact, although the *Hobbit* trilogy had the New Line logo attached to it, and although the series linked directly with the company's most successful films, the press occasionally treated the films as a success for *Warner Bros.* and situated New Line as a mere label placed on certain films when it was convenient for Time Warner to do so. Regarding *The Hobbit* films, the *Los Angeles Times* asserted, "With its blockbuster 'Harry Potter' and Christopher Nolan-directed Batman franchises both now concluded, Warner Bros. is hungry for franchise pictures."¹² Similarly, when the first *Hobbit* movie cleared \$1 billion, a Warner Bros. executive stated, "Together with our partners at MGM and New Line, everyone at Warner Bros. congratulates Peter Jackson and his entire cast and crew on the extraordinary success of this film."¹³ New Line's success was now ultimately Warner Bros.'s success.

Following the 2008 reorganization, New Line also sustained its consistency in working on outrageous comedies. The division continued its multiracial stoner series with *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (2008), followed by *A Very Harold & Kumar 3D Christmas* (2011). In the 1990s and early 2000s, New Line had established a history with other stoner films like *Friday*, and otherwise had

released PG-13-rated films about juvenile and outlandish male characters, such as *The Mask* and *Austin Powers*, with the occasional family-friendly comedy like *Elf* mixed in. But the breakout success of the R-rated *Wedding Crashers* in 2005 set a new trajectory that New Line would follow through to the end of the 2010s. Likely also inspired by the success of *The Hangover* (2009) from Warner Bros. and *Bridesmaids* (2011) from Universal Pictures, New Line produced a run of adult-oriented, raunchy comedies, many of which featured ensemble star casts in plots that entailed grown-up characters involved in playfully deviant, R-rated behavior. *Hall Pass* (2011), *We're the Millers* (2013), *Horrible Bosses* (2011), and *Horrible Bosses 2* (2014) all derive their humor from adults behaving in socially inappropriate ways, often related to professionalism, romance, or domestic family life. These traits can also be found in New Line's reboot of *Vacation* (2015), as well as *Game Night* (2018) and *Tag* (2018), the last two of which depicted grown-ups engaging in childlike play to bizarre extremes.

New Line was strongly associated with horror films from the 1980s onward, and the division continued in this genre after 2008. It partnered with Michael Bay's company Platinum Dunes on reboots of *Friday the 13th* (2009) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010). As reboots that aimed to be grittier and more "authentic" than the source texts, these films adhered to a more contemporary industrial strategy and cinematic sensibility.¹⁴ The films followed in the wake of several blockbuster reboots in the 2000s that sought to return to the beginnings of a well-known character, including Bruce Wayne/Batman in *Batman Begins* (2005) and James Bond in *Casino Royale* (2006). During this same period, Platinum Dunes produced a reboot of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) and remakes of *The Amityville Horror* (2005) and *The Hitcher* (2007). Rebooting became standard practice in Hollywood during the 2010s, allowing distribution companies to re-exploit existing IP resources across cinema, cable, and the increasingly important streaming services. As a pervasive intertextual and industrial strategy, rebooting suited the multimedia needs of the contemporary multimedia conglomerates.

But it would be incorrect to link New Line too strongly with horror reboots, just as it would be misguided to say that New Line itself was rebooted in 2008. Rather, New Line's most definitive contribution to the horror genre after 2008 was *The Conjuring* (2013), a newly developed intellectual property from the unit. With this film and the ensuing "Conjuring Universe" franchise, New Line caught onto and significantly shaped a new phase of ghost story cinema, dovetailing with the comparable *Insidious* film series (2010, 2013, 2015, 2018). Just as important, the *Conjuring* films successfully deployed a "shared universe" industrial and textual logic within the horror genre. This practice has important precedents, but the contemporary model and highest standard is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), initiated by *Iron Man* in 2008. Now consisting of more than twenty-five feature films and fifteen television series, the MCU presents characters and stories developed from Marvel superhero comic books in one, large diegetic world that has

its own internal historical development. Many MCU films have made more than \$1 billion at the global box office, and the franchise as a whole is estimated to have garnered over \$25 billion in total; this number does not include revenue generated by television, streaming, or merchandizing.¹⁵

Following the success of *Iron Man* and several subsequent MCU films, multiple Hollywood studios attempted to create similarly organized industrial intertexts out of their existing properties. Most of these efforts failed to create a franchise as sustained or internally logical as the MCU. Examples include Universal's attempt to create a "Dark Universe," based on monsters like Dracula and the Mummy, and Warner Bros.'s haphazard efforts to create a shared cinematic universe based on DC comic books. But, recalling the way in which New Line franchised Freddy Krueger across numerous texts to various consumers in the 1980s, New Line spun out a networked franchise from *The Conjuring* in the 2010s. Although the Conjuring Universe was not as expansive or as intricate as the MCU, New Line and Warner Bros. managed to promote the franchise as a "shared universe" well enough that critics and audiences came to regard it as such.

The first *Conjuring* film tells the tale of a family living in a haunted house and the "paranormal investigators" who seek to eradicate the problem. The researchers are based on real-life figures Ed and Lorraine Warren, who really did operate as ghost hunters from the 1950s through the 1980s and who found fame with the case that inspired the *Amityville Horror* book and film adaptations. Directed by James Wan, the film is stylistically sharp, affectively moody, and extremely effective in creating tension and jump scares. In these respects, *The Conjuring* resembles the director's film *Insidious* more than his gruesome breakout film *Saw* (2004).

