

"Family" Entertainment and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

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My central argument is that "family" entertainment is not merely the most visible manifestation of the Hollywood studios' ethos of global expansion (see Miller et al, 2005), but, moreover, that it is absolutely central to their industrial and commercial identities. Previous scholars (Allen, 1999; Krämer, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2006) have touched on this point. Peter Krämer, for example, has correctly emphasised the commercial importance of contemporary Hollywood "family" films, pointing out that such products are "at the very heart of today's media conglomerates and indeed today's popular culture" (2002: 96). Similarly, in 1999, Robert C. Allen published a provocative essay that positioned the "family film" as the "earliest and clearest expression" of "the rise of post-Hollywood cinema" (127). For both writers, the operations of the contemporary Hollywood studios are shaped not only by the needs of the box office, but also the ability, and the need, to exploit products across numerous horizontally integrated platforms. What has become known corporately and popularly as "family" entertainment provides the best chance of commercial success across platforms ranging from theatrical exhibition, television and home video to video games, toys and other forms of merchandise. In this essay, I would like to expand upon previous accounts of "family" entertainment in two specific ways. Firstly, I will demonstrate the extent to which "family" entertainment franchises have come to dominate the high-end operations of the major studios, especially since the mid-1990s. Secondly, I will attempt to redress the significant under-appreciation of the ways in which the seemingly unbounded proliferation of "family" entertainment has closely mirrored industrial changes – namely conglomeration, global expansion, acquisition and synergy – among these diversified multimedia giants.

The key difference between the Hollywood studios pre- and post-conglomeration is the development of "family" entertainment. The term "family entertainment" is used here to refer to a range of multimedia products commonly associated with children, but which also attempt to appeal to a much broader audience, transcending not merely demographic, but also cultural, barriers. As typified by contemporary Hollywood entertainment franchises such as *Harry Potter* (2001-2011),

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Toy Story (1995-2010), *Shrek* (2001-2010) and *Chronicles of Narnia* (2005-2010), "family" film narratives historically have been characterised by narrative transparency, spectacle, emotive qualities, an optimistic message (culminating in a "happy ending") and broad audience suitability – altogether encompassing a commercially-motivated desire to please as many, and offend as few, potential consumers as possible (Brown, 2012). Although the Hollywood "family" film dates back to the early sound era (Ibid.), its current commercial dominance is largely a post-1980s phenomenon, as is the development of the "family"-orientated multimedia franchise. Although some very useful research has been published on the subject, in general the centrality of post-Hollywood "family" entertainment has been sorely under-appreciated in the academy. Krämer has correctly observed that "most of Hollywood's superhits" since the late-1970s are "children's films for the whole family and for teenagers, too" (2004: 366-367). Yet even Krämer, at times, underestimates its scope by defining the "family" film simply as entertainment "aimed at both children and their parents" (2002: 186). It may well be (and we will not know this until the emergence of authoritative demographic and ethnographic audience research) that "families" – prototypically parents and children watching together – are still important consumers. However, I would contend that this definition of the "family" film is now anachronistic, for two reasons.

Firstly, as will be discussed, there has been a clear trend since the mid-1990s to broaden the modes of appeal of "family" films beyond this core, traditional consumer group. Contemporary "family" entertainment franchises are not merely trivial amusements for parents and their children, but are also globally-oriented mass media that target the broadest possible demographic and ethnographic cross-section. Secondly, "family" entertainment can no longer be understood solely in terms of a single, generative filmic text. Most major "family" films generate multimedia franchises, while many are based on existing brands. Although Warner Bros.' *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* film series derive from literary source material, Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-2011) and Paramount and DreamWorks' *Transformers* (2007-2011) are "adapted" from nothing more substantive than a theme park ride and successful toy line, respectively. In each case, however, their core brand images are widely accessible, possess an existing consumer base, and can be realised across various media – films, television, computer games, comic books, toys and other merchandise. Hollywood

"family" entertainment, then, has developed to the point where it transcends cinematic typology.

