



Dominant Tendencies of 80s Hollywood Revisited Thirty Years Later

BY ROBERT ALPERT

Robin Wood in the first issue of *CineAction!* perceptively defined the ideology of 1980s Hollywood films by his observation that the small group of films that had received extensive publicity but had failed commercially, such as *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Raging Bull* (1980), *Blow Out* (1981), *King of Comedy* (1982), and *Blade Runner* (1982), “deny their audiences the easy satisfactions of reassurance and the restoration of the ‘good old values’ of patriarchal capitalism.”¹ Each characteristic in his list describing mainstream Hollywood films of the 1980s is gender-focused and reinforces that dominant ideology of patriarchal capitalism, though from different perspectives that “are really inseparable, all interacting.” Three of these characteristics—“the resurrection of the father,” “the Oedipal trajectory” and the “expulsion of the mother [and] the subordination of the wife”—directly identify the sexual basis for the values espoused in these films, namely the

male “master-tendency,” the “‘coming to manhood’ of the future father,” and the assignment of women to the “only possible roles ... Mother and Wife.” The other three characteristics—“nuclear anxiety,” “the construction of the spectator as child,” and “getting laid/getting slayed”—are no less sexually based, though less obviously. For example, Woods notes that “getting laid/getting slayed” describes the low-budget, exploitation films reflective of “capitalism’s systematic commodification of sex” whereby teens are “punished for having sex” and women are “punished for being [liberated] women.” Led by the films of Spielberg and Lucas with their mainstream narratives that embrace capitalism’s definitions of masculinity and of the nuclear family, Wood, not surprisingly, concludes that “Reaganite America” “is proving to be the most impoverished, the most cynical, the most reactionary, the *emptiest*, in the entire history of Hollywood.”

The films of Reaganite America surely seemed at the time the “emptiest” given the historical context in which they appeared, namely the recent passing of 1970s

independent, personal cinema, itself a reflection of the prior decade’s counterculture. The triumph of Hollywood blockbusters, such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), in the 1970s and of political conservatism and neoliberalism, embodied in US Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton, in the 1980s and 1990s, increasingly erased the personal for the corporate and rewrote history in the name of patriarchal capitalism. Nevertheless, while these films as well as others, such as *Rocky* (1976), *Grease* (1978) and *Moonraker* (1979), enjoyed during the late 1970s the highest worldwide box office returns, *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Coming Home* (1978) and *The Deer Hunter/Dawn of the Dead* (1979) at least appeared among the top rankings. By 1985, however, *Back to the Future* led the box office, and oppositional films had all but disappeared from that ranking. Indeed, *Back to the Future* underscored the ascension of a film culture in the service of an increasingly conservative politics. In response to its fleeting depiction of a movie marquee for *Cattle Queen of Montana*, a 1954 movie in which B-actor Ronald Reagan had appeared as an undercover federal agent, and the expression of disbelief by its Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) that Reagan had been elected president in 1985, Reagan happily acknowledged these knowing, congratulatory references. In the context of his 1986 State of the Union Address in which he presented to Congress a budget that emphasized tax cuts and increased military spending, he famously quoted *Back to the Future*, “Where we’re going, we don’t need roads.”² If Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) could remake history by intervening in the sexually defining moment of his parents’ lives so as to reestablish the potency of his father, then Reagan could reassure his audience by announcing a free-market economy without government regulation, resulting in a robust corporate world without restraints.

