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CREATING FEMALE AUDIENCES:
THE DECLINE OF THE 'GIRLY' HEROINE AND THE RETURN
OF THE FORMIDABLE 'FEMME'¹

I. INTRODUCTION

During Hollywood's classical era, women were considered the most important and most influential film viewers. In a widely quoted article, film scholar Melvyn Stokes comments:

During the 1920s and early 30s, a substantial body of evidence suggested that women dominated American movie audiences – either numerically or because, by nature of their influence on their menfolk and children, they effectively decided which films would be most successful².

In contrast, twenty-first century conglomerate Hollywood ignores women, especially women over 25³, with the result that contemporary cinema is routinely derogated for its sexism, as when it depicts the female body with a view to the preferences of a young male audience, the demographic most likely to support a blockbuster success. While the family film often outdoes the male-oriented action film or gross-out comedy at the box office, this genre must negotiate a number of different groups (including parents), in which, however, the tastes of the young take precedence over those of the older generation. In each case, whether with respect to the action film or the family film, the woman's vote is not considered to be decisive in determining which films will sell the most tickets. Thus, though routinely classified as a creative industry in the twenty-first century, countering its designation as a "business, pure and simple"⁴ at the beginning of the twentieth, cinema today is increasingly the consequence of the economics of global Hollywood and the domination of young males as the most profitable audience.

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² M. Stokes, "Female Audiences of the 1920s and early 1930s", in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and Movies*, edited by M. Stokes, R. Maltby, London: BFI, 1999: 42-60 (54).

³ R. Schaap, "No Country For Old Women: Gendering Cinema in Conglomerate Hollywood", in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, edited by H. Radner, R. Stringer, New York: Routledge, 2011, 151-162.

⁴ *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, 236 US 230 (1915). Quoted in T. Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*, Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1981, 4.

2. A CINEMA FOR YOUNG MALES

The business concerns of the current configuration of Hollywood, known as the conglomerates (to be distinguished from the studios of the classical era), privilege a particular kind of film – movies that appeal to young males under 25. Productions directed towards other quadrants receive little attention, including, in media scholar Tom Schatz' words, “‘specialty films’ for specific segments that are ‘outside’ their purview (including the fairly large segments of ‘girls’ and ‘women’)”⁵. When the conglomerates generate such films, they expect them to perform in the same way as do the tent poles oriented towards young males. The conglomerates favor films that:

- will enjoy pre-established awareness,
- will lead to opening big,
- will attract audiences in a variety of windows in which theatrical release is only one venue,
- will interest other quadrants beyond the primary quadrant,
- will offer opportunities for product placement, creating an inviting environment for the promotion of consumerism more generally.

Because of women's leisure (including viewing) habits, films directed towards the female audience are less likely to fill the above criteria, a problem further exacerbated by what industry analysts call ‘bragging rights’. These encourage male producers to sponsor films that will meet with the approbation of their male colleagues. Film reviewer for the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis in an interview posted on the feminist blog Jezebel comments: “This business is really about clubby relationships. If you buy *Variety* or go online and look at the deals, you see one guy after another smiling in a baseball cap. It's all guys making deals with other guys”⁶. Not coincidentally, then, the system works to reproduce itself, hiring young males already familiar with the tastes of their preferred quadrant – further excluding women from the decision-making process⁷.

The most important factor determining what we see on the big screen is the structure of the conglomerates themselves. If the aims of feminism had suited the aims of the conglomerates, we would see more feminist films and more films for women. The conglomerates are part of the system to which the feminists object, including the rampant consumerism that they promote, but it is not a patriarchal system grounded in the law of the father. The conglomerates reflect the tenets of neo-liberalism and the flow of capital that it promotes, which theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described under the rubric of “anti-Oedipus”⁸. The status of the woman's film under

⁵ T. Schatz, e-mail message to author, June 24, 2009. I will not address, for reasons of space, the ideological issues inherent in conceiving of all audiences as basically divided into four groups or quadrants: males under 25; males over 25; females under 25; females over 25. Even Hollywood itself has a more refined sense of demographics than this initial coarse division might suggest; notwithstanding, the quadrants remain a baseline for most discussions about audience.

⁶ M. Dargis, quoted in I. Carmon, “‘Fuck Them’: *Times* Critic on Hollywood, Women & Why Romantic Comedies Suck”, jezebel.com, December 14, 2009. Accessed September 12, 2014, <http://jezebel.com/5426065/fuck-them-times-critic-on-hollywood-women-why-romantic-comedies-suck>.