Commercial Dominance

A short essay attempting to grapple with the nebulous but pervasive phenomenon of contemporary Hollywood "family" entertainment thus immediately encounters an obstacle: there is scant foundational literature on the subject – whether historical or theoretical – on which to build. In spite of Krämer's useful working definition of the "family film" (cited above), it is not altogether clear whether the "genre" should be defined chiefly in formal, commercial or industrial terms. Whilst we should not rule out the possibility of a more traditionally text-based formulation that considers recurring narrative and structural patterns or ideological overtones, such a project would be a major undertaking. Instead, for the purposes of this essay, I will understand "family films" in terms of what Steve Neale (following Lukow and Ricci) has called the "inter-textual relay." Inter-textual relays are the various "discourses of publicity, promotion and reception: that surround mainstream films and shape popular responses, including industry categories as well as trade and press reviews (2000: 2-3).

The inter-textual relay provides scholars with an alternative means through which films can be categorised, one which, properly, in my view, places greater emphasis on labels used popularly and commercially. When we examine a list of the 30 most commercially successful films in the history of commercial cinema (at the time of writing) in relation to these discourses, a striking figure emerges: 27 of them – or 90 per cent – have been marketed and/or widely received as "family" movies ("All Time Worldwide," 2012). By any measure, and even allowing for the fact that this figure may be inflated by promotional discourses designed to boost the audience-bases of the films in question, this is a remarkable statistic, one which testifies both to the immense *material* popularity of such entertainment and the considerable value of the "family" *brand*. It should be noted that the table of films from which I draw this statistic does not take inflation into account, and, consequently, most of the films are post-1990s releases, a fact which allows us to register the extent to which "family" films have come to dominate the international box office over the last two decades.

Equally significant is the fact that all of these 30 films were produced and/or distributed by the "big six" major Hollywood studios (Walt Disney

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Pictures, Warner Bros., Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Sony and Universal), which together comprise the trade association the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). These studios account for the vast majority of international box office hits and major cinematic franchises, despite typically producing less than 30 per cent of all films distributed annually in the United States ("2009 MPAA," 2009). Of course, by no means would it be true to say that the major studios *only* produce or distribute "family" films, but that each of them endeavours to craft a handful of "high-concept" blockbuster "family" films annually that can be exploited on multiple levels, and thus develop into major franchises. The MPAA member companies' exert a near-hegemonic control over global film distribution, which, when combined with some highly protectionist policies, have ensured that rivals – both domestic and international – are effectively closed out of the world market.

The blockbuster releases of each of these companies since the turn of the century have become increasingly standardised, both formally and in terms of their intended consumer base. A growing proportion of mainstream films are rated PG or PG-13 by the MPAA, evidencing an ongoing embrace of the nebulous, pluralistic but undeniably lucrative international "family" market. In 2004, a Harvard School of Public Health study observed that "a movie rated PG or PG-13 today has more sexual or violent content than a similarly rated movie in the past" and accused the MPAA of transgressing standards of acceptability in the "family"-friendly ratings (i.e. G, PG and PG-13) (Waxman, 2004). This suggests a broader renegotiation of the traditional parameters defining the "family" audience, beyond its "core" demographics of parents and children. Conversely, R-rated films, which ostensibly prevent pre-teen and young teenage audiences from attending without adult supervision, and which "were once the studios' mainstay," are reputedly "on the decline, both in numbers and in lure" (Snyder, 2005). However, a closer examination reveals that the overall proportion of films rated R has remained relatively stable at just under 60 per cent; the difference is that far fewer *blockbusters* are now released with an R rating ("Entertainment Industry").

In 1980, 55 per cent of the top 20 films of the year were R-rated; by 1995, this figure had fallen to 30 per cent, and by 2009 to 10 per cent ("All Time Worldwide"). Accordingly, among the current 30 highest-grossing movies of all-time globally, none are rated R. This trend towards "family-friendly" ratings contrasts dramatically with industry practice between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, when the R rating was