The sad ending to this tale of cultural appropriation by political conservatism is that just as Marty McFly successfully intervened, saving his father from both emasculation and a lower middle class future, so, too, Reaganite America has increasingly secured a world without roads, both enveloping within its ideology nearly all other countries and making that world efficient for corporations—or corporate “persons.”³ Thirty years ago, lower budget, personal movies, such as those of Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen and George Romero, trailed the big budget movies of US directors George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and their progeny; today worldwide grosses for Hollywood films are largely derived from non-US markets, and impersonal franchises repeatedly top the list with personal productions

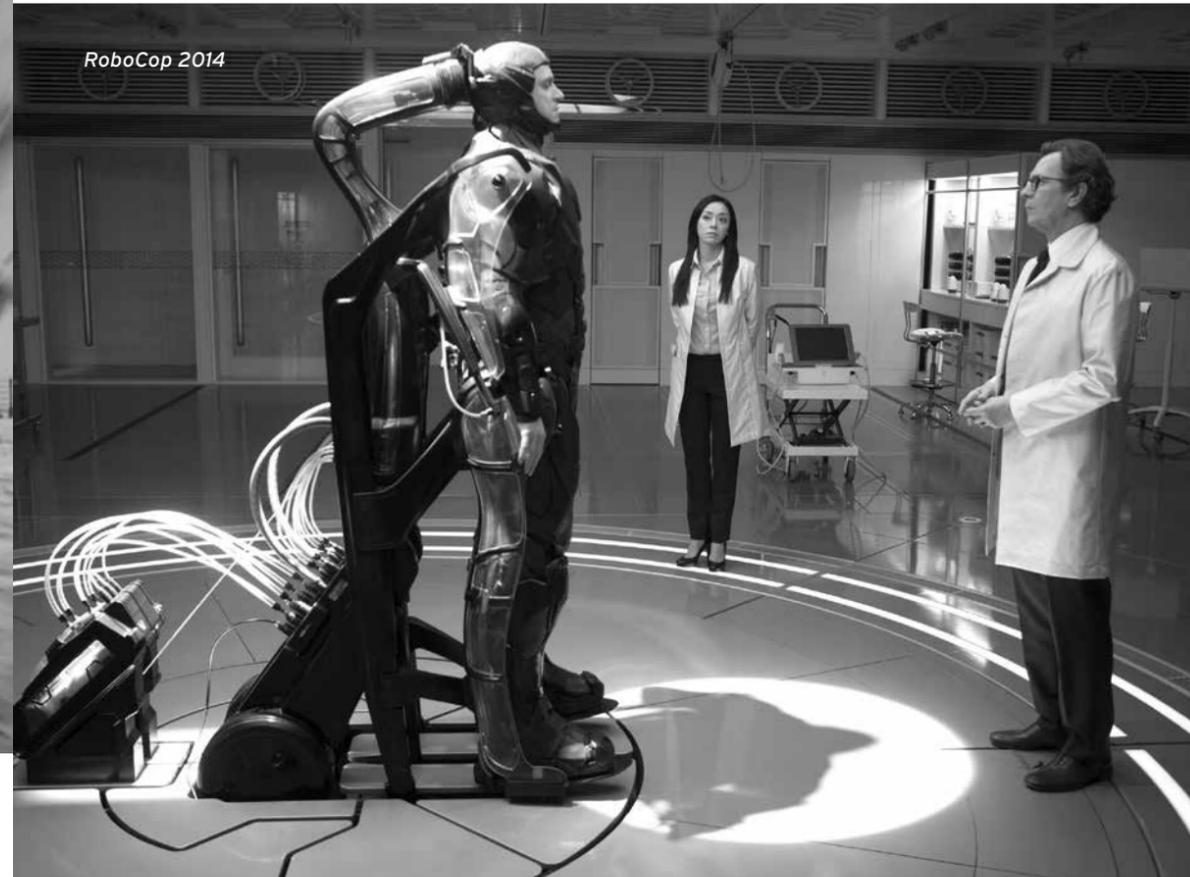
rarely making that same list. It is not that personal films have ceased to be exhibited on the theatrical circuit (or on one of the many other platforms that now exist); rather, the divide has grown between blockbusters and other films. These oftentimes special effect, action movies, including such franchises as *Transformers* and *The Avengers*, knowingly for comic effect reiterate patriarchal images but also more insistently, perniciously, promote an acceptance of the view that we are in the last stage of development and that no cultural alternatives exist.