⁷ I discuss many of these issues in greater detail in H. Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2011. See especially chapter seven, “Hit Movies for ‘Femmes’”, 116-133, and chapter nine, “*Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008): The Female Event Film”, 151-171.

⁸ For a fuller discussion of the relations between patriarchy and capitalism, see G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

conglomerate Hollywood illustrates how a dismantling of the old law of the father and family did not resolve the problems raised by feminism – such that we now have even fewer films appealing to a female audience (and older audiences more generally, males included) than during the studio era.

3. SCREEN NARRATIVES FOR FEMALE AUDIENCES

In 2011, Rob Schaap predicted that this dominance of the young male viewer would soon reach the home, where women's roles within the domestic sphere would likely further their marginalization as a desirable target demographic⁹. He notes: "Inequities in the division of domestic labor distort domestic consumption, which then go on to distort Hollywood production – an initial feminine disadvantage is thus entrenched and exacerbated"¹⁰. As the home becomes increasingly the privileged space for media consumption, he hypothesized that women would be too busy with their household duties (far heavier than their male and younger counterparts) to be a readily available audience. In fact, however, if routine theatrical offerings directed towards a mature (over 25) female audience have declined over the last decade, that same decade has seen a marked increase in screen narratives featuring complex and older female stars, for example, delivered via the many new windows or media outlets now available, which appear to target this same audience.

In fact, recent developments in delivery systems have afforded those seeking to reach female viewers unprecedented access to this audience by enabling them to engage creatively with the geographies of twenty-first-century screens, including home-viewing, through various broadcast, cable, satellite, internet and digital services, as well as the increasing number of film festivals serving most major cities. The media industries, using the same networks that have facilitated the development of Hollywood's tent pole strategies (in which a theatrically released movie becomes the pretext for the marketing of a number of related products, from DVDs and games to t-shirts), have responded to this focus on the event film to create new audiences, especially among women, for other kinds of screen narratives. A significant example of this has been the proliferation of quality television programming in which the showrunner is an auteur director known for his or her art house films, as with, for example, New Zealand auteur director Jane Campion's foray into television with her internationally successful mini-series *Top of the Lake* (BBC Two, 2013).

Interviewed for the *Daily Telegraph* about the release of her six-hour television series, Campion remarked: "Television is the new frontier. Film is conservative. I'm sick of it". Benji Wilson, the interviewer, comments: "It is a death knell to film that comes from one of the world's few genuine auteurs, a female non-conformist best known for films about female non-conformists, whose style varies from lyricism to borderline surrealist fantasy. To have Jane Campion call film 'conservative' is distinctly radical"¹¹.

Yet, if Campion clearly sees the move to television as a flight from the inhospitality of Hollywood to a certain kind of filmmaking, this perspective is hardly new. Most

⁹ Schaap, "No Country for Old Women", 159-160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ B. Wilson, "Jane Campion Interview for Top of the Lake", *Telegraph*, July 13, 2013. Accessed September 11, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10105994/Jane-Campion-interview-for-Top-of-the-Lake-The-world-is-focused-on-sexiness.html>.

scholars commenting on global Hollywood's production practices, such as Tom Schatz and Rob Schaap, as well as many filmmakers share her views. Wilson continues: "The demise of intelligent cinema and television's corresponding new golden age is an old saw, but when a director of the stature of Campion adds her name to a roster that now includes Martin Scorsese and David Fincher – plus just about any screenwriter you care to talk to who is tired of big studio film-making, which is to say almost all of them – the feeling is of a ship leaving port that everyone wants to be on board"¹². What is perhaps striking about this flight from the big screen is that it is correlated with the increasing loss of interest on the part of the studios in a certain kind of audience – not only women, but older viewers more generally. Schaap points out that "films that attract over-50s are unlikely to be attracting the quadrants every cinematic release needs," in other words, young audiences – in particular, young males¹³. The increasing importance of the young male audience, arguably, begins in the 1960s contemporaneously with the development of what is often considered the American Renaissance, the highpoint of American independent film, or what Tom Schatz calls New Hollywood¹⁴.

