GOOD TIMES?: SIMULATING THE SEVENTIES IN NINETIES HOLLYWOOD

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

April 2023

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ABSTRACT

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Good Times? is an examination of the American film industry of the 1990s, with a focus on how both the major studios and independent distributors capitalized on cultural recycling of the 1970s. On the side of the major Hollywood studios, intellectual property became increasingly important as established brands could effectively be revived and resold to audiences. In independent cinema, filmmakers sampled the music, stars, and their own personal experiences from the 1970s, in line with larger aesthetic trends of postmodernism. The films studied in this project essentially mark a meeting point between these multiple trends.

An appeal to nostalgia, broadly defined, for the 1970s provided a useful strategy for both reviving brands of that time and using them in the new ways afforded by postmodernism (such as parody and sampling) and the diverse perspectives of multiculturalism. My central argument is that, in the 1990s, both Hollywood and independent cinema utilized "the seventies" as a product to be sold and the past as something to be marketed. The primary way studio and independent films achieved this was through marketing tactics that made the seventies into a brand on multiple synergistic channels. Chapter one surveys the industrial landscape impacting the entertainment industry of the time, while chapter two covers the cultural trends of multiculturalism and postmodernism. Chapter three shows how '70s-set coming-of-age films from Gen X filmmakers had a rather serious take on growing up while their distributors glossed over these elements to highlight elements associated with nostalgia. Chapter four analyzes the studios' role in the nostalgia wave through recycling brands via synergy, as Paramount/Viacom

did with *The Brady Bunch*. Chapter five examines independents' sampling of imagery and stars associated with blaxploitation to promote their films and ancillary products.

Employing an industry studies perspective, the project uses a diverse collection of texts in its analysis. While it involves some textual analysis of films, the research also covers marketing materials (trailers, press kits, posters), screenplays, interviews, and reviews. Analyzing these surrounding materials establishes the context for the films under examination and illuminates the industrial conditions that brought the films to their audiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a movie-obsessed kid growing up, I would often daydream about attending the Academy Awards and I loved to brainstorm what I would say after winning. As I have gotten older, I have come to realize my chances of Oscar gold are slim so this may be the closest I ever get to making that type of acceptance speech. As such, I wanted to call attention to a few people who have been so important to me in this process.

To my family, your love and support will always mean the world to me. I'm forever grateful that I grew up in a household that encouraged me to pursue the things that interested me, whether or not that meant going down a traditional career path. I wouldn't have been dreaming of that Oscar win or writing about the film industry now if it weren't for your passion for movies, television, popular culture, and yes, the '70s. I am sure all of you could look at this dissertation and find some type of influence that you have had on my research.

I would also like to thank Dr. Cynthia Baron for being the exact committee chair that I needed. The dissertation process is a long, strange journey and your guidance ensured that I never strayed too far off path. I always left our meetings with a renewed sense of excitement, ready to tackle whatever questions, challenges, and curiosities that came up in our conversation. It has been a true honor working with you.

I wouldn't be the scholar I am today without the guidance of wonderful professors who have stimulated my academic curiosity along the way. At the University of Evansville, I'm glad that Dr. Mari Plikuhn and Dr. Rob Shelby saw something in this relatively shy commuter; your encouragement and mentorship emboldened me to make this jump to graduate school and continue down this path. At Southern Methodist University, my film professors fostered a welcoming environment that solidified my passion for studying this artform—perhaps none

moreso than Dr. David Sedman, whose passion for the ancillary oddities of entertainment made me comfortable in my own approach to films and their paratexts. And here at BGSU, my committee has been helpful throughout every step. In the case of Dr. Schocket, I mean this literally as I received word of my acceptance to the university from you and your courses, feedback, and jokes have always been insightful along the way. And to Dr. Rankin, I hope that my teaching is reflective of the immeasurable positive impact you have had as my supervisor over the last few years.

And finally, to my friends, thanks for keeping me laughing along the way. I'll wrap it up now before the music starts playing me off stage.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary "consensus is clear," wrote cultural historian Thomas Hine in 2007, "the seventies were awful" (10). This view dominated the 2000s. Hine's book, *The Great Funk*, belonged to a wave of texts written in the new millennium that reflected on the 1970s in American culture. Many of them open with a similar summarization of that decade. "They were strange feverish years, the 1970s. They were a time of unease and despair, punctuated by disaster," wrote David Frum in his 2000 book *How We Got Here*. Beth Bailey and David Farber also use the word strange to describe the period in their edited collection *America in the Seventies*. "The 1970s may be our strangest decade. It was an era of incoherent impulses, contradictory desires, and even a fair amount of self-flagellation" (Bailey and Farber 2004, 1). The opening sections of these books tend to highlight the defining cultural events of the time: the Vietnam War, political scandals, highly visible crises (energy, hostage, etc.), and an economic slump. Then there are the representatives of the material culture most associated with the time—bell-bottom jeans, lava lamps, Pet Rocks, disco music—that were equally derided.

Authors writing about the 1970s also often note that, after the social movements of the '60s, Americans in the '70s "wrestled with fundamental questions of identity, particularly those related to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality" (Bailey and Farber 2004, 4). "The seventies were a time when many people felt free to invent or reinvent themselves," wrote Hine, highlighting a sense of self-discovery in line with Thomas Wolfe's famous 1976 *Time* article "The 'Me' Decade" (2007, 10). But even despite these developments, Bailey and Farber write, "the 1970s has few impassioned champions, even those who enjoyed coming of age during the decade" (2004, 1). By the 2000s, the 1970s represented a time to forget—a far cry from the "good times" evoked in the titles of the hit '70s CBS sitcom and Chic's 1979 disco anthem.

It seems almost contradictory to note, then, that in the 1990s—just a decade before—the ‘70s were everywhere in American popular culture. “It seems the late ‘90s endured a flood of Seventies imagery across its popular media,” wrote music scholar David Sigler in 2004 (40). In some ways, this was the continuation of a trend that had started decades earlier. In the 1970s, Hollywood had mobilized a successful formula that targeted nostalgia for the 1950s and later 1960s, which appealed to the youthful period of the Baby Boom generation. On the phenomenon, sociologist Fred Davis wrote in 1979 that “thousands of firms exist dedicated to preserving, propagating, and deriving income from a slice of the recent past about which people feel or can be made to feel nostalgic” (118).

Revisiting the ‘70s for its lucrative, nostalgic potential was the entertainment industry’s logical next step, as it could target both younger Boomers and the Generation Xers entering adulthood in the ‘90s. One of the earliest examples of the trend in the movie industry was Richard Linklater’s high school ensemble *Dazed and Confused* (1993), which would be followed by several coming-of-age movies set in the ‘70s, including *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997), and *Almost Famous* (Cameron Crowe, 2000). In music, successful ‘70s acts from the Bee Gees to the Sex Pistols embarked on successful reunion tours, while newer bands brought back certain looks and sounds from that time (Sigler 2004, 40). On television, *That ‘70s Show* premiered on Fox in the summer of 1998 as a *Happy Days*-like ensemble about a group of teenagers growing up in the late 1970s. By the time of the show’s debut, “the seventies” had become a brand that entire shows could use in marketing themselves. This strategy depended, in part, on the synergistic benefits that branding the past could have for the major corporations in the entertainment industry.[1]

[1] From this point forward, “the 1970s” is used to refer to the historical time period of 1970–1979 while “the seventies” will mean a generalized idea of that time (and its branding).

In the ‘90s, Hollywood was one part of a larger multinational conglomerate business model that put film under the same roof as other business assets, including television, music, theme parks, merchandising, electronics, and more. The synergy among different company revenue channels created an important socioeconomic context for both cultural nostalgia and brand recycling as these companies could capitalize on ‘70s nostalgia while also revitalizing their own media catalogs. “The media have come to devour their past creations at an ever-increasing rate,” Davis wrote in 1979 (126; 132–33). This phenomenon came to be fully realized in the 1990s, where it manifested itself in multiple ways.

Coming-of-age films relied heavily on soundtracks to evoke a sense of the ‘70s and one of the most salient examples of the brand recycling involved reruns and remakes of television shows from decades before such as *The Brady Bunch Movie* (Betty Thomas, 1995), *Charlie’s Angels* (McG, 2000) and *Starsky & Hutch* (Todd Phillips, 2004). At this same time, independent cinema, which worked on the margins of the traditional film industry, also found ways of benefitting from the increase in ‘70s imagery during this period. Rather than remaking older properties as the conglomerates had done, independent distributors instead relied on aesthetic connotations to bring back the past, often through the postmodern strategies of their filmmakers. This meant that actors who were popular decades prior could now be cast in roles that directly played off their most famous and successful films, such as Pam Grier in *Original Gangstas* (Larry Cohen, 1996) and *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997).

Good Times? looks to the trend of recycling ‘70s imagery to analyze the American film industry of the 1990s. What incentive did the industry have to bring back this time that people want to forget? On the side of the major Hollywood studios, intellectual property was becoming increasingly important as established brands could be effectively revived and resold to

audiences. In independent cinema, the postmodern trends of references and multiculturalism looked back at diverse representations of the past. In both cases, incorporating elements from the past became a cultural practice could serve both aesthetic and strategic purposes, leaving '70s nostalgia to be the perfect vessel for the meeting point of these trends. The case studies of this project reveal that a collection of films engage with the strangeness of the '70s in different ways. Some use the dated material culture of the time for laughs while others reflect on the uneasy feeling of growing up in a time of increased self-expression. In the '90s, Hollywood found that "the seventies" could be branded as a cultural touchstone to market to its audiences, including those ready to look back fondly, reflect on it seriously, or simply laugh at it.

Analytical Framework

To analyze the trend of '70s recycling and see what it reveals about the U.S. film industry of the 1990s, this project considers a set of films from the time along with their production history, marketing, and reception. The films are examined in chapters three through five while the first two chapters lay out the industrial and cultural context within which the case study films were made. Chapter one explains the synergistic structure of the entertainment industry of the time. Chapter two highlights the way that postmodernism was a central driving force in American culture and film in the 1990s. The following three chapters then examine a collection of films that explore the trend of recycling the '70s in more detail. There are a set of four research questions that this project initially sought to answer. To start, it asked, <u>How did large conglomerates and independent studios alike mine the past for new material?</u> The first chapter addresses this question by introducing the industrial framework of '90s Hollywood before chapters three through five examine case studies that exhibit this phenomenon. While some of the case study films are set in the past (the coming-of-age films of chapter three), all of them

utilize media imagery from the '70s in various ways (soundtracks, reruns, stars). Chapters four and five examine films (*The Brady Bunch Movie*, *Original Gangstas*, *Jackie Brown*) that are set in the present but, through intertextual references and strategic marketing, they become positioned within the 1990s' larger wave of '70s revival.