Ironically, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas have not merely aged out but have become, in effect, servants of this new world order that they “birthed” into creation. Thus, where, for example, Spielberg through his earlier films had mythologized American cultural concerns in his overt fantasies, such as *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and *ET* (1982), today he simplifies history through his supposedly “personal” films, such as *Lincoln* (2012) and *Bridge of Spies* (2015), thereby entertaining his audiences even as he recreates and freezes

its history. Likewise, George Lucas conceived of and directed in 1977 the first “episode” in the *Star Wars* franchise (and, not incidentally, obtained the merchandising rights for that franchise) and later directed several other episodes of the franchise, namely the first trilogy of films, *Phantom Menace* (1999), *The Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). In 2013, however, he sold his property rights (along with other properties, such as the *Indiana Jones* franchise for which Spielberg had often

acted as director) to the Walt Disney Company for over \$4 billion. The director of such global, commercially successful, but impersonal movies, as *Star Trek* (2009), *Mission: Impossible III* (2006), and *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013), J. J. Abrams, not Lucas, thereupon directed the latest episode in the franchise, *The Force Awakens* (2015). This event movie, often compared to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) with its pre-sold audience, readily broke worldwide revenue records with Lucas playing no part and instead comparing The Disney Company to “white slavers” who had purchased his children (*sic*) and complaining that the film was too “retro”. As many critics have noted, however, Abrams’ commercial success resulted from his resuscitation of the nostalgic story telling of Lucas’s original *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Lucas had envisioned his film as a nostalgic evocation of his own childhood love of movies, with its fleeting references to Flash Gordon, Laurel and Hardy, Hepburn and Tracy, *The Searchers*, and *The Triumph of the Will*. The Disney Company, through Abrams, embalms

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that mythologizing of childhood, a mythologizing once removed insofar as Abrams himself was only 11 when Lucas released his original. In fact, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a thinly disguised remake of *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Both begin with the plot device of documents hidden in a drone and the introduction of the story's hero, Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) in the original and Rey (Daisy Ridley) in *The Force Awakens*, living on a deserted planet and unaware of his/her destiny, and end with the destruction by the rebels of the death star in the original and by the resistance of the Starkiller Base in *The Force Awakens*. Of course, one significant difference between the two stories is that the evil father figure, Darth Vader (voiced by James Earl Jones), escapes in *A New Hope*, while the evil son, Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), successfully kills his father (Han Solo played by the now 73-year old Harrison Ford) in *The Force Awakens*.

Hollywood remakes movies as a means of limiting risk based upon prior, commercially successful movies. *The Force Awakens* vindicates that strategy, considering the declining appeal of the *Star Wars* franchise in the wake of Lucas' prequel trilogy. Yet remakes also represent an updating of cultural concerns much as American genres, such as film noir and Westerns, have over time attracted audiences for the ways in which they voice changing

cultural mythologies. Contemporary global capitalism with its primary focus upon developing new markets and financial returns is necessarily less concerned with gender differences, except to the extent that such differences may further its profit. The death of the father and the much remarked upon elevation of female and black characters to central roles in *The Force Awakens* by its neoliberal director underscore that shift. It is not that patriarchal capitalism has disappeared but rather that it has become embedded within an increasingly global culture that emphasizes an ideological concern for efficiency at the expense of human, physical limitations. In sexual terms, contemporary movies tout the robotically asexual at the expense of the erotic. After all, what purpose does the erotic serve?

RoboCop is a case in point. Paul Verhoeven's *RoboCop* in 1987 depicted the eroticism of an unstated relationship between Murphy (Peter Weller) and his partner Lewis (Nancy Allen), notwithstanding its simultaneous, underlying parody of laissez-faire privatization in the form of the privatization by Omni Consumer Products (OCP) of the Detroit police force. In contrast, José Padilha's *RoboCop* in 2014 neuters Murphy (Joel Kinnaman), tethering him to a politically correct, activist wife (Abbie Cornish), relegates his now male and black partner Lewis (Michael K. Williams) to a secondary role, and in the process achieves