widely perceived as a marker of artistic credibility. Conversely, notwithstanding notable exceptions such as the outputs of Disney, George Lucas, or Steven Spielberg, for example, the "family"-friendly ratings were more typically seen as a virtual guarantee of commercial oblivion. In 1969, director Richard Sarafian openly complained when his film *Run Wild, Born Free* was identified by the press as a "family" movie (Goldstein, 1968). Equally significant was the U.S. release of *Chariots of Fire* (1981), a case where the distributors inserted profanity into one scene precisely in order to avoid a potentially damaging G rating. Today, as Jennifer Geer has observed, marketers are eager to represent their products as "family" entertainments, even when – as with the J. M. Barrie biopic *Finding Neverland* (2004) – the label is misleading or inappropriate (2007: 193-212). While the R rating retains its connotations of independent-minded artistry, the days when a "family"-friendly rating was considered inimical to commercial success are long gone. One Hollywood marketing executive wryly suggested: "you're leaving tens of millions of dollars on the table with an R rating. Why? For artistic integrity? Get real" (Snyder, 2005).

One of the ways in which the Hollywood studios consciously attempted to broaden public perceptions of "family" entertainment during the mid-1980s was the advent of the PG-13 rating. Introduced by the MPAA following protests in the US that *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) was too violent to fit the PG criteria, PG-13 is a buffer between PG and R, purporting to allow entry for children under the age of thirteen only if accompanied by an adult. A PG or PG-13 rating has become almost a prerequisite for live-action blockbuster success. More than 60 per cent of the top 30 films of all-time fall into PG-13, a rating which has been applied to such unambiguously "family-oriented" films as *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), *The Golden Compass* (2007) and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2007) ("All Time Worldwide," 2012). However, many of the 27 all-time hits identified by their inter-textual relays as "family" entertainment would perhaps not have been regarded as such by previous generations, notably *The Avengers* (2012) and the *Transformers* film series. Although there were criticisms in the US that the first *Transformers* film, which contained considerable violent content, was being marketed to young children, such protests were chiefly low-level (Tiemann, 2007).

Industrial Centrality

Although the current centrality of “family” entertainment is strongly linked with the conglomeration and consequent global agenda of the Hollywood studios, its proliferation has been abetted by a broader and progressive cultural receptiveness to “juvenile” entertainment since the late 1970s, particularly in North America. By 1976, 62 per cent of US audiences were aged between 16 and 29, and between 1977 and 1979, there was a further increase of 8 per cent in the quantity of tickets sold to the 12-to-20 age group (Edgerton, 1983: 175; Cook, 2000: 23). However, this is not to say that adult audiences abandoned the movie-going habit. Allegedly, the main consumers of Spielberg’s *E.T.* (1982) in the US were not children, but childless couples in their twenties and thirties (Morris, 2007: 85). The multiplex theatre, which became the predominant mode of exhibition after the 1970s, also provided the economies of scale necessary to fully exploit blockbusters (Gomery, 2005: 213-19).

Janet Wasko has claimed that the ensuing standardisation is the result of rival companies attempting “to emulate the Disney model” (Wasko, 1994: 34), but this observation is suspect. In fact, it was the spectacular success of Fox’s *Star Wars* (1977-2005) and Warner’s *Superman* (1978-2006) franchises that signalled the generic transition from a more varied (but still undeniably adult-inflected) mainstream entertainment programme to an increasingly “family”-oriented model. *Star Wars* in particular – as Krämer has argued – established a rough template for subsequent “family-adventure” franchises (2004: 366-367). After Lucas’s *Star Wars*, “merchandising became an industry unto itself, and tie-in product marketing began to drive the conception and selling of motion picture products rather than vice versa” (Cook: 51). But although *Star Wars* was a turning point *aesthetically*, the real *industrial* breakthrough – which is at least as significant, but considerably less understood – occurred during the early 1990s.