4. THE RISE AND FALL OF THE 'GIRLY' FILM

In the 1960s, following on from the demise of the studio system, the ascendancy of television and the flight to the suburbs, the industry norm in terms of spectators became the young male viewer as part of Hollywood's reorganization in response to these changes as well as to the US Supreme Court's "May 1948 *Paramount* decree"¹⁵. As Peter Krämer notes, even subsequent to the big hits of the early 1990s, such as *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Ghost* (1990), the focus on the young and even younger male audience subsisted. "In the mid-1990", Krämer explains:

Only rarely were women addressed as an audience. When they did go to the cinema on their own behalf – rather than accompanying their partners or children – they were responsible for a few modest hits in a steady stream of modestly budgeted films¹⁶.

Krämer emphasizes the male-dominated nature of the Hollywood's decision-making arm as another factor beyond those highlighted by Schatz and Schaap to explain Hollywood's intractability in this regard. Notwithstanding, building on the success of films like *Pretty Woman*, Hollywood did produce a spate of modestly budgeted romantic comedies that I call "girly films"¹⁷. The failure to establish a stable *Sex and the City* franchise (as well as, possibly, an economic climate that was no longer receptive to the over-the-top consumerism advocated by these films) seemed to bring an end to this cycle in 2008-2010, but without for that matter signaling the demise of the woman's film

¹² Wilson, "Jane Campion Interview for Top of the Lake".

¹³ Schaap, "No Country for Old Women", 157.

¹⁴ T. Schatz, "The New Hollywood", in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, edited by J. Collins, H. Radner, A. Collins, New York: Routledge, 2008, 8-36; J. Hillier, *The New Hollywood*, New York: Continuum, 1992; S. Neale, "'The Last Good Time We Ever Had?': Revising the Hollywood Renaissance", in *Contemporary American Cinema*, edited by L.R. Williams, M. Hammond, New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2006, 90-108.

¹⁵ Schatz, "The New Hollywood", 11.

¹⁶ P. Krämer, "A Powerful Cinema-going Force? Hollywood and Female Audiences since the 1960s", in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and Movies*, 93-108 (94).

¹⁷ Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema*. See, in particular, chapter two, "*Pretty Woman* (1990) and the Girly Film: Defining the Format", 26-41.

as such. Symptomatically, *Fashionistas*, based on a successful chick lit novel, directed by Donald Petrie (responsible for hits like *How To Lose A Guy In Seven Days* in 2003) has yet to see the light of day¹⁸.

In the years subsequent to the relative failure of films such as *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (P.J. Hogan, 2009), based on a best selling chick lit/mummy lit series by Sophie Kinsella, and *Sex and the City 2* (Michael Patrick King, 2010), film viewers have witnessed a waning of the girly film, to be replaced with a series of hybrids, such as romantic comedies that focus on sex and the male partner, often at the expense of the female lead, as in *No Strings Attached* (Ivan Reitman, 2011), the gross-out, usually bromantic, romantic comedies associated with Judd Apatow, the romaction, such as *Knight and Day* (James Mangold, 2010), the momcom, such as *Life as We Know It* (Greg Berlanti, 2010), in which motherhood and romantic comedy are combined on the model of *Baby Boom* (Charles Shyer, 1987) – with varying degrees of success. Similarly, the period saw the development of the Young Adult (YA) genre, including the tween/teen franchises growing out of previously successful book series, such as the Twilight series, the Mortal Instruments series, the Hunger Games trilogy, the Divergent trilogy etc., as well as films based on single best-selling YA novels, such as *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013), *The Fault in Our Stars* (Josh Boone, 2014) etc., which appeal to older women as well as young adults. These productions proved more reliable at the box office than the hybrid romantic comedies, with the franchises generally outperforming the other categories, perhaps because of the built-in pre-established awareness created by the previously successful novels, heightened in the case of a series¹⁹. Indeed, several films from these franchises aimed at women under 25 ranked among the top ten releases for their year. For example, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013) ranked number five in 2013 Worldwide Grosses²⁰.