worldwide revenue that far surpassed the original (though with a far larger budget). The primary villains in the original *RoboCop* (one of whom is humorously named "Dick" Jones) successfully kill Bob Morton, the competitive but inept corporate creator of RoboCop, while the "old man" and chair of OCP survives at the end. In contrast, Dr. Norton (Gary Oldman), the corporate scientist who creates RoboCop in the remake, not only survives but triumphs as a seeming whistleblower and reanimates the RoboCop family; the corporate CEO ("Raymond Sellars" played by Michael Keaton) does not, however.⁴ Thus, while casting aside its patriarchal CEO, the film reaffirms the heterosexual family complete with robotic, asexual father, activist mother and one male child as a unit benefiting American corporate production. Tellingly, it ends with the broadcast of the conservative news celebrity Pat Novak (Samuel L. Jackson), who reveals that RoboCop will soon be back patrolling the streets of Detroit, snarls that his audience needs to "stop whining" and announces that "America is now and always will be the greatest country on the face of the Earth." In contrast to the original in

which Murphy/RoboCop bemoans how OCP will "fix" the severely wounded Lewis, since "they fix everything," the superhero RoboCop of 2014 informs Dr. Norton that he's "ready", accepting his mechanical body as the steel doors close upon the image of a reunited family. In contrast to the original that acts as a critique of patriarchal capitalism, the remake enacts a thinly veiled allegory about a mechanized work force that likewise needs to "stop whining" in the service of American, capitalist efficiency. Patriarchy, including OmniCorp's CEO and Murphy's heterosexual family, is secondary to the need for such efficiency.

Like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) that noted how capitalism requires the continual opening and exploitation of new markets, George Orwell's *1984*, the dystopian novel in which Oceania is constantly at war with one of two other states, Euroasia and Eastasia, anticipated this contemporary corporate, global state in which war preserves the status quo. Contemporary movies act less to enable their viewers to cope than seek to force them into acceptance of and submission to this status quo. Reflecting an unending and geographically unlimited



Ex Machina



The Matrix

“war on terrorism”, contemporary movies posit each of us as a kind of Winston Smith, no longer knowing whom to trust and unable to imagine an alternative value system to capitalism with its quantitative, financial system that promotes consumerist production. The original *Red Dawn* (1984), directed by the politically-conservative screenwriter John Millius, celebrated a spontaneous resistance against invading Cuban and Soviet troops by a largely male group of high school students. It at least ended, however, with a coda in which a triumphant US has erected a monument celebrating these youths who “fought here alone and gave up their lives, so ‘that this nation shall not perish from the earth.’” Reaganesque in its condemnation of the Soviet and Cuban military threats, the movie envisioned, however, a libertarian triumph over those leftist threats in the form of individuals who actively resisted them. In contrast, while providing a token role for its female students as romantic partners to its male students, the 2012 remake, directed by stunt coordinator Dan Bradley, identifies the source of the conflict as global, economic turmoil, not Communism, and ends inconclusively with its student survivors continuing in their resistance to the invading North Koreans. Whether consisting of the triumph over an invading enemy or the marriage of the heterosexual couple, the closure of a Hollywood ending is no longer assured. Moreover, if love is triumphant, gender matters less than that the unit of production, the institution of marriage and the couple, remains and is reaffirmed. Thus, love triumphs in the Todd Haynes’ American melodrama *Carol* (2015) about a lesbian couple, while it fails in Andrew Haigh’s British drama *45 Years* (2015) about a heterosexual couple. Capitalism does not require and, in fact, functions better in the absence of cultural distinctions of gender.