Since most nostalgic media is in conversation with the time it is produced, the second initial question asked, How did themes of individuality from the "Me Decade" speak to attitudes in American culture in the 1990s? While I started by exploring this line of thinking, my research soon led to me to find that "individuality" was less relevant than the process of self-discovery. This point is discussed most specifically in chapter two, but it is also considered in the three case study chapters. In chapter three, the young filmmakers of the '90s independent scene return to the era of their childhood to understand the initial search for identity and the after effects of growing up in a time that encouraged the hedonistic pursuits of both adults and teens. Chapter four similarly explores how Generation X reflected on their upbringing, but in this case, self-discovery involves the shared experience of growing up with pervasive *Brady Bunch* reruns and the impact of the white American family. In chapter five, filmmakers, musicians, and actors alike look to the blaxploitation movement to understand the influence the film cycle had on '90s culture.

The next research question focused on the relationship between entertainment companies and their audiences in the '90s, asking, How did nostalgia-based media change in the '90s to accommodate new markets and different identities? Answers to this question are primarily provided in chapters three and five. As chapter three shows, the coming-of-age film genre took on an increasingly cynical tone as Gen X filmgoers became the target audience for nostalgia media. In addition, the typical protagonist of the nostalgic coming-of-age film deviated from the

conventional straight male, as some independent filmmakers provided a look at the experience of growing up in the '70s from feminine and queer perspectives. Chapter five examines how independent cinema celebrated "blaxploitation" as a cultural art form worthy of respect, using the stars of its films to reflect on Black film history and target African-American audiences.

Finally, the last initial research question was more forward facing. It asked, How can the trend of '70s nostalgia in Hollywood help us understand the major changes in the entertainment industry that paved the way for where things stand today? While the project briefly shows how earlier developments in Hollywood led to this trend in the '90s, the economic relationship that nostalgia has with the entertainment industry in the 21st century is especially important. The branding of the past that Hollywood solidified during the '90s proves that any decade, no matter how it is remembered, can be exploited for potential economic gain. In the 2020s, the conglomerate structure of entertainment is still in place, and reviving intellectual property has become vital to produce new content at these companies. So, the project's opening chapter and conclusion both highlight the industrial connections between the 1990s and 2020s.

Scholarly Contribution

This project is in conversation with both studies of '90s Hollywood and nostalgia in the entertainment industry. Waves of nostalgia in the American film industry has been a frequent subject of scholarship, some of which is touched on in the next section. However, there seems to be a gap in research on how the seventies are remembered in American popular culture. While there is existing academic work on some of the films and shows that I analyze, the research rarely considers the way that "the seventies" are constructed and how that connects '90s films to other texts. By putting coming-of-age films, postmodern parody, and genre revivalism in conversation with one another, the project aims to paint a bigger picture of what can constitute a

wave of nostalgia in popular culture. Given that the '70s are not generally regarded as a great time to harken back to, the trends highlighted in this project reveal the cynical nature of selling audiences the past (whether they liked it or not). The industrial angle (how the past is marketed) is also less often considered in existing scholarship, despite its importance for clarifying how the past can become branded entertainment. In this way, my project contributes to the larger fields of film studies and media industry studies through research in an area that lacks substantial work. I believe this dissertation is the first research project to use an industrial perspective to examine the trend of '70s nostalgia films within the context of synergistic Hollywood.

Relevant Literature

Nineties Hollywood

As a study of the American film industry in the 1990s, this project builds upon a variety of scholarship on Hollywood in that period. Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* (2012) was a major influence in writing about the cultural role of film in American history. While the book spans a century of film history, one of the final chapters, "From Myth to Memory," is focused on the 1990s. In the chapter, Sklar discusses the notions of social amnesia and the impact of a society that lacks a consensus on the meaning of their past (1994, 358). He argues that "[t]he question of historical memory has become the touchstone of movies' cultural power, [just] as myths and dreams had been in the Great Depression and World War II" (1994, 358). He also discusses the role of independent cinema and filmmakers like Julie Dash and Robert Rodriguez in the 1990s to revive "identity cinema" that contrasted with homogenized blockbuster filmmaking. Yannis Tzioumakis's *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (2017) was also helpful in understanding the dynamics at play within independent film at the time.

In his book on films of the 1990s, William J. Palmer argues that this era of filmmaking was influenced by the larger societal focus on "spin," which harkens back to Sklar's writing on historical memory. Palmer writes that it was in the 1990s that Hollywood fully realized the potential of remakes, sequels, and rereleases. He argues that Hollywood "held a strong sense of its own history and realized that it could capitalize on that history as a predictable hedge against the tremendous risks of its big-event mentality" (2009, 15). Understanding that mentality was particularly useful for my chapter on remakes, which Palmer uses as an example of the Hollywood conglomerate business strategy.

Jesse Fox Mayshark's *Post-Pop Cinema* (2007) was also beneficial to this project in the way that it examines the directors who debuted during this period and the recurring themes amongst their works. He argues that this generation of directors moved beyond the self-referential postmodernism tendencies of the early 1990s and incorporated them with deeper stories about longing for connection. Mayshark's work helps provide an understanding of common traits of Generation X filmmakers making their first films in the '90s, most of whom explore the experiences of the youth in the '70s (Paul Thomas Anderson, Sofia Coppola, etc.).

Since this project engages in the industrial practices of the film industry, there are a few texts that were influential in helping understand the synergy between film and other forms of entertainment owned by the same companies. For example, Derek Kompare's *Rerun Nation* takes a media studies approach to examine the proliferation of reruns (re-airings of older television episodes) on American television in the 1980s and 1990s. Nostalgia is a key element in his book since it is about recycling older programs, particularly in the '90s when cable channels such as Nick-at-Nite and TV Land become devoted to nostalgic media (Kompare 2005, 172). This information is particularly relevant to my fourth chapter, which is about older

television properties becoming a key component of cultural recycling for the major conglomerates who owned the rights to those shows. Jeff Smith's *The Sounds of Commerce* (1998) examines the relationship between the music and film industries. Smith uses the last few chapters of his book to examine the 1990s and the aesthetic influence of MTV on movies and vice versa. My project also touches on the relationship between the film and music industries within the larger synergistic structure of '90s Hollywood, where soundtracks become a key part of "the seventies" brand alongside aesthetic practices like sampling that borrowed from popular music of the time.

The work of Justin Wyatt is also relevant as he wrote about the "high-concept" movie, a dominant feature of '90s Hollywood. For Wyatt, the high-concept movie is one that can be summed up in a single line or image and that often emphasizes style through its marketing (1994, 7). High-concept filmmaking became a go-to tactic in the age of the blockbuster, so it is relevant to the 1990s strategy of selling a single image and using "the seventies" as a marketable brand. Wyatt integrates textual analysis of films with the study of external factors like marketing materials (posters, trailers, and commercials) and box office numbers, which thus provided a model for my approach to the case studies. The work of Lisa Kernan and Jonathan Gray on movie advertising was also of great help in the research.

Mass-Mediated Nostalgia

While the study of nostalgia spans a variety of disciplines, this project focuses on nostalgia in a mediated context. Fred Davis, mentioned earlier, wrote in his 1979 *Yearning for Yesterday* about the distinction between what he called private and collective nostalgia. Private nostalgia refers to when an individual encounters some object that evokes a specific memory of their past (1979, 123). This is in line with the more traditional understanding of the word, in

which an individual experiences a homesickness for a particular time and place in the past (Davis 1979, 1). By contrast, collective nostalgia is a "condition in which the symbolic objects [that trigger an emotional response] are of a highly public, widely shared, and familiar character, those symbolic resources from the past that under proper conditions can trigger wave upon wave of nostalgic feeling in millions of persons at the same time" (Davis 1979, 122–23). Collective nostalgia is key to understanding the growing commodification of nostalgia in the latter half of the 20th century, a process that can be categorized into large scale waves such as "fifties nostalgia" or "seventies nostalgia." Davis shows that the "nostalgia industry" of the later 20th century had increasingly linked the past with "media creations, personalities, and allusions" (1979, 125), a dynamic central to the case studies I examine.

The idea that past media texts (Davis's "symbolic objects") can form the basis for a shared yearning for the past is central to my study. A key theoretical framework for my research is postmodernism and its relation to nostalgia and media studies. A few scholars have shown how postmodern art targets collective nostalgia, directly and indirectly evoking familiar cultural imagery from the past. In his 1984 article "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," Frederic Jameson used the term "nostalgia film" to describe a type of film that "aesthetically colonizes" historical eras through "stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image" (66–67). Jameson specifically looked at how the 1950s were constructed as "the Fifties" through aesthetic symbols like fashion and music in films like *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973). His definition of the nostalgia film, and subsequent critiques by scholars like Linda Hutcheon, are discussed in chapters two and three.

Subsequent research has further explored the wave of '50s nostalgia that both Jameson and Davis explore. In *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film* (2003), Vera Dika

examines nostalgia films in the 1970s and 1980s and, unlike Jameson, sees their return to the ‘50s as points of resistance. Importantly, Dika notes that one of the primary ways these films revisit (and subvert) the past is through recycling older artistic genres and styles; the “image returns not as a representational of the natural real, but as simulacrual, as a copy of copies whose original has been lost” (2003, 3). *American Graffiti*, for example, is as much in conversation with the youth films of the late ‘50s and early ‘60s as it is with the actual lived experience of teenagers during that time. In other words, portrayals of the past are often linked directly to the symbolic images of mass media. In the ‘90s, this evoking of past imagery manifests through both recycling older genres (such as blaxploitation) but also the movie stars associated with those genres, who act as symbolic figures with whom viewers might have a fond attachment.