Propelled by Warner Bros.'s expansive distribution power, *The Conjuring* earned more than \$300 million internationally. As one story reported, the film "surpassed all expectations for the genre, becoming the highest grossing Warner Bros. Pictures horror release within the past 15 years internationally, second only to the 1973 release of 'The Exorcist.'"¹⁶ Such reporting at once indicates New Line's diminished stature within Time Warner, to the point of occasional discursive erasure, and its continued financial importance to the conglomerate. Perhaps most important, it indicates how New Line's continued specialization in horror cinema managed to be rescaled to meet the global ambitions of Time Warner.

As characters, the Warrens provided obvious sequel possibilities, as the couple could investigate one haunted house after another in film after film. But *The Conjuring* also opened up indirect spin-off possibilities through the many cursed, freaky items that the Warrens collected in their house. One of these, a creepy doll named Annabelle that is the focus of a vignette in the film, became the center of the first movie derived from *The Conjuring*. Budgeted more modestly than *The Conjuring* at around \$6 million, *Annabelle* (2014) depicts a previous instance of the demon-possessed doll terrorizing a family before coming into the Warrens's possession. Reviews asserted that *Annabelle* was deficient in comparison to the first film, yet it earned \$250 million.

Annabelle was so successful, in fact, that it momentarily repositioned New Line's importance within Time Warner. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "New Line Cinema's low-budget horror film 'Annabelle' couldn't have come at a better time for parent company Warner Bros."¹⁷ Warner Bros. chief Kevin Tsujihara added, "New Line is a really important piece of the puzzle for having a really broad and diverse slate. . . . 'Annabelle' is a great example of the grittiness that New Line does so well. They are very scrappy, and they made a film that quite frankly wouldn't have happened at Warner Bros."¹⁸ With such qualified praise, Tsujihara at once pigeonholed New Line and yet also suggested that Warner Bros.'s singular focus on spectacular, tentpole blockbusters may not have been a fully sufficient business strategy in the 2010s, a period in which cable continued to be crucial to media conglomerates and streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu took on increasing importance to the media business generally.

New Line produced a direct sequel in 2015, *The Conjuring 2*, for over \$40 million, not including marketing and advertising costs, doubling the production budget of the original.¹⁹ Warner Bros. distributed *The Conjuring 2* in summer 2016 like a blockbuster, releasing it simultaneously on more than three thousand screens across sixty different international markets.²⁰ Supported by massive advertising, the film earned more than \$300 million internationally. From this point forward, New Line made a spate of films linked to *The Conjuring*, including two more films featuring the Annabelle doll, *Annabelle: Creation* (2017) and *Annabelle Comes Home* (2019); a backstory about a demonic nun seen in *The Conjuring 2* titled *The Nun* (2018); a loosely connected ghost story set in Los Angeles called *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019); and a third film focused on the Warrens, *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (2021).

In some of these cases, Warner Bros. treated the films as major releases. One report noted the scale and tone of the marketing for *Annabelle: Creation*: "Warner backed it with a full-frills advertising campaign—billboards, stunts designed to stir up online chatter—that combined to hammer home one message: This was a quality movie, not just some throwaway possessed-doll schlock dumped in the doldrums of summer."²¹ In this and other instances when Warner Bros. positioned a *Conjuring* Universe film as "quality horror," one gets a sense of New Line's post-2008 identity and status: it was a sideline genre unit that nevertheless had to represent the global power and cultural legitimacy of the massive Time Warner conglomerate (known as WarnerMedia after AT&T purchased it in 2018).

The *Conjuring* franchise was a boon for New Line and for Time Warner, a success often noted in the press. In a story about *Annabelle: Creation* (2017), for example, one article reported that it and other horror films were "providing a mid-sized lifeline to some studios that are struggling with their blockbuster IPs."²² In this manner, New Line's penchant for making small- and midrange films in distinct genres had continuing value in a rapidly shifting entertainment media business. Along these lines, Emmerich noted in 2017 the continued importance of smaller-scaled, targeted genre movies in the contemporaneous multiplatform

media context. “With all the entertainment options that exist,” he said, “it’s made the theatrical experience a harder target to hit. It has allowed an opportunity for more genre films . . . to thrive as counterprogramming.”²³ In 2018 when *The Nun* achieved the highest opening weekend of the series thus far, New Line’s value appeared transparent in both senses of the word. Although this unit had produced another hit, Warner Bros. earned much of the praise in the press, with one story reporting that “Warner Bros. dominated the top two spots of the weekend” with *The Nun* and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018).²⁴

In addition to the *Conjuring* franchise, New Line scored with a new, two-part film adaptation of Stephen King’s novel *It*. Warner Bros. promoted *It: Chapter One* (2017) and *Chapter Two* (2019) as blockbusters having broad appeal, despite their R ratings, with enormous and effective advertising campaigns and cross-promotions involving fast food restaurants. The two films earned \$1 billion combined.²⁵ Reflecting on these films as well as the *Conjuring* franchise, one article asserted, “New Line, which made its name as the home of ‘A Nightmare on Elm Street,’ has had to evolve with changing tastes and rising competition . . . [and the company’s] approach to horror has adapted. The films typically feature relatable characters and family themes in scary-movie settings, in contrast to the disposable victims of classic slasher films. That helps broaden their appeal.”²⁶

Not quite a shadow of its former self, as it made films that were generally bigger and ostensibly more accessible than it once had. Not exactly Warner Bros. by another name, either, as it made films and specialized in genres that the parent studio would not. But the post-2008 New Line wasn’t exactly New Line.