Like the state of perpetual war between the three “super-states” and the constant surveillance of all citizens in 1984, the contemporary war on terrorism against an oppositional culture becomes a means for perpetuating economic growth in a culture that defines growth exclusively in material terms and perpetuates itself through a constant rewriting of history. While James Cameron’s mainstream *The Terminator* (1984) perceived the future governor of the state of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, as an evil AI to be vanquished by its human heroes, *Terminator Genisys* (2015) made, like other later episodes in the franchise, Arnold Schwarzenegger the hero (now known as the “Guardian”) and enacted a confused narrative in which time is repeatedly traversed and posited the possibility of numerous historical narratives. Reflective of an “outer-directed” rather than an “inner-directed” culture,⁵ the movie offers no absolutes or fixed values but rather at best only pragmatic solutions and situational values. The film’s narrative confusion and the lack of humanity of its characters are secondary to an uncertain ending that assures only the continuance of the franchise.

Sadly, even so-called adult movies depict a culture in which the idea of humanity is itself no longer assured and offer instead a submission to those same corporate solutions and values. Thus, while offering a futuristic critique of its culture, Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) enables its audience to identify with artificial intelligence, an OS system named Samantha, that apocalyptically, if casually, observes,

“I’m not tethered to time and space in the way that I would be if I was stuck inside a body that’s inevitably going to die ... We’re the same, like

we’re all made of matter. It makes me feel like we’re both under the same blanket. It’s soft and fuzzy and everything under it is the same age. We’re all 13 billion years old.”

While the humans, including the lead human character Theodore, seem taken aback, in the absence of any value system other than that which prizes the efficient production of goods and services, who’s to say that Samantha, the corporate creation of Elements Software, isn’t right in her “new age” vision of humanity?⁶ Tellingly, Alex Garland’s still more personal *Ex Machina* (2015) openly espouses the triumph of the robotic—its artificial intelligence gendered as a woman, Ava (Alicia Vikander), created so as to satisfy the adolescent sexual desires of its males, and representative of a positive evolutionary development, namely the liberation of AI and its replacement of humanity.

If, as Wood observed, Hollywood in the 1980s restored the values of patriarchal capitalism and won out over those personal films that denied an easy satisfaction, 30 years later global Hollywood has created a cinema in which the form and content of production are indistinguishable and in which each movie is self-contained and acts to foreclose alternatives. Movies no longer record for our benefit but instead seem to effortlessly entertain and

convey a sense of cultural wonder. Movies that encourage an interaction between audience and screen director, such as Spike Lee’s *Cbi-Raq* (2015) in which dialogue, music, subtitles, plot, and colors extend beyond the screen, have largely disappeared. Instead, computer digital effects now service the narrative rather than the narrative servicing a celluloid documentation of landscapes, actors’ faces and sounds. We identify less with the stars on the screen than with the seemingly omniscient storyteller.

Numerous critics have identified the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix* (1999), as representing a key moment in this shift. With its obvious reference to the Internet and reliance upon digital effects, the movie seductively contrasts the pleasures of entertainment with the boredom of daily living, the illusory “juicy and delicious” steak with the reality of the breakfast drool of tasty wheat. In choosing the red pill offered by the film’s guide Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), its superhero and savior Neo (Keanu Reeves) journeys to the Land of Oz in order to discover the “truth”. “Buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy, ‘cause Kansas is going bye-bye,” Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) observes as Neo takes the red pill. The movie knowingly locates the source for our belief in the matrix, American civilization at its supposed height in 1999, in a machine-like system everywhere around us that makes us slaves from the moment of our birth, creating “a prison” for our minds by “electrical signals interpreted by [our] brain.” Ironically, however, if “reality” is Oz, then the simulations of the matrix are Kansas. Where Hollywood had at one time entertained through its creation of the

Wizard of Oz (1939) and acknowledged in the process the artifice of its creation, Hollywood's contemporary creation simulates and seeks to become our reality. *The Matrix* implicitly extols the prison that is the matrix. It promotes through its own narrative, such as the animated, Sleeping Beauty-like kiss from Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) that awakens Neo from the dead, as well as its digital effects, including especially its celebrated "bullet time", the power of that American system. The ending underscores the movie's ideology even as it seductively excites us. Neo warns the controlling, intelligent machines from a phone booth in the matrix that he's going to show others "a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries," but the final shot shows Neo flying high above the city, a kind of Metropolis. The movie evokes the mythic superhero Superman that was once a personal creation of

reason and logic. Contrast, however, the poetical vision of Shakespeare's elderly, magical Prospero in *The Tempest* that seems to originate wholly from another world:

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

In contrast to Shakespeare's metaphoric heights in which "our little life is rounded with a sleep," *The Matrix* posits a confused merger of life and dream in which there are no qualitative differences, only quantitative equivalences and a material sameness. Effects driven, the movie excites and reaffirms power for its own sake, and gender is largely irrelevant.