In *Back to the Fifties* (2015), Michael D. Dwyer draws connections between Hollywood and the music industry of the 1980s in terms of ‘50s nostalgia. He uses the term “pop nostalgia” to refer to the mass-marketed nostalgia that became prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s (2015, 3–4). Dwyer examines how pop nostalgia was targeted towards teenagers in the 1980s, all of whom had “no living memory of the 1950s” and instead were sold “the Fifties” (2015, 7). This view aligns with my project’s research on how nostalgia was sold to both young and old. My project is also in conversation with Dwyer’s work in that his book shows how pop nostalgia took place across multiple facets of the entertainment industry at once. His research illuminates some of the synergistic economic benefits of recycling the past, a primary focus of my project.

While most research on waves of nostalgia in pop culture has focused on ‘50s nostalgia, scholarship on the wave of ‘70s nostalgia in the 1990s is relatively limited. There are a few articles that engage with a specific aspect of this phenomenon but they are limited in scope. For example, David Sigler’s article “‘Funky Days Are Back Again’: Reading Seventies Nostalgia in

Late Nineties Rock Music" (2004) is about the trend of '70s nostalgia extended to popular rock music of in the 1990s. Sigler argues that, unlike previous waves of popular nostalgia, this particular strain "was invariably marked by ambivalence to the Seventies as a decade, as a style of commodification, and as a lost object" (2004, 56). This sense of ambivalence is key to understanding how the seventies became branded in the '90s.

In "That 70s Sequence: Remembering the Bad Old Days in *Summer of Sam*" (2009), R. Colin Tait interrogates ambivalence in urban-set '70s films in the late '90s. Tait argues that '70s-set films "obsessively recreated the 'bad objects' of Americana—drugs, gambling, pornography, serial-killing, and bankrupt cities—within the urban spaces of the 1970s" (2009). While his case study is Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* (1999), he contextualizes it within a wave of films that includes *Boogie Nights*, *54*, *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995), and more. Seventies "nostalgia" is, thus, much different than the type that days of innocence that Jameson wrote about. Tait argues that films of this nature, which look back on the "bad old times," still reflect the larger wave of popular nostalgia through their reliance on connotation, using music video techniques to recycle the gritty imagery of urban life from the Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s (2009). "[T]he reproduction of 70s nostalgia is the symptom of a society that can only view the 70s by watching and emulating the style of the movies from that era," he writes (2009). The films' emphasis on stylistic elements is key to understanding the centrality of postmodern aesthetics (particularly references and sampling) in the cultural recycling of the '70s as well as the overall darkness often lurking underneath films with seventies music and imagery, which make them distinct from earlier nostalgic popular culture that often looked to the past as a more innocent time.

Critical Framework

Regarding methodology, this project is a combination of media industry studies and film history. Daniel Herbert, Amanda D. Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar define historical media industry studies research as "the critical analysis of how individuals, institutions, and industries produce and circulate cultural forms in historically and geographically contextualized ways" (2020, 6). Instead of considering only one aspect of the text (such as what is on screen), media industry studies look at how social institutions influence and impact texts and one another. Matthew Freeman, another media industry studies scholar, notes how part of the job of historical research is untangling industry texts from the social fabric of their time while also gaining a better understanding of how current media industries got to where they are today (2016, 104). In addition, given the project's focus on the 1990s, it can be considered historical film research. Film history charts the development of the film medium over time and utilizes various contextual sources to understand that. This research project is designed to illuminate industrial developments and aesthetic trends at play in 1990s Hollywood. It contextualizes the trend of recycling the past in nostalgia-based media within historical patterns of moviemaking while also taking into consideration the synergistic characteristics of the entertainment industry at the time.

The primary research method employed in this project is textual analysis. The final three chapters have close readings of films that recycle the '70s, with the goal of identifying thematic, ideological, aesthetic, and industrial patterns. As an media industry study, the chapters' textual analysis is in conversation with discourse analysis that contextualizes the films and the cultural and material forces around them. The study incorporates Hollywood trade papers, newspaper articles, and marketing materials like posters and trailers as well as reception documents such as reviews and box office reports. The Ray Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State

University was a valuable resource for press kits and promotional materials that revealed how many of the case study films were positioned by their distributors. Evidence from the films and surrounding cultural and industrial context affords multilayered analysis of how the films were packaged and marketed as commercial and cultural products.

Chapter Preview

This project's first chapter, "Consolidation and Fragmentation," establishes its industry studies approach. The chapter introduces the major industrial shifts in 1990s Hollywood, including the continued consolidation of the conglomerates that owned the major movie studios and the simultaneous expansion of media channels that could reach a wider audience. The first section of this chapter examines developments in the film industry involving the conglomerates but also the emergence of independent cinema as a platform for alternative storytelling. The chapter's next three sections use a media industry studies approach to show how synergy became an important way to bridge the movie industry and other entertainment venues (television, music, and the internet). The television section charts the rapid expansion of cable television and satellite technologies that disrupted traditional models of television consumption. It also considers the importance of syndication and reruns during this time of expansion. The music section shows that soundtracks continued to be a powerful ancillary market for Hollywood during the '90s and that hip-hop became a defining music genre of the time. The final section focuses on the rising popularity of the internet and its effects on conglomerates' marketing strategies and retail practices in ancillary entertainment markets.

As a companion to chapter one, the project's second chapter is an examination of the aesthetic and cultural trends of postmodernism that impacted the movie industry of the 1990s. The first section looks at the rise of multiculturalism in American culture and the concomitant

change in screen representations. The chapter's second section focuses on the postmodern traits of irony, quotation, and self-referentiality in the films of this time, including how these relate to the practice of sampling in hip-hop. Finally, the chapter considers the tendency of postmodern art to return to the past and reflect on culture's place in history. The intention of these first two chapters is to set up the industrial, aesthetic, and social context for the three chapters that follow.

One of the most traditional ways of revisiting the past in postmodern film is through the coming-of-age film. These films are often auto-biographical attempts to portray what it was like to be a teenager at a certain time in the recent past. Chapter three examines a wave of '70s-set coming-of-age films that came from independent cinema in the 1990s after the cult success of Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993). In addition to *Dazed*, the films studied include *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Slums of Beverly Hills* (Tamara Jenkins, 1998), *54* (Mark Christopher, 1998), and *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999). When looking at these films together, a thematic trend emerges around their focus on growing up during the Sexual Revolution and what it meant to be an unsupervised teenager during this time. The films are often more pessimistic and thus mark a departure from the traditional association of the coming-of-age nostalgia films as yearning for a simpler time. The chapter's last section considers the films' positioning as commercial products by their distributors. An analysis of their marketing reveals a disparity between the films' core themes and distributors' tendency to simply sell the brand of "the seventies."

While the coming-of-age film is a more traditional model of revisiting the past, chapters four and five show how major studios and independents alike recycled older intellectual properties. Chapter four, "Reruns and Reunions," homes in on how entertainment giant Viacom recycled one '70s IP in particular: *The Brady Bunch*. After experiencing massive success in

syndication, the show reemerged in full force in the '90s in the form of a comedic stage play, a compilation album, a retrospective TV special, and books about the making of the show that would eventually turn into a made-for-TV movie. The chapter's primary focus is Paramount's 1995 film *The Brady Bunch Movie* (Betty Thomas). Unlike the coming-of-age films (all set in the past), this film is a fish-out-of-water comedy that places the Brady family—still their '70s selves—into the mid-90s and accentuates the cultural differences for laughs. When considered amongst the larger "Bradymania" wave, the film reveals the multifaceted approach to cultural recycling that could cater to audiences nostalgic for certain IP and viewers who disdained it.

Rather than looking at a conglomerate or specific IP, the fifth chapter reveals how independent studios contributed to '70s nostalgia through the revival of the film genre known as "blaxploitation." The chapter's main case studies are Orion's *Original Gangstas* (Larry Cohen, 1996) and Miramax's *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997). Both films, like *The Brady Bunch Movie*, are set in the 1990s but heavily rely on quotation and sampling iconography from blaxploitation films. While ancillary elements like soundtrack are relevant here, the most pertinent way that the films reference the past is through their stars, Fred Williamson (*Original Gangstas*) and Pam Grier (who appears in both *Original Gangstas* and *Jackie Brown*). Unlike the coming-of-age films and *The Brady Bunch*, these films give Black actors central roles and allow for a more multicultural look at '70s culture. Given they are set in the 1990s, the films use their stars to comment on the cultural legacy of blaxploitation and its relationship with artistic movements of the '90s (hip-hop, hood films, and so on).

While the project is focused on cinema of the 1990s, the conclusion charts the lingering impacts of the industrial trends highlighted in the main chapters. Under consideration is both the

way that ‘70s nostalgia continued in the new millennium, but also how Hollywood has become even more reliant upon synergistic IP in the streaming age.

CHAPTER 1. CONSOLIDATION AND FRAGMENTATION: THE INDUSTRIAL CONTEXT OF NINETIES ENTERTAINMENT

Two concurrent trends developed in the entertainment industry of the 1990s that seemed to move in opposite directions, but, in reality, worked in conjunction with one another. On the one hand, large multinational conglomerates solidified in ways that meant that ownership of film studios, record labels, television channels, book publishing, etc. was controlled by an increasingly smaller number of entities. These developments were a continued trend from earlier decades in which the deregulation policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations led to bigger mergers and a return to market control in the form of horizontal integration. On the other hand, from a consumer perspective, media experiences became increasingly fragmented. The number of media channels available to the average consumer drastically multiplied from the start of the decade to the end. Just as the postindustrial economy prioritized specialization in the Information Age, the decision-makers in entertainment media embraced narrowcasting through which outlets like television channels or radio stations could target more specific niche audiences.

One major thread tying these two developments—consolidation and fragmentation—together was the process of "remediation," or the adaptation of existing media types to a new technology. Take the example of the *New York Times,* a newspaper first printed in 1851, starting a website in 1996. Remediation in the face of new media prioritized both hypermediacy and immediacy (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 5). "Hypermediacy" is the multiplication of screens and ways that media take up our daily lives, while "immediacy" prioritizes getting media to the consumer in the quickest and most direct way possible. In the technological landscape of the 1990s, these two logics were mutually dependent upon one another (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 6). Most entertainment companies faced remediation in the 1990s with the task of translating their existing business models to the digital unknown. "Intellectual property (IP)," or the legal

ownership of existing media texts and ideas, also became increasingly important for conglomerates in the decade as the way people consumed media continued to change. The amount of new outlets meant that existing properties could be revived in new ways to fulfill the need for more content, as reruns and remakes could cash in on decades-old brands with the safety of knowing that an audience already existed for the product. Intellectual property was also important in the face of the internet's impact on the entertainment marketplace, as e-commerce was a new method of distribution and digital piracy altered the dynamics of consumption. This chapter outlines the industrial developments in film, television, music, and new media that set the stage for the fragmentation and specialization that occurred during the 1990s and the new ways in which media-makers could re-visit the past.