Hollywood “family” entertainment since the early 1990s is conterminous with corporate strategies of vertical and horizontal expansion. In spite of some immensely profitable “family” entertainment franchises, the actual volume of “family” films as a percentage of total output remained comparatively low during the 1980s. What I call the *structural* centrality of “family” entertainment was initiated as a result of behind-the-scenes deal-making and industrial realignment. Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, all of the major Hollywood studios except Disney were either acquired by larger multinational corporations or merged with other media

companies to create the diversified, international media conglomerates that exist today. The first wave of Hollywood media conglomeration began in 1962, when MCA acquired Universal, but a more significant movement took place between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. In 1985, Turner Broadcasting purchased MGM, while News Corporation acquired Twentieth Century-Fox. Columbia was bought by Coca-Cola, which then re-sold to Sony in 1989. The same year, Warner Bros. merged with Time-Life to form Time-Warner, and in 1993, Viacom acquired Paramount. This industrial process of conglomeration continues to this day. Among the "classical" Hollywood majors, only Disney – a company that has continued to expand both vertically and horizontally – has resisted takeover (this is due, in large part, to the fact that its expansion and diversification has always been based on the "family" entertainment model). It is no coincidence that these media mergers coincided with an upsurge in films and franchises with purportedly "universal" appeal that could, theoretically, be realised across multiple media platforms, targeting an increasingly accessible world market.

In 1991, Time-Warner announced plans to create a "family film" production division. With hindsight, this was a development of the utmost significance, yet it aroused very little surprise in the industry or the trade press. *Variety* observed that it reflected "industry-wide awareness that survival in the 1990s may be a matter of creating wholesome, family-oriented entertainment," and that similar discussions regarding "increasing production of family films, if not creating family film divisions" were ongoing at Universal, Paramount, TriStar and Columbia ("New Plan," 1991). The same article noted that Peter Guber, then head of production at Sony, was "seriously interested in pursuing programming that has strong family appeal," partly because of the growing value of so-called "aftermarket business" such as home video (Ibid). By this point, the development of specialised "family film" divisions, which were intended to produce movies *beyond* run-of-the-mill theatrical product, evidently was considered logical, if not inevitable, given the increasing box office value of "family" entertainment, coupled with the progressively global outlook of the Hollywood conglomerates.

By 1993, Warner Bros. and Twentieth Century Fox had "family film" divisions in operation (Moerk, 1993; O'Steen, 1993). As Warners executive Rob Friedman explained, "the industry has identified a growing family audience [...] the baby boomers are now parents, and the family orientation is growing as a business" (Moerk, 1993). Disney's Tom Deegan responded: "the family market has always been there, but

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Hollywood has just chosen to ignore it in the past" (Ibid). Universal, Sony, and Paramount followed suit by opening their own specialist "family" units in 1998, 1999 and 2002, and in 2007 Universal created a specialised independent animation unit, Illumination (Sandler, 1998; Cox and Littleton, 1999; Lyons and Dunkley, 2002; Fleming, 2008). The magnitude of the industry's attitudinal shift regarding "family" entertainment was underscored when Disney divested itself of its left-field, "indie" subsidiary Miramax in July 2010 in order to channel its energies on its "family" entertainment operations (Littleton, 2010). In 1986, the same company had created Touchstone, an "adult film" subsidiary, in order to *escape* the creative and brand-related restrictions of "family" programming.

Political, sociological and commercial interest in the "family" was also high in the US during the early 1990s. Some "baby boomer" executives even went so far as to identify a moral compunction to produce wholesome "family" fare in what they saw as an age of violence and uncertainty (Dare, 1994). A more tangible motivation, however, was an influential report by Paul Kagan Associates advocating greater production of "family" entertainment (Murphy, 1993). By 1994, such unlikely figures as Chuck Norris and Roger Corman were jumping on the bandwagon and trying to establish footholds in the "family" market, utilising the potentialities of direct-to-video production (aka "kidvids") (Dare, 1994). By the mid-1990s, the effects of media conglomeration on film form were becoming increasingly apparent. Mid-level "adult" productions were scaled down in favour of a smaller volume of "family"-suitable "event" films. This was a major turning point. Since 1995, as Richard Maltby has observed, Hollywood's output has fallen almost exclusively into two categories: "big-budget international movies and smaller-budget movies with less dependence on the international market" (2003: 223). The fact that profitable overseas markets were opening up – such as post-Soviet Russia and post-economic-"liberalisation" India – was an added incentive: why make "family" films only for North American consumers when a huge global market was waiting to be addressed?