A number of factors might explain this decline in the stereotypical chick flick: if the current recession has had a negative effect on the reception of films such as *Confessions of a Shopaholic* that take consumerism as a principle theme, and if girly films have failed, as in the case of *Sex and the City: The Movie* (Michael Patrick King, 2008), to establish successful franchises, the nature of their audience has also been an issue. Girly films tend to be single quadrant films – appealing to women over 25 – with men reluctant to attend; as Hollywood felt itself under increasing pressure, particularly when falling DVD sales accompanied diminished theatrical attendance, it was less willing to take risks on a film that, even if successful, would lack broad appeal²¹. Symptomatically, Schaap reported that 47 percent of the audience for *The Expendables* (David Callham, 2010) was female, five percent of the audience for *Eat Pray and Love* (Bryan Murphy, 2010) was male²². The fact that chick lit, women's magazines, blogs and internet shopping sites continue to do well indicates the degree to which, for conglomerate Hollywood, reaching the mature female audience is not a priority – particularly since these

¹⁸ movieinsider.com, accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.movieinsider.com/m1822/>.

¹⁹ This phenomenon is linked to a renaissance in young adult fiction – with reviewers systematically recommending YA to mature female readers. See for example, Sam Baker, “Sam Baker’s Reading Recommendations”, [harpersbazaar.co.uk](http://www.harpersbazaar.co.uk), February 19, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014, <http://www.harpersbazaar.co.uk/culture-news/staying-in/sam-baker-beyond-the-book-club-reading-recommendations>.

²⁰ [boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com), accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=2013&p=htm>.

²¹ A. Fixmer, S. Rabil, “DVD Plunge May Force Studios to Write Down Movies (Update2)”, January 30, 2009, [bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com), accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?sid=a5OzGGq-SCQ54&pid=newsarchive>.

²² Schaap, “No Country for Old Women”, 155-156.

same women are willing to go along to movies primarily directed at other quadrants: to those constituted by their partners, daughters and sons. For example, in 2010, five to seven of the top ten films were “family oriented”²³ (depending how these are categorized). We can assume that audiences for these films included substantial numbers of women.

5. “BAD TEACHER”?: THE HYBRIDIZED CHICK FLICK AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Hollywood does not need to cater to women because they are perceived as willing to watch movies directed at other quadrants. The film *Bad Teacher* (Jake Kasdan, 2011), a gross-out romcom, the success of which generated a television spinoff (CBS, 2014)²⁴, illustrates the various conundrums produced by this perception with regard to the behavior of female spectator, demonstrating how conglomerate Hollywood has appropriated women’s genres to serve the interests of the audience it has identified as most commercially lucrative, young males, in the hope of expanding its viewership. The film revolves around a female protagonist who, while young, blonde and willowy in appearance, fails to achieve the ideals of neo-liberalism in terms of a successful career. In many ways this film could be read as a cautionary tale – a reminder of what happens to the young woman who is so incautious as to deem marriage a suitable ambition with regard to financial gain and social position.

Although this reading may hold a degree of validity, the film’s discourse around femininity is much more complex than such an initial appraisal might suggest with regard to this “raunchy romantic romp”²⁵. A summary of the plot signals the film’s affinities with two genres – with what Tamar Jeffords McDonald terms the “hommecom”, which draws on “Raunch Culture”²⁶, and the inspirational “teaching” film, such as *Dangerous Minds* (John N. Smith, 1995) starring Michelle Pfeiffer, which the movie parodies. Elizabeth (Cameron Diaz) teaches in a middle school, while making it her life plan to marry a wealthy man. Convinced that breast augmentation will increase her chances, she decides to acquire the necessary funds. In the process, she becomes involved with her students and learns to care about them. At the film’s conclusion, she gives up on her pursuit of a wealthy man and partners up with an impoverished gym teacher (Jason Segel) who loves her the way she is, finding her true vocation as a guidance counselor. In a manner typical of the romantic comedy, Elizabeth undergoes an education: she learns that what is valuable in life is not material things, but people.

In the words of Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, “the process of conversion represents a progression of the woman towards the position articulated and represented by the hero”²⁷ – here, by the gentle gym teacher, an affable slacker. The viewer, in turn, comes to realize that, underneath her tough exterior and immature mode of behavior,

²³ boxofficemojo.com, accessed September 14, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=2010>.

²⁴ This success did not translate to the small screen. The remake was cancelled after three episodes. deadline.com, accessed October 9, 2014, <http://deadline.com/2014/05/crazy-ones-cbs-cancelled-bad-teacher-hostages-bad-teacher-728167/>.

²⁵ B. Sharkey, “Movie Review: ‘Bad Teacher’”, *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/24/entertainment/la-et-bad-teacher-20110624>.