NEW LINE’S LEGACIES

In instances throughout this book, I discuss New Line Cinema’s “legend” and have referred to such industrial and cultural identity work as “legend building.” In numerous acts of self-mediation and automythography, New Line worked to construct and project a more or less coherent institutional identity. Further, the frequent coverage of New Line, its employees, and its films in the trade and popular press significantly contributed to, expanded, and complicated the company’s legend. Most of these enunciations and discourses aimed at a community of media industry professionals comprising New Line’s competitors and potential collaborators, and it is unlikely that New Line ever affixed itself firmly in the minds of a general public. People were fans of *Reefer Madness* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Rush Hour*; relatively few were fans of New Line Cinema.

But the cultural connotations and associations woven through these mediations and self-mediations are significant. They shaped the very course of New Line’s business operations, and, indeed, they help illuminate how media institutions more generally imagine themselves, theorize their function, and project images of themselves as a matter of course.²⁷ The New Line Cinema presented in this book

entails its films, its promotional materials for its films and for the company itself, its internal and external discourses, and the discourses that it provoked. Looking at New Line Cinema in this multidimensional way specifically helps illustrate how subject to transformation the company really was. New Line's mutability is precisely what made it successful and reflective of larger changes in the film industry and media culture.

New Line proved in the 1970s that there was a small but important market for highly esoteric movies on the cinema screens of college campuses and midnight movie theaters, a market that thrived precisely because of its desire for alternatives to mainstream cinema. Within this arena, New Line illustrated how tiny, eclectic, and opportunistic distributors could identify, appeal to, and cultivate small but dedicated audiences based on taste distinctions and, relatedly, social identities, particularly through targeted marketing and advertising strategies.

New Line was not the only company to pursue this market, but it was one of the rare companies to transfer this strategy into a more robust and sustained practice in the 1980s, and it managed to attract large-scale audiences and achieved truly significant financial rewards as a result. As the "New Hollywood" of the period prioritized a youthful cinema of spectacle and franchising across home video and myriad merchandise, New Line showed how these same principles could be deployed with minor genres, particularly inexpensive and violent horror films. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* reached broad audiences and consumers, even children, through clever textual use of cheesy humor and even cleverer exploitation of home video and other forms of franchising. At the same time, New Line showed how independent distributors of the 1980s were best served by keeping their belts tight, their ambitions measured, and their successes predictable.

Indeed, if we see the 1980s as a period of increasing sanitization and corporatization in both the American film industry and movie culture, then New Line also underscores how small, flexible distributors could succeed by making more eclectic and peripheral stories, characters, and genres appealing beyond their apparent limits. New Line's operations in the 1980s and into the 1990s indicate how the macro-scale industrial and technological changes of New Hollywood created opportunities to bring the margins to the mainstream, changing the very texture of "the mainstream" in the process. We know that the media business underwent intense corporate consolidation and increasingly prized high-concept tentpoles that could be re-exploited across multiple outlets and products. But sometimes, as with *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a company could grab hold of a franchise and ride it into the future or, with something like *House Party*, could franchise material that may otherwise have been viewed as narrow due to limited understandings of audiences' entertainment desires. In this last regard, New Line manifested an important aspect of American cinema by showing that Black cinema sometimes could be very important when it did not aim to be important.

New Line exemplifies Hollywood's incorporation of independent and specialty distributors in the 1990s, as the greater American media business came to more fully recognize the value of "niche" material in cinema and narrowcasting on cable. And while Fine Line Features illustrates that American culture continued to prize artistic pedigree, sophistication, and refinement, New Line's greatest *economic* value proved to be much less elegant. "Independent" could be smart like *The Player*, could be queer like *My Own Private Idaho*, or could be quirky like *Spanking the Monkey* (1994). But independent could also be stupid, and independent could be populist, and New Line's combination of all these things, coupled with its fiscal restraint and opportunistic eclecticism, is what made this independent especially attractive to Ted Turner.

After Turner bought New Line in 1993 and then merged with Time Warner in 1996, New Line illustrated the odd place of "independence" within the Conglomerate Hollywood system, particularly as specialty cinema came under the rule of the big media corporations. With its model of growth through incorporative heterogeneity, what New Line illuminated most from the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s is that offbeat cinema does not always pursue prestige and, further, that the boundaries of "offbeat" can sometimes look quite ordinary. Comedy is a conventional genre, to be sure, as is the action film, but *Dumb and Dumber*, *Blade*, and *Rush Hour* were all offbeat in their own way; they made New Line appear odd compared to most other studios, in any case. Looking back, also, to *The Lord of the Rings*, it is easy to view that franchise as the very essence of Hollywood. But doing so dismisses the unconventional path that led to the trilogy's production. It is easy to forget that the books appeared so odd to the industry at the time that *no other company but New Line* wanted to adapt them.

Indeed, one of the greatest lessons of New Line is that American cinema has been even stranger than we might originally think. New Line's story could be wrapped into a metanarrative of increasing homogenization of movie culture, a story about the co-optation of originality and innovation, as the company went from the unruliness of John Waters to the conventionality of *The Notebook*. But this presents too simple a trajectory, and even *this* oversimplified connecting of dots is quite unusual, when thoroughly examined. Consider that Toby Emmerich, who once organized soundtracks for films like *Austin Powers*, was promoted to president and chief content officer of Warner Bros. in 2017, giving him creative control over both Warner Bros. and the New Line unit.²⁸ Then consider that Warner Bros. replaced Emmerich with none other than Michael De Luca in 2022, reversing with bizarre symmetry their professional switcheroo at New Line twenty years earlier. Should we see these trajectories as astonishing, or should we understand New Line Cinema as providing excellent training for running Hollywood?