Accordingly, this period marked the decline of the "traditional" "family" film. One Sony executive announced, portentously: "the death of the family movie – that is the footnote for summer 1996." Twentieth Century Fox executive Bill Mechanic explained:

We made a strategic move to get out of the kid business, as we've known it, a year ago. Kid-oriented movies have been in trouble. [The] *Nutty Professor* [1996] and *Independence Day* [1996] have become the kid movies, the new family films. (Brennan, 1996)

Disney's Joe Roth traced the beginnings of this shift to the Lucas-Spielberg collaboration *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981); this was, he claimed, "the beginning and the end of family films in America" (Ibid). This remark encapsulates the new reality of "family" entertainment: the highly culturally-specific "dual" appeal that characterised "family" films until the 1970s has been supplanted by a more escapist, "undifferentiated" mode of audience address.

Whilst we must not overlook the fact that Hollywood's international dominance stems partially from its so-called "competitive advantages" on the world stage, neither can we ignore the undoubted global appeal of the entertainment values it packages and exports. An ever-expanding global consumer base has underpinned Hollywood's embrace of a less culturally specific aesthetic since the turn of the century. In 2008, *The Golden Compass* made the headlines as the first film to gross \$300 million in overseas revenue without hitting \$100 million in North America, a fact that was attributed to foreign distributors marketing it more effectively as a "family" movie than domestic marketers (Dawtry, 2008). On a purely practical level, international audiences attend fewer movies than their US counterparts (McNary, 2008). As a result, they tend to privilege "event" movies with "family" (that is, mass) suitability. The plurality of global "family" audiences is reflected by the thematic and stylistic diversity of contemporary "family" films, which encompass various live-action and animated genres, as well as the expanding range of films – such as *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011) – which mine the convergence between these traditionally dichotomous formats.

Increasingly, industrial and synergistic considerations impact directly on the generic and formal composition of mainstream Hollywood films. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the wholesale proliferation of fantasy subjects, which have formed the basis of the majority of "family" blockbusters since the millennium. There are three primary reasons why fantasies are particularly attractive subjects for globally-oriented "family" films. Firstly, fantasy is a highly visual form that presents an ideal pretext for the kinds of visual-orientated appeal demanded by international consumers. Secondly, because its horizons are generally non-terrestrial, fantasy subjects are freed from the socio-cultural

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specificity that may alienate non-Western audiences. The *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* franchises, although inevitably retaining Western emphases, are not as clearly “American” in origin as, say, *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*. Disney executive Mark Zoradi argues that “the fantasy genre travels exceptionally well, partly because there’s nothing that makes it geographically unique [...] and its themes are pretty universal – good vs. evil, loyalty, the family sticking together” (McNary, 2008).

Thirdly – and most importantly, from my perspective – a richly detailed fictional world affords almost limitless opportunities for merchandise and other tie-ins. What David Bordwell has termed “world-building” is central to Hollywood’s treatment of fantasy. “World-building” describes the intricate construction of a fictional universe, intended to imbue fantasy narratives with as much depth and identification as possible, and although it can be traced as far back as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), it has reached its apotheosis in more recent fantasy franchises (Thompson, 2007: 84). As Paul Grainge has observed, Warner Bros., with its stake in the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises, led the way in world-building at the turn of the millennium “with serials, spin-offs and genres that were based quite specifically on the filmic realisation of a pre-sold, inveterately marketable, narrative universe” (2008: 59). The active viewer participates through recapitulation, via word-of-mouth, social networks and fan clubs, and by purchasing the merchandise, thereby significantly extending the life of the media franchise. Such processes of cross-media interdependency sustain the post-Hollywood studios, and provide justification for yet more industrial deal-making.