²⁶ T. Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, London: Wallflower, 2007, 109-110.

²⁷ S. Neale, F. Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, London-New York: Routledge, 1990, 144.

Elizabeth is, in fact, characterized by the traditional feminine qualities of understanding (particularly in relationship matters).

Her pedagogical approach, nonetheless, highlights the implausibility of the inspirational teaching film. She oscillates between neglect and a sadistic, totalitarian regime, in which humiliation and physical pain are prime motivators. Her students excel on the statewide test, affording Elizabeth the bonus that she needs in order to finance her cosmetic surgery – not as a result of hard work, but because she illegally procures the test answers in advance. In this adolescent fantasy, however, the guilty emerged unscathed, while the goody-two-shoes teacher, Elizabeth's archrival, reduced to Elizabeth's level of duplicity²⁸, is sent off to an inner city school in punishment. The conventionalized plot highlights the ways in which Elizabeth's character drives the project as a vehicle for the star persona of Cameron Diaz, whose character in the film corresponds to a norm generated by male teenagers' fantasies about girls, drugs and sex.

If, in general, in terms of plot, the film opts for a sentimental vision of heterosexuality in which love is more important than money, it also incorporates one significant difference: Elizabeth is not punished for her blatant bad girl mores, which include abuse of alcohol, illegal drugs, reckless endangerment while driving a vehicle, promiscuity, fraud, attempted extortion, to name but a few. If she rejects her initial aspirations, in which marriage to a wealthy man was her ultimate career goal (again harkening back to an earlier vision of femininity), her basic bad girl nature remains intact, corresponding to an adolescent vision of ideal femininity.

The element of consumerism itself is re-introduced through the persona of Diaz, who during the film struts around in her Rick Owens t-shirts and Louboutin heels, perpetuating the same 'look' that she presents as a *Harper Bazaar's* covergirl, but also in her many appearances in more low-brow women's magazines, in which she promotes a more affordable choice of clothing. Diaz notoriously revealed to the media in a remark widely repeated over the past few years that: "I have a new philosophy on clothes. Now I always wear whatever I'm wearing, the same outfit, for four days, and then I never wear it again"²⁹. This philosophy feeds directly into what is called McFashion, the promotion of low-end, cheap, and, ultimately, disposable garments that simulate high fashion as intrinsic to the contemporary fashion system³⁰. Diaz' excessively cultivated and stylish appearance (especially for a middle-school teacher) seemingly authorizes her bad behavior – making it seem glamorous and humorous – as in the infamous car wash scene – rather than sordid.

Jake Kasdan, the director, praised this dimension of the star's persona: "Cameron is probably the only actress in the world who can pull that off, because she is the only person I can think of who can be that funny while being that hot. She's just completely hilarious in that scene"³¹. While Kasdan is referring to the notorious car wash scene in which Diaz metaphorically humps the cars to encourage better tips, this comment could

²⁸ M. Dalton, "Bad Teacher Is Bad for Teachers", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 41, 2 (2013): 78-87 (83). Accessed October 9, 2014, DOI:10.1080/01956051.2013.787352.

²⁹ *Hindustani Times*, March 19, 2007. Accessed October 9, 2014, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-1238655221.html>. madamenoire.com, accessed October 9, 2014, <http://madamenoire.com/421069/celebrities-with-terrible-personal-hygiene/15/>.

³⁰ For an extended discussion of McFashion and the contemporary fashion system, see M. Lee, *Fashion Victim: Our Love-Hate Relationship with Dressing, Shopping, and the Cost of Style*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003.

³¹ E. Levy, "How Cameron Diaz Chooses Roles?", emanuellevy.com, June 21, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2014, <http://emanuellevy.com/comment/bad-teacher-how-cameron-diaz-chooses-roles/>.

apply to Diaz' behavior throughout the film. Thus, Diaz in her role as Elizabeth offers a stereotypical vision of a female who can share the male adolescent's own predilections while remaining overtly 'girly' or feminine, an ideal that rarely penetrates to women's magazine, but which is routinely promoted in other areas, such as popular music. Not coincidentally, Diaz won a Teen Choice Award for her role in the film³².