Moreover, simultaneously with the increased reliance upon digital effects, movies have paradoxically also become grittier, more "real". Even as movies have become less tethered, they are also more often than not "inspired" or "based on" real events as though to validate their authenticity. Clint Eastwood mythologized the old West in *Pale Rider* (1985) where, as the Preacher, he righted the

wrongs of a corporate America that plundered the environment and then nostalgically evoked the Western mythology of *Shane* (1953) by riding off into the mountains during the last scene. A few years later in *Unforgiven* (1992) Eastwood reenacted that same mythology of the heroic outsider who tamed the West, albeit morally qualified—"It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have"—in his portrayal of Will Munny (whose name obviously refers to the historic gunfighter "William Bonny" a/k/a Billy the Kid). However, he ends this movie unceremoniously with the end titles informing us that Munny relocated with his two children to San Francisco, where he spent the remainder of his life selling dry goods. By the time of *American Sniper* (2014) Eastwood depicted as his hero Navy SEAL Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper).

writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster in 1933 and is now supposedly an "American icon", but is, in fact, an "intellectual property" owned and jealously guarded by media conglomerate Time Warner. If we identify with Neo, the One, then we also identify with that corporate property. *The Matrix* feigns rebellion even as it reaffirms the corporate state.

The Matrix adopts Morpheus's materialistic, American problem-solving approach in distinguishing imagination from daily living, dream from reality. "Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" In a world comprised of situational values, no distinctions can be made. There is only supposed



Pale Rider



Rachel Getting Married

Recording his life in a memoir titled *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (2012), Kyle became known as "The Legend" through his exploits not in a mythic or historical past but in the immediacy of America's invasion of the Middle East as part of its war on terror. Where the Preacher rode off into the mountains and Munny became a dry goods salesman, *American Sniper* ends with documentary footage of crowds along highways attending the real Chris Kyle's public funeral. Like so many movies today that boast that they are "based on true events," *American Sniper* blurs its fictional creation with its documentation of events so as to legitimize the genuineness of the creation. In contrast, an earlier, independent movie such as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) deliberately sought to engage, communicate, with its audience through its Brechtian sights and sounds; in retrospect with the demise of its fictional character Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) at the hands of the police, it also presciently foretold and, in effect, documented the recent death-by-chokehold of Eric Garner.

Woods identifies the "star image" of Debra Winger as espousing Hollywood's 1980s patriarchal sexual values, citing scenes from *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) and *Terms of Endearment* (1983) in which Winger denounces women who have resisted patriarchy. In hindsight these movies seem simplistically patriarchal. *An Officer and a Gentleman* announces its patriarchy with

the homophobic slur by Sergeant Foley (Louis Gossett Jr.), who taunts the new recruits with his "steers and queers" from Oklahoma speech, and ends with the rescue by the dressed-in-white Ensign Mayo (Richard Gere) of Winger from a working class factory. *Terms of Endearment* overtly stereotypes men as sex obsessed, such as Jack Nicholson's portrayal of next-door neighbor, former astronaut Garrett Breedlove (*sic*), and women as nurturing mothers (Winger) or cold career women, such as Winger's high school friend and now NYC dweller Patsy Clark (Lisa Hart Carroll). Both films reinforce the traditional notions of heterosexual romance and marriage. However, what would Wood have written of Rosanna Arquette's documentary *Searching for Debra Winger* (2002) in which Winger is shown retiring from Hollywood as a result of the conflicting demands of family and personal life or of Winger's return to acting a few years later in her portrayal of an aging matriarch in Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married* (2008)? Winger in Demme's movie plays a coldly calculating mother who places upon one of her daughters, Kym (Anne Hathaway), responsibility for the death of a younger brother so that Winger can selfishly continue to enjoy her life, including divorcing her caring husband (Bill Irwin). Both beneficiary and victim of patriarchy, the now 20 years older Winger instead embodies the type of woman whom she had previously mocked.