It is unlikely anyone could have predicted New Line's path through history, or that its place in the American film industry of the 2020s would be so different than it once was. But some of the lessons learned from New Line still resonate beyond

its contemporary iteration. If any company looked more like New Line than New Line during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it was Lionsgate. Founded in 1997, Lionsgate has been unusually successful as an independent film and television company. As Alisa Perren writes: “Instead of focusing on releasing the edgy, quality or quirky films favored by many indie distributors during the 2000s, Lions Gate primarily favored popular commercial genre fare targeted to clearly defined and often underserved demographic groups such as young adults, African Americans, Latinos, and aging boomers . . . much like 1980s-era New Line, it usually went straight for the money, primarily by acquiring content that proved to be ‘just a little too much.’”²⁹

The comparison to New Line appears apt on a developmental level also. Lionsgate gained economic stability with the *Saw* horror franchise but then had a blockbuster franchise with the *Hunger Games* series, a trajectory comparable to New Line moving from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and eventually to *The Lord of the Rings*. Lionsgate also sought out Black film and television audiences by partnering with Tyler Perry, who coproduced a string of films predominantly featuring Black performers that Lionsgate distributed. By addressing audiences with particular genres and franchises not dominated by the larger Hollywood studios, Lionsgate has followed a logic of incorporative heterogeneity similar to the one New Line historically traced.

There are important points of contrast, of course. Lionsgate has been much more consistently successful with action films, such as the *John Wick* series (2014–), a genre that New Line struggled with. Perhaps more significant, Lionsgate is as highly active and successful in television as it is in cinema, making it much more of a multimedia corporation than New Line ever was. New Line certainly had a strong Home Entertainment division, but Lionsgate’s work in television has sustained the company much more steadily and strikingly. Too, Lionsgate has sold many of its programs to streaming services like Hulu and Netflix, indicating how the company has aligned with changing industrial practices in Hollywood. As an example of how the two companies are related but are distinguishable, Lionsgate tried to develop a television series based on the same title, premise, and IP as *The Conjuring* at the time that New Line began making the film series.³⁰

Lionsgate’s ability to savvily operate across multiple media and delivery outlets illustrates what is perhaps the greatest industrial change since New Line’s restructuring in 2008: the rise of streaming video. Following more than a decade during which Netflix, Amazon Video, Hulu, and other services exploded the streaming business, the entertainment industry as a whole appeared to commit fully to streaming with the rollout of high-profile services Apple TV+ and Disney+ in November 2019. This was followed by NBC Universal’s Peacock in April 2020 and HBO Max in May; Sony is the only major studio without a proprietary streaming service. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States in March 2020 and home entertainment was the *only* entertainment, streaming

subscriptions rose precipitously.³¹ By 2022, newcomer Disney+ boasted nearly 120 million subscribers, while HBO Max had 73 million, Paramount+ 32 million, and Netflix remained in the top position with 222 million. It is clear that digital delivery will shape Hollywood's composition and business practices for some time to come, symbolized potently by Netflix's entry into the MPAA in 2019 (now the MPA).

All the same, it does not appear that "Streaming Hollywood" has been fully established as a new paradigm. Rather, during the past fifty years the number of outlets and venues for delivering entertainment media have only proliferated with the rare example of a platform or business model disappearing entirely, such as with VHS and the video rental store model. Instead, we see audiences in the United States and across the globe, however incongruently, viewing movies and television programs in movie theaters, on the old broadcast networks, or on one of the multitude of pay cable channels, while also subscribing to one or more of the major streaming services. In this multiportal, multiplatform environment, streaming services like Netflix and Amazon engage in strategies that recall the "two Hollywoods" that characterize Conglomerate Hollywood, as described by Thomas Schatz. The companies make or acquire a small number of high-budget, spectacle-driven productions with star casts, such as Netflix's *Red Notice* (2021), but much more of their offerings are smaller-scaled, niche productions that seek distinct audiences.

Amanda Lotz has described how cable television of the 2000s increasingly addressed "a collection of niche audiences," rather than the "mass" audience of the network era.³² The growth and proliferation of streaming portals has only intensified this logic of expansion, fragmentation, and particularization—a logic of incorporative heterogeneity—in media production and consumption.³³ I am *not* suggesting that New Line blueprinted the shape of Netflix, Prime Video, or any other streaming service. Rather, my point is that the strategies that made New Line successful and attractive to a multimedia corporate empire in the 1990s cohere as commonsense practices today. With this in mind, it seems instructive that in 2022 Amazon launched a blockbuster television series set in the world of Middle Earth, taking place before the stories told in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. New Line's biggest gamble—on an unproven property and genre—is now the proven ground from which an e-retailer appeals to media audiences around the world.

In this and other dispersed instances, one can see hints and reminders of New Line Cinema's forty-year journey through the media business. But New Line stands apart, all the same, and it played a distinctively important role in the history of American cinema. A maverick company that made and distributed maverick movies, often with great imagination, New Line's trajectory through time and the film industry was untypical and yet also illustrative. New Line Cinema was and is a legend in every sense of the word.

NOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

CC	Cornell Cinema
IDP	Ira Deutchman Papers, University of Michigan Special Collections Library
JWC	John Waters Collection, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives
KSUL	Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives
NMP	Norman Mailer Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin
RS-NLCP	Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers, University of Michigan Special Collections Library
WSBP	William S. Burroughs Papers, Ohio State University

INTRODUCTION. NEW LINE CINEMA AND THE SHAPE OF THE MODERN MOVIE BUSINESS

1. See David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 301–36; Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electric Rainbow, 1980–1989* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 142–59.

2. Jon Lewis examines Hollywood’s relationship with the counterculture in *Road Trip to Nowhere: Hollywood Encounters the Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 3.

3. On transgenerational media industries, see Derek Johnson, *Transgenerational Media Industries: Adults, Children, and the Reproduction of Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

4. Elements of this account come from Peter Alilunas, “Screen Arts and Cultures: A Department History,” College of Literature, Science, and Arts, University of Michigan,

November 2013, https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/ftvm-assets/documents/SAC%20History_%202013_Alilunas.pdf.

5. I interviewed Bob Shaye extensively over the course of three days in 2017. Yet much of what he shared with me consisted of facts, anecdotes, and even turns of phrase that I had encountered previously or would encounter as I conducted my desk research. I don't take our conversations as spin, as I have faith that Shaye aimed to give me an accurate, insider account. This was the legend he had been articulating over the course of decades. The experience was extremely helpful, and I am grateful for Shaye's generosity, time, energy, and incredible memory. The factual information he provided helped guide me through the material records. The more personal, individual information and many otherwise fascinating stories he shared proved to be largely incidental to the eventual shape and tone of this book. Shaye will certainly be the subject of a great biography someday, but that is not this book.

6. For those who wish to read more journalistic, behind-the-scenes, and sensational accounts of the independent cinema scene and New Line, which draw from interviews with industry insiders, see Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); Sharon Waxman, *Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2005).

7. For example, the *New York Times* published a lengthy portrait of Shaye in 1982 and included much discussion of New Line's financials and business strategies. Sandra Salmans, "Independent Distributor Finds Profits in Low-Grossing Films," *New York Times* (21 June 1982), D4. The *Times* published an even lengthier assessment of Shaye and New Line in 1994, on the heels of Turner's acquisition of the company. Bernard Weinraub, "Dues Paid, a Hollywood Upstart Joins the Mogul Set," *New York Times* (5 June 1994), 95. The *Los Angeles Times* published a twelve-column story about New Line in 1999. Patrick Goldstein, "Pater Familias: Bob Shaye Runs New Line Cinema, Home to Freddy Krueger and Austin Powers, as If It Were the Family Business, but You Don't Want to Get on Dad's Bad Side," *Los Angeles Times* (7 November 1999), SM22. *Variety* did another piece about New Line in 2002 that assessed the company's shifting identity. Dana Harris, "H'wood Maverick Shaye Still Does It His Way," *Variety* (18–24 February 2002), A12.

8. On paratexts, see Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Spoilers, Promos, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson provide a thorough and perceptive study of promotion and advertising in the audiovisual industries in *Promotional Screen Industries* (London: Routledge, 2015). For many excellent analyses of movies and advertising from a variety of perspectives, see Bo Florin, Nico de Klerk, and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *Films That Sell: Moving Pictures and Advertising* (London: British Film Institute, 2016).

9. Eric Hoyt, *Ink-Stained Hollywood: The Triumphs of American Cinema's Trade Press* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 6. For a discussion of the trade press as a source for media industries research, see Kenton T. Wilkinson and Patrick F. Merle, "The Merits and Challenges of Using Business Press and Trade Journal Reports in Academic Research on Media Industries," *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 6, no. 3 (September 2013): 415–31.

10. Hoyt, *Ink-Stained Hollywood*, 1.

11. Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Phillippe Meers (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell,

2011), 3. In his review of this edited collection, James Chapman is right to note that there are important precedents of this kind of scholarship. James Chapman, "Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies" (book review), *Screen* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 287–90.

12. Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," 3.

13. I am indebted to Colin Gunckel for this line of reasoning, which he articulated and helped me articulate in various fun conversations about New Line and the subject of his research, the Calderón family's cinematic endeavors in Mexico.

14. Gray, *Show Sold Separately*; John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 26.

15. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 155–64.

16. For overviews of media industry studies, see Daniel Herbert, Amanda Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar, *Media Industry Studies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 12–30; Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, "Introduction: Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?" in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1–16; Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, "Media Industries: A Decade in Review," in *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*, ed. Mark Deuze and Miriam Prenger (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 31–43; Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, "Introduction: Production Studies: Roots and Routes," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1–12; Paul McDonald, "Media, Industries, Research: Problematizing the Field," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (London: Routledge, 2022), 1–19.

17. This tradition continues in such works as Miranda Banks's study of the WGA, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Kate Fortmueller's work on screen actors and their institutions, *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021); Erin Hill's work on female labor in Hollywood, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016); and Eric Hoyt's study of film libraries, *Hollywood Vault: Film Libraries Before Home Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); and his more recent book about the Hollywood trade publications, *Ink-Stained Hollywood*.