The Film Industry

The 1990s began with two of the Hollywood studios changing ownership in major corporate mergers. In 1990, MCA—then owner of Universal Pictures—was acquired by Japanese technological company Matsushita. The MCA-Matsushita saga proved controversial as it came only a year after Columbia Pictures was taken over by Matsushita rival Sony, leading to jingoistic fears in some parts that Japanese companies were looking to take over Hollywood, an iconic American institution (Hirsch 1990). In the same time frame, Warner Communications (parent company of Warner Bros.) announced a merger with Time Inc. The actual merger was delayed, however, by a hostile takeover attempt of Time Inc. by media giant Gulf+Western (parent company of Paramount Pictures). When Time Inc. increased its bid for Warner, Gulf+Western sued to block the Time-Warner merger but that proved unsuccessful and the merger went through in January 1990. In 1993, Viacom (owner of CBS among other assets) purchased Paramount Communications before acquiring home video rental giant Blockbuster the

following year. Within five years, four of Hollywood's biggest studios were taken over or merged with larger media conglomerates, a development that exemplifies the rapid pace of acquisitions and the change in corporate structure that occurred during the 1990s.[2]

Within the evolving culture of conglomerate Hollywood, diversified interests and synergistic strategies became more prominent than before as the companies now had several platforms to promote a single property. Each of the major Hollywood studios had a network television analog by the end of the decade: Twentieth Century Fox to Fox, Disney to ABC, Universal to NBC, Warner Brothers to The WB, and Paramount to both CBS and UPN. As cable television expanded, the number of television stations within the larger portfolio of each conglomerate also grew. Theme parks also became a popular platform for the Hollywood studios to extend their brand and properties as Disney had done decades before. In 1989, Disney opened a third park in Orlando called Disney-MGM Studios, which saw it teaming with MGM to form a movie-centric park to pair with its Magic Kingdom and Epcot venues. Disney-MGM Studios was a clear attempt to get a leg up on the competition as Universal Entertainment opened Universal Studios Florida in Orlando in 1990, which shared a similar theme with Disney-MGM. In 1993, MGM expanded its theme park brand, building an indoor amusement park in Las Vegas adjacent to its casino. Also in 1993, Paramount Parks emerged as a new subdivision of Paramount Communications. Unlike Disney and Universal, Paramount Parks acquired existing popular parks and rebranded them with the Paramount name and properties. For example, Kings Island in Cincinnati became Paramount's Kings Island and boasted new rides themed after Tom Cruise films *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) and *Days of Thunder* (Tony Scott, 1990). One of the most unusual examples of corporate synergy's reach in the 1990s was The Walt Disney Company

[2] One additional example of that trend is Disney's acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC Inc. in 1995.

creating a professional sports franchise, the Anaheim Mighty Ducks, which was branded to promote a popular film the company had released the previous year.

Movies themselves were also affected by the expansion of downstream markets during the 1980s and 1990s. Distribution rights became even more important as a consumer could now see a movie after its release in more settings than ever before. The home video market saw a steady increase throughout the decade with the continued success of VHS and the commercialization of the DVD in 1998 and 1999. Ancillary markets like merchandising and home video could act as financial security for high-risk projects and sometimes, especially in the case of children's films, earn more money than box office receipts. Another reason downstream markets and ancillary merchandise became more important for the conglomerates was the rising cost of film production. "Average Cost of Making, Marketing Movies Soars" read a *Los Angeles Times* headline from 1995, an article that quotes MPAA president Jack Valenti as stating that the rising costs "must be reckoned with" (Eller 1995). The article also clarifies that increased globalization was affecting distribution plans, with the share of international theatrical revenue eclipsing the domestic revenues for the first time in 1994 (Eller 1995).

While the VCR was one component of at-home viewing, network and cable television continued to be a popular platform to show films. For example, a *TV Guide* from the week of August 19th, 2000 contains a catalog in the back of over 400 movies that would be shown on premium cable networks in that week alone. Filmmakers and studios were adjusting their films in post-production to translate well to the smaller screen. The movie theater, the more traditional market for film exhibition, was simultaneously going through a rapid expansion of its own. In 1988, the world's first "megaplex" opened in Brussels with an astounding 25 screens and over 7,000 seats (Henson 2005). The megaplex soon expanded to the United States as well where the

number of screens grew 61 percent, from roughly 23,000 screens in 1988 to around 37,000 in 2000 (Ulin 2012, 123). For consumers, the continued rise of multi- and megaplexes meant more options when going to the movies than ever before. For producers, the megaplex model meant more screens to show a varied product (like the new affordances of home video). However, the flip side of this new model was that the large theatrical exhibition chains were leading the charge of the megaplexes and shutting down smaller, more regional theaters. Therefore, the theatrical expansion during the 1990s was another example of the increased consolidation in industry that took place alongside the simultaneous diversification of ancillary markets.[3]

One of the most important developments in the American film industry in the 1990s was the rise of independent cinema as an alternative to Hollywood studio conventions. The independent cinema era was kickstarted in 1989 with the critical and commercial success of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape*, winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and nominee for Best Original Screenplay at the Academy Awards. Soderberg's film ushered in a period in the 1990s when independent films became much more prominent on the awards circuits, partially due to heavy-handed tactics from the likes of independent powerhouses such as Miramax. After Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* was nominated for Best Picture in 1992, Miramax enjoyed a twelve-year streak of having films nominated in that prestigious category, including wins for *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996) and *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998). Independent cinema became visible in new ways, which led to the popularization of the term "indie" as a marketing tool.

One of the biggest impacts of independent cinema's rise in this era was the platform to tell more diverse stories beyond what might typically be portrayed in a Hollywood movie. Film

[3] Eventually, this massive expansion of screens would catch up to the industry and the number of screens would level off in the new millennium but the 1990s was a boom period for the theatrical business.

historian Robert Sklar uses the labels "identity cinema" and "identity-based filmmaking" to describe this movement, which he sees as constituting a genre of its own that spans fiction, documentary, and avant-garde (1994, 373). Concerning identity cinema, Sklar notes that although these "films clearly addressed members of the group from which they sprang, many also no less distinctly spoke to outsiders, if no more than to proclaim, 'We exist, look at us'" (1994, 374). For example, American independent cinema produced a wave of films starring and directed by African American artists that came to be dubbed "New Black Cinema." This era of filmmaking began in the late 1980s with filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Julie Dash making films that expressed experiences in the Black community. One of the most well-received films of this movement was *Boyz N the Hood* from 1991, written and directed by 23-year-old John Singleton. *Boyz N the Hood* would exemplify what Keith Harris classifies as "Black Crossover Cinema," primarily hood-based films that reached mainstream success from 1989 to 1995 (2011, 255). For example, *Boyz N the Hood* screened at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, made $53 million at the domestic box office on a budget of just $6 million, and Singleton was nominated for his writing and directing at the Academy Awards. Another prominent example of identity cinema was the wave of independent films in the early 1990s that dealt with themes about sexuality and queer cultures, which *The Village Voice*'s B. Ruby Rich labeled "New Queer Cinema." Rich noted the impact of these films at festivals in 1991 and 1992 and, when discussing the potential progressive power of the films, described New Queer Cinema as a platform where "the queer present negotiates with the past, knowing full well that the queer future is at stake" (2013, 29). Both movements signified that the American movie industry was diversifying both in terms of characters on screen and filmmakers behind the camera.

As the popularity and recognition of independent cinema grew during the 1990s, the label "independent cinema" came to take on different meanings by the end of the decade. Upon seeing the success of the independent cinema model, the major studios entered the fray with their own specialty labels. 20th Century Fox and Sony formed new specialty distributors, Fox Searchlight and Sony Pictures Classics respectively, while existing independent distributors were acquired by the larger conglomerates. Two examples of that type of acquisition were independent leaders Miramax and New Line Cinema being bought by Disney and TimeWarner respectively in the mid-1990s. What started as the "indie" era of independent cinema would fracture into two distinct movements known as "Indiewood" and "Indie 2.0." Indiewood was the result of the institutionalization of independent cinema, as Yannis Tzioumakis puts it, which ramped up in the late 1990s as budgets rose, bigger stars appeared in the films, and more capital was invested in the marketing of them (2017, 257–58). Conversely, what made Indie 2.0 distinct was that it retained the low budgets of independent cinema's roots as digital filmmaking technology became more affordable for amateur filmmakers and DIY marketing campaigns could leverage new media like the internet to spread word of mouth (Tzioumakis 2017, 276–77). For example, *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) were released the same year but the budgets were drastically different ($37 million versus less than $1 million) and the former featured Tom Cruise while latter was filled with unknowns. While both productions could be labeled "independent films," the distinction between the different types of film reveals how varied this section had become. In sum, an array of elements constitute the Hollywood industrial context in the 1990s. The next sections track the developments in other media that were also impactful on the film medium.

The Television Industry

Like the patterns in the film industry, television in the United States looked drastically different at the end of the 20th century than it had fifty years prior. Not only were the same conglomerate ownership shifts occurring, but also the industry was undergoing what industry scholar Amanda D. Lotz has labeled the "multi-channel transition" (2014, 8). In the decades leading up to the multichannel transition, American television was in the control of ABC, CBS, and NBC (commonly referred to as the "Big Three" networks). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, cable television emerged as an alternative and rapidly expanded over the subsequent decades.

Beyond television channels, however, the technology of television was also changing. Two examples that Lotz highlights are the remote control and videocassette recorder (VCR), which emerged around the same time (2014, 56). Together with the proliferation of channels, these new technologies represented a profound change in the viewing experience as consumers had more options and more control over the content they consumed. By allowing viewers to record programs, the VCR made a major impact on viewing habits as users could now choose when to watch something and could build their own personal collections (Lotz 2014, 26). While VCR technology was initially introduced in the late 1970s, it became more affordable throughout the 1980s and by 1988, 50 percent of homes had a VCR (Lotz 2014, 57). By the end of the century, that number would reach 88 percent of households and top out at 98.3 percent in 2003 (Lotz 2014, 57). The remote control, an accessory to the television that allowed viewers to control volume and switch channels among other things, also became a more common accessory by the late 1980s. What these technologies signal is that, unlike television viewers in the first four decades of the medium, consumers now had more control over the content they watched, and the television experience could thus become more personalized.