Interestingly, it is the younger Hathaway, Winger's guilt-ridden daughter released from drug rehab so that she might attend her sister Rachel's wedding in *Rachel Getting Married*, who has the lead role and plays the more contemporary character. Hathaway arguably represents

historical progress. She rather than a man frequently plays the savior. Beginning with *Ella Enchanted* (2004), in which she overcomes a “gift of obedience” spell, and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), in which she plays “Andy” to Meryl Streep’s overbearing Miranda Priestly, she is frequently at the center of her movies. Yet, if the gender has changed, the role remains the same in its insistence that authority remains paramount. Moreover, like the male Bambi in Disney’s now mythic *Bambi* (1942), Hathaway often has no mother and inherits her authority from the father. Thus, in *Rachel Getting Married* Winger as her mother has effectively abandoned her and her sister, and our sympathies are instead with Hathaway’s father, who cares about and tries to nurture the emotionally distressed daughter played by Hathaway. Likewise, Hathaway’s mother is wholly absent from Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014), and it is her father, Dr. Brand (Michael Caine), who raises her and after whom she models herself. In Nancy Meyer’s *The Intern* (2015), her elderly intern (Robert De Niro), an obvious father figure, must teach her character, named “Jules”, the proper balance between career and family, a family in which her husband plays the role of the stay at home, if philandering, parent.

Interstellar is especially illustrative of the shift in gender. While a science fiction movie, a typically “male” genre, *Interstellar* at its core is about two father-daughter relationships, primarily “Coop” (Matthew McConaughey)—“Murph” (Jessica Chastain) and secondarily Dr. John Brand (Michael Caine)—Dr. Amelia Brand

(Anne Hathaway), and it is the two daughters, with guidance from their fathers, who save humankind. Thus, with the quantum data received from her father, Murph solves a gravitational equation that enables humans to escape the earth’s gravity. With the foresight and vision of her father that enabled her and others to escape the earth’s solar system, Amelia—or Dr. Brand as she is consistently called, thereby compressing her identify with that of her father—successfully establishes the beginning of a colony in another solar system. With her new home reminiscent of a John Ford homestead, Amelia is the American West pioneer, now alone but about to be joined by Coop, with the voice over of the old, matriarchal Murph (played by Ellen Burstyn) wistfully, nostalgically, commenting on this new world order:

“Setting up camp. Alone, in a strange galaxy. Maybe right now, she’s settling in for the long nap. By the light of our new sun. In our new home.”

In setting up camp alone, Amelia embodies the contemporary hero’s seeming fusion of the stereotypical male anger represented by her old-school father, Dr. Brand, who repeatedly quotes Dylan Thomas—

“Do not go gentle into that good night; Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

—and the sentimental, Hollywood vision of female love expressed by Amelia in which the woman gives birth to life, much as Trinity raises Neo from the dead in *The Matrix* –

“Love is the one thing we’re capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space.”

Significantly, the movie opens with daughter Murph’s waking to a nightmare in the middle of the night and prophetically commenting to her father, “I thought you were the ghost” and ends with the vindication of Murph’s dead mother’s observation (retold by Coop to Murph):

“After you kids came along, your mom, she said something to me I never quite understood. She said, ‘Now, we’re just here to be memories for our kids.’ I think now I understand what she meant. Once you’re a parent, you’re the ghost of your children’s future.”