18. Exemplary works that inspired me include Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* and *United Artists, Volume 2, 1951–1978: The Company That Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976, 1987); Richard B. Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan Is Born* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Richard B. Jewell, *Slow Fade to Black: The Decline of RKO Radio Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); and Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). Most recently, Routledge's Hollywood Centenary series, edited by Yannis Tzioumakis and Gary Needham, aims to provide comprehensive accounts of each of the eight Hollywood studios. Volumes published thus far include Tino Balio, *MGM* (London: Routledge, 2018); Peter Kramer, Gary Needham, Yannis Tzioumakis, and Tino Balio, eds., *United Artists* (London: Routledge,

2020); Frederick Wasser, *Twentieth Century Fox* (London: Routledge, 2020); and Matthew Bernstein and Eddy von Mueller, *Columbia-Sony* (London: Routledge, 2022).

19. Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 74–90.

20. This includes Chris Holmlund, *Female Trouble* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017); Richard Nowell, "Between Dreams and Reality': Genre Personae, Brand *Elm Street*, and Repackaging the American teen Slasher Film," *Illuminace* 24, no. 3 (2012): 69–101; Kristin Thompson, *The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

21. For example, Matt Connolly, "Underground Exploiteer: John Waters and the Development of a Directorial Brand, 1964–1981," PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2018; Yannis Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels, and American Independent Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

22. Key works in this area include Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, eds., *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Continuity and Change in Contemporary American Independent Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012); Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood meets Independent Cinema* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009); Geoff King, ed., *A Companion to American Indie Film* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Geoff King, Claire Malloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis, eds., *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Sherry Ortner, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis, *US Independent Film after 1989: Possible Films* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Perren, *Indie Inc.*; Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies*; Sharon Waxman, *Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

23. Perren, for instance, uses "independent" for independent distributors unaffiliated with the Hollywood studios and "indie" for Hollywood-owned specialty divisions, while Yannis Tzioumakis takes a discursive approach that attends to the variety of aesthetic, industrial, and cultural factors that have crystalized notions of "independence" in cinema at any given moment over one hundred years of film history. Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 8; Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 10.

24. Dana Harris and Adam Dawtre, "Can B. O. Postman 'Ring' Twice?: New Line Hopes to Emulate 'Harry' Hoopla," *Variety* (26 November 2001), 1, 70.

25. Newman, *Indie*, 4, 5, 15.

26. Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 3, 4.

27. Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 6.

28. Alisa Perren called for more dedicated study of distribution in 2013, and the field has been rewarded with many books and articles that have followed. Alisa Perren, "Rethinking

Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 165–71. Perren subsequently provided a thorough and thoughtful overview of the scholarship on distribution that ensued. Alisa Perren, “Reassessing the Space Between: Distribution Studies in Transition,” in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon-Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 67–86.

29. Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2003), 84. Courtney Brannon-Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald make clear that studios must still engage in such activities. Brannon-Donoghue, Havens, and McDonald, “Introduction: Media Distribution Today,” in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon-Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 5–6.

30. On the problem of periodizing Hollywood, in particular, see Murray Smith, “Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3–20.

31. Bob Shaye, “Corporate Memorandum,” 11, University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye—New Line Cinema Papers, “Business Documents—New Line Cinema—Corporate Memorandum, May 13, 1969,” Box 1; Tzioumakis, *Hollywood’s Indies*, 216–20. Tzioumakis attributes the phrase “great studio pullback” to Dade Hayes, “Picturehouse,” *Variety* (September 5, 2008), <https://variety.com/2008/film/markets-festivals/picturehouse-4-1117991737/>. The phrase “New Hollywood” can be found widely used throughout film scholarship, but “Conglomerate Hollywood” has been less commonly deployed, despite its excellent descriptive power. See, for example, Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hillary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York, Routledge: 1993), 8–36; Thomas Schatz, “The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood,” in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 13–42.

32. As indicated, the literature on “New Hollywood” is substantial and I do not provide an extensive review of it here. Derek Nystrom separates the pre- and post-1975 periods as “New Hollywood I” and “New Hollywood II.” Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film, Volume 3: 1946–1975*, ed. Cynthia A. Barto Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470671153.wbhafo62>. Geoff King divides “New Hollywood” similarly, devoting one chapter of his book to “New Hollywood, Version I: The Hollywood Renaissance” and another to “New Hollywood, Version II: Blockbusters and Corporate Hollywood.” Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002). Jeff Menne alters received timelines of New Hollywood to look at its “establishment” from 1962 through 1975, in *Post-Fordist Cinema: Hollywood Auteurs and the Corporate Counterculture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 25. Jon Lewis’s timeline of Hollywood’s engagement with the counterculture runs from 1967 to 1976, aligning with other scholars’ timeline for “New Hollywood I.” Lewis, *Road Trip to Nowhere*, 3.

33. Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” 18–19.

34. Jon Lewis, *Hollywood vs. Hardcore: How the Struggle over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), esp. 135–56; Justin Wyatt, “The Stigma of X: Adult Cinema and the Institution of the MPAA Ratings System,” in

Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era, ed. Mathew Bernstein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 238–63; Schatz, “The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood,” 18–19.

35. Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 9.

36. Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” 9, 17. On “high concept” cinema, see Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

37. Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, 116–17. Frederick Wasser provides an extensive study of home video’s development and impact on Hollywood; in this, he notes that many independents got absorbed within conglomerates whose revenues were bolstered by home video. Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 185.

38. Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” 30.

39. Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980–1996* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

40. Tino Balio provides an excellent study of Hollywood in the 2000–2010 period in which he details many of the issues raised by Schatz and others. Balio finds important continuities between the periods that Schatz designates as “New” and “Conglomerate” Hollywood: “To understand the structure of today’s Hollywood, one has to go back to the 1980s.” Tino Balio, *Hollywood in the New Millennium* (London: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of British Film Institute, 2013), 7. Schatz further blurs the chronologies of New Hollywood and Conglomerate Hollywood, writing, for instance, that “in the late 1980s and 1990s . . . the New Hollywood steadily morphed into Conglomerate Hollywood”; that millennial Hollywood might differ from “the New Hollywood of the 1990s”; and Hollywood’s “modern conglomerate era crystallized in the mid-1980s.” Thomas Schatz, “New Hollywood, New Millennium,” in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2009), 19, 20, 21. J. D. Connor uses the term “Neoclassical” to describe Hollywood and its films from 1970 through 2010, thus combining previous articulations of “New” and “Conglomerate Hollywood” periods. J. D. Connor, *The Studios after the Studios: Neoclassical Hollywood, 1970–2010* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

41. Schatz, “The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood,” 14.

42. See, for example, Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985); Daniel Steinhart *Runaway Hollywood: Internationalizing Postwar Production and Location Shooting* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

43. Douglas Gomery, “Motion Picture Exhibition in 1970s America,” in David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 397–416; Charles Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

44. Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: British Film Institute, 2007); Barbara Klingner, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

45. Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 5.

46. Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc, *The American Television Industry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of British Film Institute, 2009), 119.

47. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Fuchs, and Anthony Freitas, "Introduction," in *Cable Visions: Television beyond Broadcasting*, ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Fuchs, and Anthony Freitas (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 9.

48. Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 1–2.

49. Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," 31. Alisa Perren constructs a similar typology, saying that "a new, three-tier industry structure, consisting of the majors, studio-based indies, and true independents, developed," but in her account this industrial arrangement was in place by 1997. Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 145.

1. "TAKE A FILM WHERE IT WILL BE MOST APPRECIATED":
THE FIRST DECADE OF NEW LINE CINEMA

1. "Pictures: New Line Cinema Corp," *Variety*, 13 September 1967.
2. Bob Shaye, "Corporate Memorandum" (13 May 1969), 11, University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers (hereafter cited as RS-NLCP), "Business Documents—New Line Cinema," Box 1.
3. "Two Awards in Creative Cinema," Society of Cinematologists, RS-NLCP, "New Line Cinema Papers," Box 1.
4. Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
5. Wasson, 25, 153.
6. "Corporate Memorandum" (13 May 1969), 11.
7. "Stills from the Czechoslovak Film Festival," Museum of Modern Art, Film Department, 1967, www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2604.
8. "Pictures: French 'New Wave' Film Producers Now Number 23; Fresh Pic Outlook," *Variety* 215, no. 11 (12 August 1959): 22.
9. Jonas Mekas, "New York Letter," *Sight and Sound* 28, no. 3 (Summer 1959): 118.
10. Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," *Film Culture* 24 (Spring 1962): 6.
11. "New Cinema: An International Selection," Museum of Modern Art, Film Department, 1967, www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3831/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0005_3A.pdf.
12. "New Cinema: An International Selection."
13. Bob Shaye, "Bob Shaye Time Warner Board Presentation," 1, RS-NLCP, "Personal—Speeches—Time Warner Board Presentation 1997–1999," Box 1.
14. "Synopses and Critical Excerpts—Films in the Martyrs Program," Cornell Cinema (hereafter cited as CC), Folder "Martyrs of Love."
15. *Films Incorporated: Catalog No. 61, 16mm Sound Feature Films and Short Subjects* (Willamette, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica Films, 1962): 1, Donald Hall Collection, University of Michigan.
16. One notable exception is Andrea Comisky, "The Campus Cinematheque: Film Culture at U.S. Universities, 1960–1975," *Post Script—Essays in Film and the Humanities* 2011 (Winter–Spring): 36–52. Comisky focuses on the programming and culture on particular campuses, not the distributors that served these campuses, such as New Line. Similarly,

Nick Pinkerton wrote a journalistic but broadminded piece that argues for the importance of film societies in shaping “quality film” culture. Nick Pinkerton, “Breeding Ground: The Glory Days of the Campus Film Society Nurtured Movie Lovers Nationwide (Plus a Film-maker or Two),” *Film Comment* 2017 (November–December): 58–63. Otherwise, film societies and campus film culture of the 1960s and 1970s comes up adjacently in a number of scholarly studies on related subjects. See, for example, Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); David Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