The flip side of this increased personalization and control in the hands of the consumer was that the strength of the broadcast networks weakened as a result. The networks were no longer the only options, prompting them to find new ways to stay relevant. Throughout the 1980s, television transmitted through cable (as opposed to open-air broadcasting) snowballed in popularity. Cable went from being in 20 percent of American homes in 1980 to 67 percent in 1989 (Du Brow 1989). Over that same time, the share of total viewership belonging to the Big Three networks decreased from 85 percent to 67 percent (Du Brow 1989). These numbers illustrate that the Big Three networks still controlled most television consumption, but their grip was losing strength. In 1991, the broadcast networks began to fight back against antitrust laws that were initially aimed at preventing them from gaining complete control of the market. Twenty years earlier, the Federal Communications Commission had put the financial-syndication rules (also known as "fin-syn") into place to separate production and distribution for the three major networks. "Syndication" is the practice of national/international companies selling content to local outlets, which began in newspapers and became popular in television of the 1960s and beyond (Kompare 2005, xiii). The fin-syn rules prevented the Big Three from airing shows that they fully owned in primetime and from airing syndicated programming that they produced. Inspired by the deregulatory stance of the Reagan Administration in the 1980s, the networks pushed for the government to ease these constraints, and 1993 saw the official end of the fin-syn rules. The change meant that the broadcast networks could now make more profit by promoting synergy through production, distribution, and exhibition arms.

While the Big Three were able to regain some strength, these rule changes also meant new companies could enter the broadcast network realm. After Fox emerged as the fourth major broadcast network in 1986, both UPN and The WB entered the broadcast TV realm in 1995. As a

testament to the control of the Big Three, these new networks faced an uphill battle when entering new markets and talks of a merger between them started shortly after their respective lackluster launches (Tyrer and Mermigas 1995; Daniels and Littleton 2007, 72).

Although they were not as successful as their established counterparts, the creation of the new networks signified two distinct developments in the realm of broadcast television. The first development, discussed in the previous section, was that every conglomerate that owned a major film studio also owned a broadcast network. Some corporations made concerted efforts to link the brand iconography of the film studios with their networks. For example, Fox incorporated the studio's iconic searchlights and fanfare into its television marketing, while The WB—whose name alone conjured connections to the studio's famed shield—wanted a character from Warner's Looney Tunes catalog as its mascot (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 51). The convergence of studio brands into new media also meant that the companies had to be extra careful with how their brands were perceived, as exemplified in how Bugs Bunny as mascot for The WB was seen as too much of a risk because of the fear that audiences would assume the network was for children or, even worse, that his image would be tainted if promoted alongside risqué shows (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 51).[4] Fox and The WB reveal how brand identities were converging at this time as corporate synergy was being prioritized.

The second, and perhaps more significant, development was that networks knowingly marketed themselves towards specific demographics. This development is a departure from the time when specific shows may have been narrow-casted; now entire networks built their identity by targeting niche markets. The traditional broadcast television approach had been commonly been referred to as "lowest-common-denominator programming," which was meant to appeal to

[4] The WB ended up deciding on a more obscure and long-dormant Looney Tunes character for their mascot, Michigan J. Frog.

as wide an audience as possible (Mullen 2003, 1). However, what lowest-common-denominator programming actually meant was that the Big Three networks catered primarily to white, middle-class audiences. A 1995 article from *Advertising Age* described The WB and UPN's strategy as "looking to build targeted audiences, develop brand identities and fill voids left by other networks" (Wilke 1995). "We were aiming for teens and young adults ages 12 to 24, the audience the other networks seemed to be ignoring," explains Susanne Daniels, head of development at The WB during its opening campaign (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 53). Similarly, UPN initially had a goal of targeting a younger demographic but eventually pivoted to target young African American audiences with shows by Black showrunners, like the strategy that Fox deployed early in its run (Brown 2022). The strategies of Fox, the WB, and UPN signaled a shift towards acknowledging the gaps in audience representation in the previous model.

The fragmentation of broadcast network audiences mirrored similar developments on cable television. For most of the 20th century, an aspect of television that differentiated it from other visual media such as film was its power to reach millions of homes simultaneously, forming what Lotz calls an "electronic public sphere" (2014, 37). With the spread of cable and satellite technology, television began to shift away from a unified space to something more akin to a bookstore or newsstand, where the consumer has options in terms of sections and content within those sections to choose from (Newcomb 2011, 110). As indicated by Bruce Springsteen's 1992 song "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)," the rapid expansion from three channels to more than fifty was clearly something on the minds of artists and consumers at the start of the decade. By 1998, some consumers in the United States would have more than 150 channels to choose from (Gunther 1998). Some industry trades at the time prognosticated about

the economic viability of such a spread, with a *Fortune Magazine* article labeling the expansion of cable television programming a "Malthusian crunch" (Gunther 1998), suggesting that networks were producing at a rate that audiences could not realistically handle.

The expansion of cable signified a shift from the practice of broadcasting to narrowcasting. "Narrowcasting" is a media strategy with roots in radio in which stations target and advertise to niche audiences (Lotz 2014, 41). Two examples that illuminate the narrowcasting approach in the 1990s are Music Television (MTV) and Black Entertainment Television (BET). One of the most well-known cable upstarts of the 1980s, MTV saw its popularity continue to grow in the 1990s as it showcased current music videos from the popular music scene. However, the network also expanded its programming variety, most notably with the smash hit *The Real World* in 1992. With the growing popularity of the brand, Viacom created M2 (later known as MTV2) in 1996 to carry on the original brand identity of showing nonstop music videos (Richmond 1996). Two years later, the network added two more channels to its slate: MTV S and MTVX. MTV S, the "S" standing for Spanish, catered specifically to listeners of Latin pop and remains a channel to this day (now known as Tr3s), while MTVX focused on rock music. Started in 1980, BET became the first major cable network to cater to African Americans, filling gaps in the traditional network television offerings. BET also formed its own spin-offs with BET on Jazz in 1996 and BET Movies/Starz3 in 1997 (Smith-Shomade 2008, 44). The company, which was independent of conglomerate ownership at the time, also looked to expand its brand into different areas of the entertainment world. This strategy included acquiring magazines and starting clothing lines targeted at teens (Smith-Shomade 2008, 44). These two families of television brands (MTV and BET) were not alone in the multiplying trend, as ESPN,

Vh1, and Nickelodeon were among the other channels that grew spin-offs during the late 1990s.[5] The creation of spin-off channels exemplifies how cable was used by conglomerates to cater to as many interests as possible. Depending on your taste, MTV could signify music videos, reality television, or even a specific genre of music, while BET no longer solely meant television.

One of the effects of cable television's spread was the emergence of "reruns" as a part of America's pop culture lexicon. The term "rerun" was coined in the late 1950s to describe the process of re-airing older programs, and it soon became synonymous with the television medium, primarily through syndication (Kompare 2005, 71). The repercussions of reruns extended beyond broadcasters being able to fill airtime, however, as older shows could grow new audiences and programs could become bigger hits than they had been in their original broadcast run. A 1989 *Los Angeles Times* article detailed the significance of this trend, stating that "the explosion of new channels in the 1980s meant a need for programs to fill them," most of which depended on older films and television shows (Du Brow). For owners of the rights to the shows, reruns signaled that new opportunities had emerged to extend the brand of these intellectual properties, whether that be through reunion specials, merchandise, or even movies based on the TV shows. While some audiences might have been discovering the shows for the first time, reruns also allowed older viewers to retrieve the media experiences of their youth and so, in the 1990s, nostalgia became a marketing tool for channels such as TV Land, Game Show Network, and Boomerang that specialized in airing reruns. Similar developments were happening for film history, most notably with Turner Classic Movies starting in 1994. This development showed that content libraries were increasingly important as the commercial channels for media consumption expanded. That development has intensified in the 21st century era of streaming.

[5] Each network had their own specialty market: ESPN was 24/7 sports, Nickelodeon showed children's programming, and Vh1 was music channel for a demographic older than the one for MTV.

So, while reruns were initially dismissed as fodder by some network executives (Du Brow 1989), their impact continues to be felt.

The Music Industry

The 1990s music industry followed the film and television industries pattern in terms of conglomerate ownership and increased personalization through new technology. At the start of the decade, there were just six major record labels. A merger between PolyGram and Universal Music Group in 1999 shrunk that number to five. Three of those major labels—Warner Music, Sony Music, and MCA/Universal Music—were assets in larger entertainment conglomerates that included film studios. As ownership consolidated in fewer hands, the term "entertainment industry" became more appropriate to describe companies in different media studios and labels increasingly bound together.

Given this consolidation, a solid partnership between the music industry and other entertainment sectors became evident in the 1990s. On television, MTV and Vh1 are two examples of brands that centered their identity on music. MTV was a crucial cog in the promotional machine for marketing music and spotlighting a certain artist or song, acting as a sort of arbiter of celebrity in the 1980s and 1990s (Marks and Tannenbaum 2011, 16). Behind the camera, music videos also acted as a platform for young creatives like David Fincher and Michael Bay to springboard into making feature-length films (Marks and Tannenbaum 2011, 17). The synergistic partnership between the music and film industries continued to be strong as well. In the late 1970s, film soundtracks became a key marketing tool for ancillary profits and they continued to be an important promotional tool in the 1990s. Movie soundtracks were the highest-selling albums of the year three different times in the 1990s, with 1994 being a landmark year as four different soundtracks went multiplatinum (indicating more than 2 million units

sold): *The Lion King, Above the Rim, Reality Bites,* and *Forrest Gump* (Morris 1995, 14). The last of those is especially relevant as it is a prime example of what could be labeled the "nostalgia soundtrack." The songs on the movie's soundtrack span 1958 to 1980 and thus encapsulate a musical tour through that era of popular music. For films set in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, nostalgia soundtracks became a staple of the entertainment industry's offerings as they could appeal to a generation who grew up in that era and was at the height of their buying power in the 1990s. In a time before on-demand digital music services, these compilation soundtrack albums could act as specially curated box sets of the ilk advertised in infomercials from Time Life.