While *Bad Teacher* may have some qualities that recommend the film to women, its targeted audience seems to be young males and young viewers (between 13-15), more generally, in fact, the middle school students who might have attended Adams, where Elizabeth teaches. This is a group that might buy the DVD (having seen the film), or even more likely, download it from iTunes and watch it repeatedly. While Elizabeth may offer a refreshing alternative to the success-oriented heroine of the girly film, she hardly seems praiseworthy! She incarnates an image of femininity that paradoxically combines the characteristics of male adolescence with a number of traditional womanly traits associated with consumerism, suggesting the ways in which these hybrid forms often discard the very qualities that would make them a substantive contribution to the canon of women's films and the legacy of classical Hollywood. *Bad Teacher* illustrates how the hybrid romantic comedy featuring a female lead transforms the formula such that it no longer addresses the concerns of women, and indeed often privileges depictions of women, in the name of what is known as male fan service, that are offensive to many women as well as older men. This fan service dimension, which encourages the objectification of women, counters the potentially progressive elements in the film – for example the way in which the narrative potentially challenges the double standard by which male and female behavior is judged by suggesting that women may behave as badly as men and yet return to the fold of a happy heterosexual relationship, providing they realize the error of their ways.

6. THE RETURN OF THE FORMIDABLE 'FEMME'

In fact, the most obvious ways in which the woman's film as defined in classical Hollywood has been preserved is through television – in particular, through the rise in the production, sparked by cable, of what was once termed quality television. This trend is particularly evident in material aired on premium channels such as HBO and Showtime, supplemented by programs that other networks have felt compelled to create in order to compete, such as *Scandal* (ABC, 2012), or *Top of the Lake* (BBC Two, 2013), both of which feature complex and powerful female characters over the age of 25. The program *Damages* (FX, Audience Network, 2007-2012) illustrates the power and attraction of this medium not only for directors, but also for established female stars (in this case, Glenn Close) seeking roles that are central, rather than supporting or ancillary, as well as for younger, emerging stars (such as Rose Byrne) who wish to establish a reputation for dramatic characterizations with a degree of complexity. Though marriage and children feature heavily in *Damages*, as in *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-current), the plotlines of both highlight relations between women, and their ambitions in the public well as private sphere and their consequent problems.

While television has typically been recognized as female oriented, more surpris-

³² Cameron Diaz Online, accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.cameron-diaz.org/cameron-diaz/awards-and-nominations/>.

ingly, American independent cinema, long considered a masculine preserve, has also become the site for a re-working of the women's film, resulting in the rise of a number of women directors like Nicole Holofcener, with films such as *Enough Said* (2013), *Please Give* (2010), *Friends with Money* (2006), *Lovely and Amazing* (2001), and *Walking and Talking* (1996), or the younger and, at least for the moment, less successful Kat Coiro, whose films include *Life Happens* (2011) and *A Case of You* (2013) – both updates of the Hollywood romantic comedy formula. While these films are rarely available in the theater, new delivery technologies mean that they are available internationally to women viewers, who seek them out as “chick flicks” for “smart women”³³. Similarly, films produced by the mumble core graduates such as Noah Baumbach and his partner, co-screenwriter, Greta Gerwig, with films such as *Frances Ha* (2012), have exploited the relative accessibility that new technology affords the aspiring director to create films taking up topics, such as female friendship, artistic ambition, and familial relations, that are the focus of the woman's film. In addition, established directors such as Jonathan Demme have been willing to explore chick flick formulas, such as the wedding film, as in *Rachel Getting Married* (2008), possibly because female stars are more likely than their male counterparts to take risks with a view to gaining dramatic credibility, given such roles are rarely offered to them by conglomerate Hollywood³⁴.

A final re-location of the woman's film is found in what would typically be categorized as children's films, such as Disney's *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013), the top grossing film at the box office in 2013, and the highest grossing animated film of all time, or *Maleficent* (Robert Stromberg), released in 2014. While based in fairy tales, both also allegorically explore adult themes, relations between females and were exceptionally successful with women³⁵.