Expansionism and Synergistic Dimensions

It must be stressed that “family” entertainment can be understood at least as much in terms of corporate infrastructure as consumer products. “Family” entertainment is the *material* manifestation of a broader universalistic agenda; conglomeration, expansionism and synergy are the equivalent *corporate* manifestations. They are two sides of the same coin. As the eye-popping costs involved in bringing high-profile “family” films such as *Avatar* (2009) or *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) to fruition would suggest, the stakes are high. The same is true of industrial expansionist strategies. Some of the most notable media acquisitions of recent years – including Disney’s acquisition of Pixar Animation Studios for \$7.4 billion in 2006, of Marvel for \$4 billion in 2009, and of LucasFilm for \$4 billion in 2012 – were motivated by the need to generate additional synergistic outlets and licensable properties in the pursuit of the global

"family" market. Although costly in the extreme, the executives who oversee these corporate developments are convinced that they are sound investments. In the aftermath of the Pixar deal, Disney executive Dick Cook enthused: "you can't come close to calculating what [this acquisition] means in the long term for the company in terms of new characters, stories, and lands for films and parks and publishing and more" (Fritz, 2007). Disney CEO Bob Iger espoused similar rhetoric in relation to the LucasFilm acquisition, predicting that the ownership of *Star Wars*, "one of the greatest family entertainment franchises of all time," will "give us a great footprint in consumer products globally" (Graser, 2012).

Some of the most visible cross-media synergies in recent years have been comic book tie-ins. The comic book adaptation emerged as a sub-genre of the wider superhero movie boom that began with *X-Men* (2000) and continued with the *Spider-Man* (2002-2012) and *Batman* (2005-2012) series, as well as *Hulk* (2003), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *Superman Returns* (2006) and *The Avengers*. Most superhero movies have found their inspiration directly from the back catalogues of Marvel and DC Comics, and considering the large, hitherto-unexploited range of licensable characters these companies own, it is scarcely surprising that they became desirable targets for acquisition (Graser, 2009). Paramount, Sony and Fox already have long-term distribution deals based on superhero characters, with Sony holding the rights to *Spider-Man* and Fox to *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*. Irrespective of the cinematic longevity of the superhero cycle, the durability of these properties across different media – books, comics, action figures, computer games, theme park rides – ensures that the franchises will endure long after the movie cycle loses box office appeal. A word has been invented to describe films that facilitate a reciprocally beneficial relationship with the toy market – "toyetic" (Hayes, 2008: 122). The *Transformers* film franchise – co-produced by Hasbro, Paramount and DreamWorks – is carefully designed to cut across demographics, exploiting not only nostalgia for Hasbro's original toy line and the television show (1984-1987), but also the large number of adults who still buy toys themselves. An 8 per cent rise in the sales of action figures in 2008 was attributed partly to higher sales of merchandise based on R-rated films (Thelman, 2008). As *Variety* notes, "adult toybuyers don't just drive toy sales, they drive enthusiasm that can be turned into films" (Ibid).

Hollywood's obsessive pursuit of synergy is matched only by its desire to exploit the commercial potential of pre-existing "family" brands. Home

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video has been integral to the diversified “family” entertainment franchise since its popularisation during the early 1980s, when “sell-through” – the policy of pricing the video cheaply in order to sell the maximum number of copies – became a popular strategy, especially with “family” films. *Pinocchio*’s entire run of 300,000 copies earned Disney \$8 million (Wasser, 2002: 163-164). However, it was not until the early 1990s that studios began manufacturing “kidvids.” In 1994, Disney released *The Return of Jafar*, a direct-to-video sequel to its 1992 theatrical hit *Aladdin*. The venture was highly successful, selling over seven million copies, placing it within the top-ten all-time best-selling videos (Chanko, 1994). Direct-to-video animations can be made relatively cheaply. *The Return of Jafar* cost approximately \$6 million. Producer-director Tad Stones admitted that “we didn’t have Disney’s best animators working on *Jafar*,” but pointed out that “you don’t compare a TV movie-of-the-week to *Schindler’s List*” (Ibid). Direct-to-video has since become common industry practice; unsurprisingly so, when “even a modest-selling video premiere can generate \$25 million-\$50 million in revenue for a studio” (Hettrick, 2000). This dominance accelerated as DVD replaced VHS as the leading home video technology. By 2004, the annual revenue from “kidvids” had increased to \$3 billion (Graser, 2004). One of their major strengths is relative immunity to theatrical market forces, such as the industry recession of 2008-2009. Sony marketing executive Marc Rashba has suggested that “family audiences, even in this sort of down market [...] continue to support family titles overall on DVD” (McLean, 2009).