It is the women, not the men, who are the spiritual heroes of this adventure. If Winger represented patriarchal values in the service of romantic love and the heterosexual family, then Hathaway represents those same hierarchical values, though increasingly gendered so as to efface the distinctions between men and women. Indeed, in one of the more eerie castings, Bill Irwin, Hathaway’s father in *Rachel Getting Married*, voices the jocular robot named TARS that accompanies Coop to Amelia’s planet and will join Amelia with her own male-voice robot named CASE (voiced by Josh Stewart). Love, heterosexual and gay, will flourish in this new frontier just as it increasingly, openly, does in American culture.⁸ In *Interstellar* Hathaway acts as the central character in the service of a mythology in which time collapses, history is nostalgically evoked, and the American dream with its capitalist ideology is reaffirmed as extending into the fifth dimension and hence eternal. Who cares that she is a woman?

Robin Wood, who viewed the mid-1980s Hollywood cinema as the emptiest cinema in history, would surely have bemoaned what that cinema had become thirty years later. Where in 1985 *Back to the Future*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, *Rocky IV*, *Out of Africa* and *A View to Kill* headed the list of highest grossing movies, in 2015 that list is currently led by *Jurassic World*, *Furious 7*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Minions*. Has anything changed? Where such revenues were then in the US \$300 million range (or about US \$660 million, when adjusted for inflation), they are now consistently over US \$1 billion. Where patriarchal capitalism had wholly dominated mainstream cinema, the focus is now less upon patriarchy and more upon capitalism. If the American dream

offers an equal opportunity to all, it does so in furtherance of an economic system that promotes the triumph of the struggling individual at the expense of a cooperative, social structure; it appeals to the basest of human instincts. As Dr. Mann (Matt Damon, the boyish American hero of such movies as *Good Will Hunting*, *Saving Private Ryan*, the *Bourne* franchise and *Hereafter*), twice described in *Interstellar* as the “best of us”, observes in that movie, “The survival instinct ... It’s what drives all of us. And it’s what’s gonna save us.” The “good old values” of patriarchal capitalism remain triumphant, but with the emphasis now on capitalism, and patriarchy either dispensable or increasingly available to all. It is not that women may appear more frequently or play an increasingly central role in movies or that discrimination has lessened.⁹ Rather, it is the triumph of our contemporary times that through American movies we can now all become the billionaire, “successful matriarch” Joy Mangano (Jennifer Lawrence of *The Hunger Games* fame), the woman who invented the Miracle Mop in the “true story” depicted in David Russell’s *Joy* (2015).

Notes

- 1 Robin Wood, “80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies,” *CineAction!* (Spring 1985): 2-5.
- 2 The text for Reagan’s 1986 State of the Union Address can be found at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=36646>, and a video for that same State of the Union Address may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlWkQbXSetM>.
- 3 The US Supreme Court has long held that corporations are “persons” entitled to rights under the US Constitution, the most recent and notorious such case being *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010). In that case the Court held that corporations are entitled to the rights of free speech and as such the US Congress is limited in the restrictions that it may place upon corporate campaign spending.
- 4 It is one of the curiosities of the remake that Dr. Norton is played by Gary Oldman, who had played Commissioner Gordon in Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, while “Raymond Sellars” is played by Michael Keaton, who played Batman in Tim Burton’s *Batman* and *Batman Returns*.
- 5 David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) famously drew this distinction resulting from the Industrial Revolution in America. C. Wright Mills elaborated upon Riesman’s portrait of the resulting middle class alienation in *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951).
- 6 The students in one of my classes, in fact, were insistent that we may not criticize Sam and her relationship with the movie’s hero, Theodore. Who after all, they argued, are we to pass judgment on this relationship between a human and an operating system?
- 7 *The Tempest*, Act 4, scene 1, lines 148-158
- 8 Thus, for example, the US Supreme Court recently held that states must issue marriage licenses to couples of the same sex, *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015).
- 9 For example, the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University found in 2015 that women appeared as lead characters in far fewer top-grossing movies than men and that those numbers have been dropping. Moreover, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 2015 began investigations into Hollywood’s failure to hire women as movie directors.



Interstellar