The consequence is a growing canon of films and other forms of screen narratives that address topics that have typically been associated with the woman's film in classical Hollywood, films that, in the words of scholar Jeanine Basinger, “tell the truth” and “are a way of recognizing the problems of women”³⁶. Basinger further underlines that “the woman's film accomplishes one important thing for its viewers: It puts the woman at the center of the universe”³⁷. Thus, the contemporary television political dramas *Boss* (Starz, 2011-12) or *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-current), which ostensibly revolve around the male leads (Kelsey Grammer and Kevin Spacey respectively), position their wives (Connie Nielson and Robin Wright) as formidable women with their own stories and political agendas, which may often compete and conflict with those of their respective husbands. The prominence of these latter characters indicates how important the female viewing audience is in the context of a historically male-driven genre (the political drama) and how the genre has hybridized to include this audience. The recent *Maleficent* (a re-working of the traditional Sleeping Beauty fairy tale), which explores the darker ramifications of failed relationships and surrogate motherhood not typically associated

³³ See H. Radner, “*Rachel Getting Married* (2008): Personal Cinema and the Smart-Chick Film”, *US Independent Filmmaking After 1989: Possible Films*, edited by C. Perkin, C. Verevis, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, forthcoming 2015.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ B. Lang, “‘Maleficent’ Shows Strength of Female Audiences at Box Office”, *Variety*, June 2, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/maleficent-box-office-frozen-strong-female-audience-1201205259/>.

³⁶ J. Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

with the more traditional versions of the story, suggests how the concerns of this same audience are being addressed within a genre that explicitly targets a younger audience.

7. CONCLUSION

Amanda Hess reports for *Slate* in 2014 that:

Last year, women made up 52 percent of the moviegoer population and bought half of all tickets sold. Those numbers prompted Women and Hollywood to put pressure on Hollywood studios to better reflect its audience on the big screen: “So again, we ask, if women are going to the movies more than men, why do only fifteen percent of the films star women?” Melissa Silverstein wrote. If I were a Hollywood executive, though, I might be asking a different question: If women are already going to the movies more than men, why should I change my films to accommodate them? [...] And we’re not just showing up to heralded female-driven stories like *The Hunger Games* and *Frozen*: according to Post Track data, women recently outnumbered men in the audience for the new Liam Neeson thriller, *Non-Stop*³⁸.

In contrast, Brent Lang at *Variety* commented that: “More than any other Hollywood player, Walt Disney has adroitly tapped into the strength of the female moviegoing audience, keeping this potent demographic in mind while cooking up everything from princess lines to ‘Let it Go’-style empowerment anthems”. Observing that recent blockbusters have been “skewed male”, Lang claimed that “it’s evident that women were giving the cold shoulder to this year’s crop of popcorn films”. He made an exception for a Zac Efron vehicle (53 percent female), remarking: “Never bet against male objectification”. *The Other Woman* (Nick Cassavetes, 2014), a female friendship film, had a 75 percent female audience; its box office was respectable, but not in the top ten, and not likely to support the marketing of ancillary products³⁹.

In conclusion, what can we say about the female audience in the twenty-first century? It remains important, if perhaps under-served by global Hollywood – possibly because, as the US Supreme Court judged in 1915 in a 9-0 vote, “the exhibition of moving pictures is a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit”⁴⁰. What strikes me as more interesting, however, is that other kinds of efforts that we might deem “creative” continue to exist and reproduce themselves in interesting ways sometimes against, but sometimes on the coattails of, an organization that is purely venal in its preoccupations: the *Holofceners* and *Campions of the world* may very well exist not in spite of Hollywood, but because of it – which remains one of the great paradoxes of contemporary mass culture.

³⁸ A. Hess, “Women Buy Half of All Movie Tickets”, *Slate*, March 27, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/03/27/mpaa_2013_numbers_women_buy_half_of_all_movie_tickets_but_that_won_t_mean.html.

³⁹ Lang, “‘Maleficent’ Shows Strength”.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 4.

SUMMARY

Although cinema is routinely classified as a creative industry in the twenty-first century, countering its designation as a “business, pure and simple” at the beginning of the twentieth, Hollywood productions are increasingly determined by the commercial imperatives of the conglomerates and the domination of young males as the most profitable audience within this sector. Notwithstanding, recent developments in delivery systems have afforded those seeking to reach female viewers unprecedented access to this audience by enabling them to engage creatively with the geographies of twenty-first-century screens, including home-viewing, through various broadcast, cable, satellite, internet and digital services, as well as through the increasing number of film festivals serving most major cities. While the ‘girly’ film, or chick flick, is in decline, the woman’s film, its hybridizations, in particular in the form of franchises targeting young female viewers, and its various televisual avatars have proliferated, with women directors emerging in the independent sector and art house directors developing ambitious projects for television in its new incarnations that take the female audience into account.