The assumption that the “family” film is the key foundational element in multimedia “family” franchises is no longer a safe one. Several immensely profitable “family” franchises reached cinemas only after successful runs on cable television, most notably *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004), and *The Smurfs* (2011). Their success demonstrates that “family” entertainment franchises need not be uniform and formally conventional to achieve big success, but they do require easily accessible imagery and licensable material for ancillary exploitation. This fetishisation of the brand image perhaps reaches its fullest extension with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, which, prior to its successful narrativisation, traded exclusively on its renown as a Disneyland theme park ride. In recent years, high-profile movie “adaptations” of Disney theme park rides “Jungle Cruise” and “Haunted Mansion” have also been announced, as well as a film set in “The Magic Kingdom” itself (McClintock, 2010). A Ridley Scott-directed film adaptation of the board game Monopoly (in association with Hasbro) is currently in development,

and there have even been discussions concerning a movie based on the Rubik's Cube (Shoard, 2010). Such cross-media tie-ins are regularly dismissed as indicative of the creative bankruptcy of the contemporary Hollywood studios, but this is to overlook the fact that creativity and originality are necessarily subservient to the economic capital of successfully exploiting pre-sold, universally intelligible brand images. According to Universal Pictures Chairman Marc Shmuger, "brands are the new stars," and brands associated with the "family" market are the most valuable of all (Fritz, 2009). Cross-media deal-making of this nature is based on the conviction that there is no such thing as a closed market, either demographically or geographically.

The conventional wisdom – largely propounded by the media industry itself – is that "synergy" is vital to the success of internationally popular franchises. A synergy can be defined as "a financial benefit, to either the top or bottom line, attainable only through a particular corporate combination," and is often one of the key drivers behind corporate mergers and acquisitions (Knee, Greenwald and Seave, 2009: 213). Synergy is an extension of the capitalistic paradigm of growth and expansion that underpins mainstream Hollywood cinema. It is perceived as one of the primary commercial engines of the global visual media business. In 2002, Universal executives Scott Stuber and Mary Parent asserted that "if you can have a product that can be realised across many different avenues of the company, it has more than one shot at success" (Bing and Dunkley, 2002). Of necessity, much of my examination of contemporary "family" entertainment in this essay has centred on its potential profitability. However, as with all business strategies, there is the potential for failure, and because of the vast sums of money at stake, failure tends to be highly damaging. Disney's *Mars Needs Moms* (2011), which recouped less than one-third of its estimated \$150 million budget, made headlines as one of the most spectacular box-office flops in cinema history. However, media underperformance as a result of corporate strategies of growth and expansion is even more damaging, and much less visible. Media economists Jonathan Knee, Bruce Greenwald and Ava Seave cite a number of prominent media mergers and acquisitions that failed to yield any perceptible synergistic benefits, and identify such expansionist and universalistic strategies as primary markers of "bad mogul" behaviour (2009: 3).

The record-breaking, headline-grabbing box office performances of, say, *Avatar* or the *Harry Potter* films, represent a glamorous and slightly misleading upside to a broader agenda of global media expansionism that

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is, as often as not, marked by underperformance. Disney, which is often represented as the model of the diversified, synergistically active, "family"-oriented, international media conglomerate, in fact provides a salient example of the potential dangers of this aggressively expansionist approach. By the early 1980s, the company had lost its place in the theatrical "family" market, and a new corporate team, headed by Michael Eisner, assumed control. Under Eisner's leadership, Disney reinvented itself artistically with such hits as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *The Lion King* (1994). The company began outperforming its rivals – for a time. Eisner gained renown as one of the earliest and most vocal industry proponents of synergy. He set in place a "synergy boot camp" for divisional heads to reinforce that notion that Disney had to expand and diversify in order to survive (Ibid: 236-237). He also instituted a permanent "Synergy Group" to report to him directly, and insisted that "if you don't have synergy, you have nothing but new products. [...] If you have synergy, it goes on and on" (Allen, 1999: 121). A superficial analysis might detect a direct correlation between Disney's outperformance during the late 1980s and early 1990s with Eisner's insistence on synergy.