For consumers, technological changes meant that the musical experience could be specialized to their tastes. Over the course of the 1990s, digital recordings of music increasingly replaced existing analog formats (Harrison 2011, ix). In their oral history of MTV, Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum argue that MTV's rise was notable because technology replaced bands in becoming the rock star for the young generation (2011, 19). In their account, the technology was television, but idea also applies to portable MP3 players, cell phones, and the internet, platforms now acting as a more immediate mediator between the consumer and the content. Radio, a traditional platform for music, became increasingly narrowcasted as advertisers targeted specific demographics, thus replicating the appeal to niche television markets (Marks and Tannenbaum 2011, 20).

As happens over time, the popularity of certain genres waxed and waned. For example, stations specializing in rock music saw the age of average listener steadily become older-skewing as the generation listening to music from the late 1960s and 1970s aged (Moran 1989). As traditional hard rock declined, newer subgenres such as grunge and college rock came to

prominence by appealing to the younger Generation X (Harrison 2011, 74–76). While existing popular genres like rock transformed for newer generations, the rise and commercialization of hip hop as a popular genre was just as significant in the music landscape of the 1990s.

While hip-hop had been around since the late 1970s, it existed on the periphery of the music industry into the 1980s as it was still primarily a locally-based genre, with most notable artists hailing from New York City and the surrounding region. Part of the reason behind this marginalization is that the genre hit a nerve with established (white) critics, rock musicians, and politicians for the way it re-used older material and for the vulgarity of its content (Harrison 2011, 37–38). From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the genre entered what has been referred to as its golden age with the emergence of new styles and wider appeal. Artists like LL Cool J, Queen Latifah, and MC Hammer bridged 1980s rap styles with more mainstream-friendly material that led to crossover success (Harrison 2011, 38-9). Regional music scenes began to make their own imprint on the genre as Southern rap and West Coast hip-hop became two major examples of regional subgenres that came to prominence in the 1990s, giving the genre distinct flavors depending on the area it was produced. By the middle of the decade, hip-hop had become one of the top-selling genres in music globally and thus a major export of the American music industry (Batey 2010). One of the most significant aspects of this development was that the genre was predominantly Black and had roots in the oral traditions of African American song and dance (Rose 1994, 45). In the same way that TV channels such as BET and UPN promoted Black artists and targeted underrepresented demographics, hip-hop was an example of how more diverse voices were entering mainstream American culture in the 1990s.

Like New Black Cinema in the realm of film, hip-hop provided a platform for Black artists to speak more honestly about issues facing their communities. Hip-hop helped paint a

more realistic nature of Black culture in the 1980s and 1990s, in contrast to the upper middle-class versions popularized in entertainment like *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992). Indeed, New Black Cinema and the hood films of the time were another way hip-hop entered the mainstream in the 1990s. Given the popularity of soundtracks, filmmakers could capitalize on contemporary music trends to help sell the film, as was the case for the chart-topping soundtracks of *Above the Rim* (Jeff Pollack, 1994) and *Friday* (F. Gary Gray, 1995). Both films are also notable as they starred well-known rappers Tupac Shakur and Ice Cube respectively, who both acted in numerous films in the 1990s.[6] This confluence of rap star and movie star marked a prime example of the synergy between the film and music industries of the time.

At the start of the decade, hip-hop was at the center of an important legal case that targeted the popular musical technique of "sampling." In music, sampling is the "appropriation of previously created material for freely inventive re-use" (Vernon 2021, 1). As is covered in chapter two, this practice was very common in hip-hop but was handled rather informally, with record labels often securing the rights to the original material *after* a song had been recorded (Russell 1992). In 1991, musician Gilbert O'Sullivan sued rapper Biz Markie over the unauthorized use of an eight-bar sample from his 1972 song "Alone Again (Naturally)" and the case reached the U.S. District Court Southern District of New York. While previous sampling controversies had been settled out-of-court, this was the first to reach this level of the legal system. Judge Kevin Thomas Duffy ruled in favor of O'Sullivan, effectively setting a legal precedent that sampling without authorization was a form of stealing (Russell 1992). The ruling significantly altered the production and distribution processes as artists and labels would now need clearance to license a piece of music, which led to the difficult task of tracking down and

[6] Hip-hop artists Queen Latifah and LL Cool J similarly crossed over into acting during this time.

negotiating with the original owners and/or rights holders (Russell 1992). One ripple effect of the ruling is that sampling would thereon depend on the fame of the artist and the ability of labels to pay the clearance fees, meaning that the practice would favor the most well-off in the industry (Richards 2012). This case is one example of the way intellectual property was becoming a topic of interest in both business and law.

Intellectual property has long been a key component of the entertainment industry from both a legal and creative standpoint. As opposed to tangible property, "intellectual property" applies to ideas produced for the public good and protected by the U.S. Constitution so that authors, inventors, and artists can receive compensation for their work (Legal Information Institute). Examples of legal IP protections include patents, copyrights, and trademarks. For film, copyright has been a point of contention since the medium's earliest days and continues to be the subject of legal battles in the digital age (Decherney 2012, 2). The Hollywood studios, as Peter Decherney writes in his 2012 book about the copyright wars in the movie industry, "are in the business of creating and controlling intellectual property" (4). On the one hand, intellectual property provides a competitive advantage for a studio as IP gives it sole control of using a property, and that brand control can stretch for decades. On the other hand, IP is also often a meeting point between the studio and its audience as communities and emotional connections grow around a particular brand. Thus, IP is important for how entertainment companies compete with one another *and* interact with their audiences.

In the 1990s, the reach of intellectual property expanded globally. The North American Free Trade Agreement, which went into effect in 1994, has been described as a watershed moment for intellectual property rights as it expanded protection both internationally and to new media like computer programs, which under NAFTA were considered literary works (Levy and

Weiser 1993, 672–73). Around this same time, film industry executives and lobbyists provided a vocal resistance to ongoing global negotiations about the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as the studios tried to do away with the quotas and levies that limited the distribution of Hollywood films in Western Europe (Davis 1993). The growing importance of international markets for these companies is one reason behind this urgency; maintaining global ownership over their brands and properties would prove vital for multiple reasons. For one, maintaining control over these properties allowed companies to reuse IP in a variety of different ways. Secondly, it afforded the entertainment companies more protection in the face of a new challenge: digital piracy, or the illegal sharing of media on the internet. Piracy is just one of the ways that the internet would disrupt the entertainment industry in the 1990s.

The Entertainment Industry on the Internet

While film, television, and music were legacy media that underwent changes during the 1990s, the decade also saw the rapid diffusion of a technology that would impact all three: the World Wide Web. In the early-to-mid-1990s, the internet became increasingly commercialized as website technology progressed and eventually led to a boom at the end of the decade. From 1989 to 2000, the percentage of American households with a home computer jumped from 15 percent to 51 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Even with this steady climb, there was still an access gap in terms of who was using the internet. Pew Research began collecting data on internet usage in 2000 and, in that year, found that Americans with higher income and education were more likely to use the internet (Pew 2021). For example, 78 percent of college graduates reported internet use in 2000 while only 40 percent of high school graduates and 19 percent of people with less than a high school diploma (Pew 2021). In terms of race, Pew found that white Americans had a higher usage rate (53 percent) than Black Americans (38 percent) (Pew 2021).

These statistics exemplify what has come to be known as the digital divide. While internet use was rising to the widespread distribution in the United States in the 2020s, it was still a relatively privileged medium at the end of the 1990s.

Inherent in the name of the platform itself, the World Wide Web was revolutionary in forging a new interconnectivity between communities across the globe. Communities could grow online and were not limited to geographical restrictions, meaning that the topic of interest was now the main avenue that brought people together. One impact of this community-forming was the level to which internet users could tailor online experience to their specific interests. For example, the 1990s saw the introduction of numerous websites and online communities dedicated to film, television, and entertainment. Just as video stores manifested a physical space for "movie culture" to exist in local communities, film blogs and forums allowed for a digital hub in which people could discuss and debate movie news, their favorite movies, and so on. The internet is thus one of the clearest examples of the fragmentation and specialization of media in the 1990s and how the experience could be tailored to specific interests and self-discovery.

New media also had numerous impacts on existing entertainment media, some more prominent than others. The internet provided new opportunities for entertainment consumption in a variety of ways, some more legal than others. The internet struck a particular fear in the major movie studios, record labels, and lobbying organizations like the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). One of the most infamous examples of a platform for internet piracy, Napster.com, was founded in June 1999 as a website that allowed users to share Mp3 audio files with fellow users (also known as a peer-to-peer network). Peer-to-peer networks signified a distinct shift in how consumers could access their entertainment, circumventing the traditional model that required a monetary purchase for

ownership of the media product. MPAA head Jack Valenti was one of those most vocal in warning about the dangers of piracy, alongside the likes of Time Warner CEO Richard Parsons, who warned of "a cultural Dark Ages" and called piracy "an assault on everything that constitutes the cultural expression of our society" (Gillespie 2007, 108). Like the responses to television and home video decades before, the major companies feared that this new technology would disrupt the profits gained from their existing distribution models.

However, in the face of these new threats, there were also ways that entertainment companies and creative artists could use the internet to their advantage. The World Wide Web provided a new platform for film studios to advertise their movies to audiences. Film posters and trailers now included website URLs, which hyper-textually extended the life of a film to the internet. Unlike older forms of advertising, these sites could more fully immerse the visitor in the world of the film through selling merchandise, showing behind-the-scenes footage, playing music from the soundtrack, and so on. The new strategy emphasized "experiential engagement," which pooled together previous marketing tactics (trailers, posters, press kits, etc.) and fan experiences (fanzines, collecting, etc.) into one centralized cyberspace (London 2012, 11). It is no wonder that the studios were quick to use this tool to expand the reach of their films.