17. Comisky, “Campus Cinematheque,” 49.
18. Comisky, 38, 49.
19. Eliot Tiegel, “The Film—New Stimulant on Campus.” *Billboard* 80, no. 15 (13 April 1968): 40.
20. “Film Company Is Purchased by Britannica,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1951.
21. Tiegel, “The Film—New Stimulant.”
22. Myron Bresnick, “The Art Film Goes to College,” *Billboard* 80, no. 15 (13 April 1968): 44.
23. *Audio Brandon Films, 1973–1974 / 16mm Sound Films* (Fleetwood Films Inc., 1972), 8, Donald Hall Collection, University of Michigan.
24. *Audio Brandon Films, 1973–1974*, 8.
25. “Films on Campus,” *Billboard* 83, no. 13 (27 March 1971): 78
26. Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 4, 16, 35, 151–52, 186–88.
27. “Seymour: ‘Ozone,’ Future as History,” University of Texas, Harry Ransom Center, John Crowley Papers, Box 22, Folder 4.
28. “Seymour: Program Notes for New Line Cinema,” 1, CC, Folder “Martyrs of Love.”
29. Production still, *Martyrs of Love*, CC, Folder “Martyrs of Love.”
30. Advertisement, *Cornell Daily Sun*, 23 September 1969, 7, Cornell University Library, <https://cdsun.library.cornell.edu/?a=d&d=CDS19690923>.
31. Advertisement, *Michigan Daily*, 3 April 1968, 2, University of Michigan, digital.bentley.umich.edu/midaily/mdp.39015071754001/708.
32. Advertisement, *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 23 February 1968, 5, Columbia University, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19680223-01>.
33. Advertisement, *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 17 April 1968, 6, Columbia University, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19680417-01>.
34. Kenneth Anderson, “‘Hotel Ozone’: Merely History,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 18 April 1968, 5, Columbia University, <http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19680418-01>.
35. “Corporate Memorandum” (13 May 1969), 8.
36. Vincent Canby, “Nemec’s ‘Martyrs of Love,’” *New York Times*, 4 February 1969.
37. Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock ‘n’ Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960–1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8–36.

38. Jon Lewis, *Road Trip to Nowhere: Hollywood Encounters the Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 3.
39. Lewis, 9.
40. Sylvia Harvey, *May 68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).
41. Martin Levine, "N.Y. Film Festival Owed Much to Godard," *Washington Post*, 6 October 1968.
42. Roger Greenspun, "Screen: 'Sympathy for the Devil' ('1 + 1')," *New York Times*, 27 April 1970.
43. Craig Fischer, "Films Lost in the Cosmos: Godard and New York Distribution and Exhibition (1961–1973)," *The Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 63.
44. Fischer, "Films Lost in the Cosmos," 64.
45. Advertising flier for *Sympathy for the Devil*, CC, Folder "Sympathy for the Devil."
46. Advertising proof sheet, *Sympathy for the Devil*, CC, Folder "Sympathy for the Devil."
47. Vincent Canby, "What Godard Hath Wrought," *New York Times*, 29 March 1970.
48. William Dinner, "Revolution Will Be Demanding," *Michigan Daily*, 16 April 1970, University of Michigan, <https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/midaily/mdp.39015071754035/750>.
49. "Godard Socks Producer at Showing of His Film," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 1 December 1968.
50. Canby, "What Godard Hath Wrought"; Gene Siskel, "The Movies," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 July 1970.
51. "Boston," *Boxoffice*, 11 May 1970; "Picture Grosses: 'Devil' Nice \$1,500, L'Ville; 'Joe' 4G, 4," *Variety* 261, no. 5 (16 December 1970): 15; "Picture Grosses: 'Frenzy' Big 175G, Det; 'Devil' \$11,000," *Variety* 267, no. 7 (28 June 1972): 12.
52. "Pictures: Cottrell, 25, in U.S. for 'Maud'; Foresees 700G Rentals Here; His French Group Self-Made," *Variety* 258, no. 5 (18 March 1970): 5.
53. "Pictures: New Line Shaye Doubts Old-Line Showmen Re Kids," *Variety* 257, no. 13 (11 February 1970): 4.
54. "Campus News: Film Distrib Urges Backing of Groups," *Billboard* 82, no. 21 (23 May 1970): 40.
55. "Campus News: Film Distrib Urges Backing."
56. "New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973," 1, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives, John Waters Collection (hereafter cited as JWC), Box 22, Folder 14, "Film Projects, Distributors."
57. "New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973," 1.
58. "New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973," 2.
59. "New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973," 2.
60. "New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973," 44.
61. "Correspondence: New Line Cinema to Richard Myers," Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives (hereafter KSUL), accessed 12 April 2019, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/3533>.
62. "Correspondence: New Line Cinema to Richard Myers."
63. "Contract: CAK Fund, placement of funds," KSUL accessed 12 April 2019, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/3527>.
64. "New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973," 52.

65. “Financial Records: Confrontation at Kent State rentals and producer income statements,” KSUL, accessed 12 April 2019, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/3540>.

66. “Correspondence: Inquiries for purchase and rental of film, Confrontation at Kent State,” KSUL, accessed 12 April 2019, <https://omeka.library.kent.edu/special-collections/items/show/3532>.

67. “New Line Cinema Catalog 1, 1973,” 46.

68. “Pictures: New Line Will Handle Gaul-Sichel Program of Erotic Fest Items,” *Variety* 265, no. 11 (26 January 1972): 7.

69. New Line told Norman Mailer that it had contacted “over 100 schools by telephone and almost 1,000 via mail” in the company’s attempt to book speaking engagements. “Letter to Norman Mailer—2 June 1972,” University of Texas, Harry Ransom Center, Norman Mailer Papers (hereafter NMP), Container 810.8.

70. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo, 1983), 262.

71. Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 262.

72. “Banzhaf, Shaye, Winners in Burkan Competition,” unidentified clipping, RS-NL-CP, New Line Cinema Papers, Box 1, “Shaye Personal—Columbia University Law School, Nathan Burkan Memorial Competition, 1964.”

73. Display advertisement, *Variety*, 1 November 1972. For a discussion of *Reefer Madness* within a comprehensive analysis of “classic” exploitation cinema, see Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), esp. 228–41.

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5. ONE FRANCHISE TO RULE THEM ALL: NEW LINE AND *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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Cover design: Kevin Barrett Kane.

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ISBN: 978-0-520-38235-0



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