However, a closer examination reveals that Disney's resurgence had more to do with conservative cost-cutting and price-rising strategies. Moreover, the company's subsequent difficulties, from the mid-1990s well into the new millennium, coincided with Eisner's attempts to (over) extend the media conglomerate (Knee et al.: 236-237). In 1995, he oversaw Disney's most radical corporate realignment in decades: the acquisition of US television network ABC for an estimated \$19 billion (Gomery, 2005: 272). It should have been the apotheosis of Eisner's tenure at Disney, enabling a whole array of reciprocally beneficial synergies and tie-ins. However, not only did Disney significantly overpay for the acquisition and begin underperforming as a result, but Knee, Greenwald and Seave have argued that the deal "seemed to undermine the profitability of both ABC's broadcast network and Disney's filmed entertainment operations" (Knee et al, 2009: 236-237). Such examples of underperformance are not isolated. They are, however, often overlooked by the trade and general-interest media, which are more interested in presenting a simplistically attractive, and marketable, image of blockbuster hits and easily digestible box office statistics.

My key argument – that the post-Hollywood studios are pursuing a global expansionist agenda based on the "family" entertainment model – thus can be related to one of the major debates in business and economic

studies, namely the relative merits of a "local" and a "global" capitalist framework. Clearly, these international media conglomerates do not believe – as do Knee, Greenwald and Seave – that "all profitable media is local" (2009: 169). Their very identity, which at its heart is predicated on the capitalistic ethos of continued growth and expansion, proves otherwise. Indeed, Hollywood's advancements in emerging global markets such as China and Russia over the last two decades have been achieved primarily with mass-appeal "family" films. However, there is obvious recognition that broad-appeal "family" movies cannot appeal to everyone, least of all to those people who desire entertainment that reflects their own social and behavioural values. Presently, "family" films are achieving their purpose extremely well, keeping the major Hollywood studios' share of the global box office at around 60 per cent (Rickey, 2010). But there seems to be increasing awareness that true global domination also requires products individually tailored towards local markets. Advancements into foreign territories have been particularly successful in countries such as Russia, but less so in the larger, more profitable Indian and Chinese markets (Arango, 2009). Furthermore, although Disney's advancement into India with the acquisition of film studio UTV Motion Pictures constitutes a clear attempt to appeal to "local" as well as "global" audiences, its (ill-fated) decision to produce a Hollywood-style, big-budget CGI-animated "family" blockbuster, *Arjun: The Warrior Prince* (2012), suggests a long-term desire to boost the receptivity of this international market to its more universalistic, English-language productions ("Walt Disney, UTV," 2011). Therefore, in some cases at least, what initially appears a point of departure from the global "family" entertainment agenda in fact constitutes an extension of it.

"Family" entertainment can no longer be regarded merely as a "cycle" or even a "trend" in Hollywood cinema. Those terms falsely imply a state of transience or impermanence. Rather, the modern media conglomerates are now structurally committed to the production and exploitation of globalised "family" entertainment. This, of course, is not to suggest that "adult"-oriented filmmaking is in terminal decline, or that it will disappear entirely. There will always be demand for the sophisticated, the provocative, the perverse. The major studios continue to distribute such entertainment as long as costs can be kept sufficiently low, in the hope of a "runaway" hit. However, there is an undoubted trend of marginalisation of such entertainment from the mainstream arena, particularly in North American cinema. Of course, the evidence offered here is only the tip of a very large iceberg, and there is a clear need for more in-depth research

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on the key points raised in this essay. In 2002, Krämer pointed out that “family” films are “very low on the academic agenda, at least in film studies” (2002: 185), and sadly this attitude has changed little in the intervening years. In order to come to terms with this most important facet of contemporary mass media culture, we must first acknowledge the centrality of “family” entertainment. That is, we cannot continue to view the “family” film merely as one genre among many, and not even as the dominant mode of production. Instead, “family” films must be understood as constituents of broader entertainment franchises that serve as the very foundation upon which the modern, post-Hollywood media conglomerates are built.

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