Take for example the Paramount Classics website for *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), pictured in Figure 1.1. The home webpage was designed like a teenage girl's bedroom, with an interactive collage on the wall that leads to content about the film and the Jeffrey Eugenides book on which it is based. A visitor to the website could read the book's entire first chapter on the book on the website. The content relating to the film ranged from links to the trailer and soundtrack to broader thematic material such as "What Is Teenage Obsession?" and "This is Suburbia." In addition to reading production notes and interviews, the visitor was also

given the opportunity to ask questions to Coppola. By offering an array of options, the studios could cater to audiences by allowing for an increasingly personalized experience. This website exemplifies a new type of "paratext" that prepared viewers for other texts (Gray 2010, 25). The film website in the late 1990s emerged as a paratextual tool to drive further engagement with media properties.

Figure 1.1 - www.virginsuicides.com, March 1, 2000

The internet's emergence as a marketplace also had an impact on the entertainment industry, ushering in an era of e-commerce, which prominently featured "direct-to-consumer" sales as a popular practice. Direct-to-consumer sales meant that companies could sell products or merchandise directly to potential consumers through digital storefronts on their websites. Every major film studio in 1999 provided shopping links on the homepage of their websites. Since its inception, internet film marketing was an economic strategic play by film companies to sell merchandise and home video releases (London 2012, 10–12) and e-commerce was part of the new business model.

At the same time, existing forms of retail could be translated into new virtual settings that would impact the entertainment industry as well. A now famous example of this is Amazon.com, started by Jeff Bezos in 1994 as an online version of the traditional bookstore model. In 1997, Bezos would meet with Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph about potentially acquiring their start-up NetFlix.com, which provided 7-day DVD rentals by mail on a flat monthly rate (Randolph 2019).[7] With the introduction of DVD technology and the success of Amazon, the company saw an opportunity to extend the video store format to the digital space. Starting in the late 1970s and expanding in the 1980s, video stores were crucial in expanding both the amount of companies involved in the movie business and the access to movies for the average consumer, which allows for greater customization of one's viewing habits based on the new variety of choice (Herbert 2014, 19). So, not only were movie theaters gaining more screens and films were being shown on new cable networks, but viewers could now go to a local store and browse which movies they wanted to watch on their own time. Netflix was a remediated extension of this phenomenon, removing the physical browsing component and thus the limitations of having to choose from whatever your local video store offered. Websites such as Netflix gave a promise of the new type of experiences that the internet could recycle heading into the 21st century.

Conclusion

The formation of Amazon and Netflix would be two of the most important developments of the 1990s for the film industry, even if that was not obvious at the time. Both companies have become major players in film distribution and production in the 21st century, as indicated by the forty-seven Academy Award nominations between the two in 2021 (Faughnder 2021).[8] Thus, the

[7] The Netflix representatives were unimpressed with Bezos's offer, but the two sides did form a brief partnership in 1998.

[8] Netflix nabbed 35 nominations and Amazon 12, with the latter winning Best Picture for *Nomadland* (Chloe Zhao, 2020). A year later, tech giant Apple would win their first Best Picture with *CODA* (Sian Heder, 2021).

convergence of existing media industries and the internet is one of the most important legacies of 1990s entertainment. It is also just one of many examples of how entertainment companies managed to harness emerging technologies to expand their reach into different aspects of the consumer's life. Between the home computer, multiplexes, cable television, and more, consumers had a smorgasbord of screens to explore in the realm of entertainment. Given the multiple commercial delivery channels, the entertainment industry would find ways to recycle older properties across these different platforms, a strategy that would have an impact on '70s nostalgia in the 1990s.

CHAPTER 2. REFERENCES AND RETURNS: POSTMODERN TRENDS IN MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

As Hollywood underwent industrial, corporate, and audience changes in the 1990s, a postmodern cultural shift had an aesthetic and thematic impact on American film. It is not the intention of this chapter to define every aspect of postmodernism, but instead to explore some of its influences on American film and media culture in the 1990s, recognizing that postmodernism is a complex development that has touched more than just entertainment to include philosophy, architecture, art, and more. Postmodernism, as a label, first emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s to describe a cultural reaction to the demands of "modern" society. As literary scholar Linda Hutcheon writes, postmodernism "has called into question the messianic faith of modernism, the faith that technical innovation and purity of form can assure social order" (1989, 12). Specifically, postmodernism was a response to and/or symptom of the post-industrial economy and rise of consumer culture (Compagnon 1994, 119; 127–28). In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Jean Baudrillard famously argued that postindustrial society had ushered in an era of "third-order simulacra" in which images and symbols were no longer tethered to reality and American life was akin to a hyperreal simulation (1994). Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* similarly suggested that the hyper-consumerism of post-industrial economy led to self-referential art that collapsed the distinction between modernist high culture and schlocky mass entertainment (1991, 54–55). By the 1990s, the rise of a post-industrialist economy and the increased move toward globalization continued as postmodernism fully entered American public consciousness.

This chapter covers the changing aesthetic and cultural trends in 1990s America concurrent with the rise of postmodernism, occurring alongside the industrial and technological changes covered in chapter one. The first section discusses the topic of multiculturalism and

cultural pluralism, which helped destabilize the hegemonic control of straight white males over the meaning of the term "American." The second section looks at the effects of postmodernism on film aesthetics, especially the different facets of self-referentiality. Lastly, the chapter's third section considers the tendency of postmodern films to revisit the past and examines the implications of that pattern within the culture wars of the 1990s. Together, these trends help to explain why '90s filmmakers returned to cultural markers of the 1970s to both reexamine the current cultural climate and for a sense of self-discovery in terms of their own tastes and experiences.

Multiculturalism in American Culture

While postmodernism has many distinct elements, one that has come to define it is pluralism/multiplicity. In this context, these terms imply the destabilization of singularity and embracing multiple worlds at once (Franco 2017, 112). As such, postmodernism is important to the popularization of multiculturalism and the subsequent debates about its place in American culture since the 1990s. An evolution of the term "cultural pluralism," multiculturalism concerns the process of acculturation and the extent to which minoritarian identities are acknowledged as integral to American society. Multiculturalism can be defined as "the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserve special acknowledgement of their differences with a dominant political culture" (Encyclopedia Britannica n.d.). In the 1990s, public institutions (the government, schools, etc.) in the U.S. faced increased criticism over unequal treatment of people based of historically disadvantages cultural identities like (based on ethnicity, race, gender, religion, etc.) (Taylor and Gutmann 1994, 3). These issues were increasingly pertinent at the end of the 20th century, as the country's racial and ethnic composition was projected to look much different in the new millennium. "America's Changing

Colors," the *TIME Magazine* cover read on April 9, 1990, as the cover image featured an American flag with the white stripes replaced by black, brown, and yellow streaks. Just under the magazine's title there is the question: "What will the U.S. be like when whites are no longer the majority?" Questions such as this lingered over the heads of white Americans in the twentieth century's last decade as right-wing politicians pushed the notion that changing demographics meant that a large-scale "replacement" was taking place.

Multiculturalism signified a shift in the way white Americans considered diverse cultures and their integration within a larger sense of American identity. In terms of ethnic relations, the predominant model in the United States for most of the 20th century had been that of the "melting pot," wherein European immigrants especially could drop defining ethnic traits in favor of adopting an "American" identity. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, embraced the unique characteristics of diverse cultures and encouraged them to coexist without having to sacrifice their distinctions. To some vocal cultural critics, the rise of multiculturalism posed a threat to the "American way of life." In his 1991 book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, prominent historian and political advisor Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. warned that the next major conflict to follow the ideological struggle of the Cold War was the mass convergence of diverse ethnicities due to improved travel, communication, and the "breakdown of traditional structures" (10). While Schlesinger leads by saying that the "eruption of ethnicity" in the United States had beneficial consequences, he goes on to warn of that, if pressed too far, the "cult of ethnicity" will lead to harmful divisions and an uprising against America as "one people" (1991, 16; 43). In his 1997 book on the subject, sociologist Alvin J. Schmidt similarly labeled multiculturalism as America's "modern Trojan horse" and pointed to failed multicultural policies in countries like Yugoslavia as negative examples (5). America's transition to

multiculturalism was thus a perplexing subject for established historians and academics who saw a transformation of American culture right in front of their eyes.

While those critics found a certain audience, they were self-admittedly in the minority, as public opinion was largely on the side of multiculturalism. In a series of interviews with middle-class Americans from four regions of the United States, sociologist Alan Wolfe found that most of his respondents were sympathetic to the goals of multiculturalism, even when voicing opposition to current issues like bilingualism (2000, 460). While less enthusiastic than their nonwhite counterparts, Wolfe described some of the white respondents in his study as aligning with "benign multiculturalism," which is against the institutionalization of multiculturalism but informally in favor of some of its goals (2000, 461). If some saw the melting pot's dissolution as negative by some, for others it meant untangling an illusory version of unity that favored some voices and silenced others. Multiculturalism prioritized counternarratives, meaning part of its project was to undo the hegemonic control of straight male Anglocentric perspectives on American history (Zabrowska 1998, 11). "Race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness," Toni Morrison wrote in 1992, as "American" has historically meant white as a way to discriminate against racial minorities and create a sense of otherness (47). A goal of multiculturalism was redefining that sense of American in the public consciousness.

Prioritizing marginalized voices and counternarratives also meant dismantling longstanding myths used to uphold the "traditional structures" that Schlesinger saw breaking down. Counternarratives reveal the presence of mainstream ideas that warrant challenge. In terms of multiculturalism, counternarratives in the 1990s ran in opposition to what Ronald Takaki called the "Master Narrative of American History" (2008, 4). Takaki described the

Master Narrative as the ethnocentric lens through which historians, their students, and subsequently white Americans had interpreted ideas of "America" (2008, 4). Found in the works of prominent nineteenth and twentieth century historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner, the Master Narrative posited that America was founded as an idea by white (male) European settlers who created something unique from both Old Europe and the native cultures that had lived on the land before their arrival (Takaki 2008, 5). Embracing diversity meant challenging the notion that Eurocentric history and many cultures—not just Western European—are integral to the idea of "America."

One institution affected by the spread of multiculturalism and the increased visibility of diverse cultures was the American film industry. The growth of independent cinema in the 1990s meant that new diverse audiences were represented on screen more often than in any previous era of Hollywood. Concurrent with the new demographics reached through independent cinema was the emergence of movie stars who challenged the white heteronormativity of A-list stardom. Moving beyond the token roles common in the first seventy years of Hollywood, actors such as Denzel Washington, Will Smith, Angela Bassett, Antonio Banderas, and Jennifer Lopez became bonafide movie stars that were box office draws in films aimed at a wide audience (Everett 2012, 4). Not only did some of these roles grow beyond the stereotypical supporting parts of years past, but the emergence of these stars also led to conscious discussions about the exclusionary nature of Hollywood to that point, as exemplified by marginal roles such as the Black Best Friend or the Exoticized Latina (Mask 2012, 167). Anna Everett writes that by "the 1990s, then, this nexus of racial diversity and stardom helped to advance a new representational economy more reflexive of America's actual demographic composition and striking cultural complexities" (2012, 5). Everett sees this increased representation aligning with the larger trend towards multiculturalism in the

United States during the decade. These trends, in conjunction with the greater number of outlets for diverse creators to make films and television, allowed the entertainment landscape in the 1990s to reflect America's multicultural fabric.

Postmodern Aesthetics on Film

By the end of the 1990s, postmodernism wielded a significant influence on American cinema. Beyond the changing stars on screen, dialogue had a new self-referential ring to it and age-old genres were reinvented. Take, for example, revisions to the horror film genre during the 1990s. "About a Decade Ago, Horror Films were Killed Off, Largely by Their Repetitiveness. Now They've Been Recast for a Cynical, Postmodern Generation and Have Regained Their Bloody Zing," read a newspaper headline after the release of Wes Craven's *Scream 2* (Boyar 1998). Critics and scholars alike noted how Craven's *Scream* franchise breathed new life into horror by acknowledging the history of the genre and the tropes associated with it. "The 1990s [have] witnessed the rise of a new cinematic trend—in films such as *Scream*, *Scream 2*, *Copycat*, and *Seven*—that portrays murderers as semiotically informed bricoleurs who follow the outline of a pre-established narrative manifest in a shared literature of images," wrote film scholar Todd F. Tietchen about how the structure and formula of horror-mystery films were integrated into the narratives themselves (1998). The new cycle of horror film, which proved popular with audiences, is just one example of how postmodernism affected Hollywood. Just as multiculturalism splintered master narratives to acknowledge pluralistic identities, filmmakers revisited the myths embedded in older film genres through a new lens. Thus, the decade's cultural trends had a series of aesthetic and narrative impacts on American films.

One of the clearest ways the postmodern aesthetic was solidified in cinema in the 1990s is through increased self-referentiality. In the context of postmodern art, self-referentiality is

when a text highlights its status as a work of art and reminds the reader of its own artificiality. While self-referentiality had long been a hallmark of American popular culture, it became common in all forms of entertainment in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Dunne 1992, 10–11). In his 1992 book *Metapop: Self-Referentiality in Contemporary American Popular Culture*, Michael Dunne described what made this self-referentiality phenomenon distinct from its predecessors. He explains: "Because of the increasing immersion of contemporary Americans in all forms of mediation, moreover, the rhetorical intention of the self-references has shifted considerably, shifting away from the artist's self-expression and toward an affirmation of the mediated community that is embracing both creator and audience" (1992, 11). In other words, the viewer's heightened awareness of storytelling conventions and what makes a film a "film" constitutes the basis of a collective experience that references in 1990s films mobilized. The delivery of the content and the conventions that structure a film became as important in the creator-audience dynamic as the story itself. While film is one place that self-referentiality increased, Dunne demonstrates this occurrence in media of all sorts, including comic strips, advertising, and music videos, a medium in which Dunne says self-referentiality had become a key convention of the form (1992, 13). It is no surprise, then, that films of the late 1980s and 1990s borrowed aesthetic cues from their music video counterparts. The self-referential phenomenon is especially important to keep in mind when considering ways that intellectual properties were recycled in the decade. Self-referential pop culture was aware of its influences, its conventions, and the public perception of certain characters or stories. This trend is crucial to chapters three through five, all of which show how filmmakers consciously referenced the '70s.

Another form of postmodern aesthetics in film is the use of parody as a subversion of genres and generic conventions. Parody, as a form, is reliant on a viewer's knowledge of

conventions or specific narrative or visual reference points and uses that knowledge as a source for comedy. Dan Harries notes that intertextuality, or the relationship between multiple texts, is at the core of parody, and he aligns the practice of parody closely with "quotation" (2000, 26). Expanding on that point, Antoine Compagnon argues that postmodernism "reevaluates the ambiguity, plurality, and coexistence of styles," which it cultivates through "vernacular and historical quotations or references" (1994, 119). Compagnon finds that such references are the "most potent figure" of postmodernism (1994, 120).

The discussion considers quotation more deeply in a moment; for now, it is important to note that quotation is a prominent aspect of pastiche, in which a text imitates the style of an earlier artist or movement. What sets parody apart from pastiche art is that parody is laced with irony, a trait that allows it to deconstruct, rather than simply imitate, past texts (Harries 2000, 30–31). Recognizing irony is what allows audiences to acknowledge they are undeniably separated from the past by both time and representation (Hutcheon 1989, 94). Therefore, the parodic film is built on a foundation of self-awareness.

Linda Hutcheon points to the double-coded politics of parody, whereby parody "can be used as a self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past" (1989, 101). She continues, parody's "ironic reprise also offers an internalized sign of ideological legitimation. How do some representations get legitimized and authorized? And at the expense of which others? Parody can offer a way of investigating that process" (1989, 101). The pastiche-parody dynamic is visible throughout the project's case studies. While some '90s films like *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997) recycle past styles to pay tribute to them, others, like *The Brady Bunch Movie* (Betty Thomas, 1995), use references to the past to make jokes about the relationship some Americans have with popular media.

Discussion of postmodern aesthetics and the act of quotation provides a useful opportunity to return to the importance of sampling in hip-hop music mentioned in chapter one. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sampling became a staple of the hip-hop genre during its transition to the mainstream. As some scholars have pointed out, borrowing from older music aligns hip-hop with a larger movement of building on past forms of Black cultural expression and increases the music's political edge. Reiland Rabaka writes, to "invoke hip hop as a 'movement,' rather than merely a 'generation,' is to conjure up and consciously conceive of hip hop as *the accumulated politics and aesthetics of each and every African American movement and musical form that preceded it*" (2013, 285; italics in original). That accumulative process involves the aesthetic of recycling, which in this case means the practice of sampling. Additionally, by positioning hip-hop as a movement, Rabaka frames it as a direct successor in the lineage of political movements promoting Black identity. For Americans denied access to the nation's melting pot, an appeal of hip-hop was its subversive power to speak political truths about issues not commonly covered in mainstream media. While some of that power may have been lost as hip-hop became mainstream, its position in the cumulative movement for empowered Black culture meant that its mainstream crossover was a breakthrough that was centuries in the making. Sampling was thus more than merely the recycling of older material for new songs, it was a way to pay respect to the music and movements that came before.

While sampling is generally discussed in a music context, filmmakers used similar postmodern methods in the 1990s, with adjustments suitable to cinema aesthetics. One of the most often-cited examples of postmodern cinema is Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). In the film, Tarantino references the past in a multitude of ways. As *Rolling Stone* film critic Peter Travers wrote in his review, Tarantino "revels in pop culture, especially that of the '70s, and he's

no snob: The French New Wave or blaxploitation, The Wild Bunch or The Brady Bunch—it's all grist" (1994). Audiences could find most of these references on the surface, specifically, in the film's soundtrack and mise-en-scène. Often, the film's self-referentiality comes through the dialogue as characters talk about pop culture from years past, as if echoing Tarantino's own history as a former video store clerk. The nuances of some performances in *Pulp Fiction* are contingent on the star personas of the actors, allowing for an intertextual play between the character and the star's past. For example, in a role often described as a comeback for his career, John Travolta doing the twist on a dancefloor with Uma Thurman has narrative purpose, but also calls back to his younger performances in films like 1977's *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham) and 1978's *Grease* (Randal Kleiser), which had catapulted him into movie stardom. The dance scene exemplifies how self-referentiality and sampling can go beyond surface-level aesthetic choices, as films of this nature were thematically indebted to the work that came before them.

In postmodern cinema of the 1990s, the function of sampling could be twofold. On one hand, it could provide a platform for artists to show their knowledge of cultural history and pay homage to their influences. Given the wide range of cultural reference points in *Pulp Fiction,* sampling could create a collage-style composition that brings together high and low culture, as well as popular and obscure culture, in a single place. Moreover, from audiences' perspective, sampled references could elicit personal associations, positive or negative, with the cues. Audience associations are one reason that films set in the recent past rely so heavily on pop soundtracks, as songs can elicit strong emotional connections with a certain place and time. For audiences unfamiliar with the media referenced, the film acts as an introduction to an archive of older films, shows, and music to discover. The logic of music sampling and popular culture references thus has potential benefits for artists, studios, and consumers alike.

There are, however, criticisms of the effects that sampling and self-referentiality can have on art. If a new piece is heavily reliant upon references to the past, then a few distinct issues can arise. On the flip side of offering salient reference points for viewers, film's dependence on references could alienate audiences if they do not recognize the cues. In addition, if a reference is not presented correctly, it could play like a joke that someone does not get. A more pressing issue concerning sampling, quotation, and reference is the question of originality. The Biz Markie-Gilbert O'Sullivan copyright infringement case is one example of how sampling became litigated in the 1990s; Vanilla Ice's popular 1990 single "Ice Ice Baby" was entangled in a similar suit in which neither David Bowie nor the members of Queen were credited as songwriters (and thus could not receive royalties), despite the song clearly borrowing the bass line from "Under Pressure."[9] Such legal cases raise questions about artistic stealing and, in some ways, plagiarizing someone else's work without credit. Indeed, the reason the crediting and royalties components were so key in these cases is that the original artists expected the credit due them and whatever financial compensation accompanied that official credit.

But even if original sources are acknowledged and remunerated, a larger philosophical question arises beyond the concern of plagiarism: at what point does media stop progressing if a large portion of its composition consists of borrowing and reusing different elements from earlier works? This question applies not only to sampling and quotation but also the film industry's increased reliance upon intellectual property, as when older products and brands are repackaged in new ways (some more subtlety than others). Critics' concerns about originality also echo Baudrillard's observations about simulacra and simulation, as media products constantly

[9] The case was later settled out of court and the songwriters of "Under Pressure" were given credit on "Ice Ice Baby".

referring to themselves suggests a collapse of the distinction between the reference and referee, emulating third-order simulacra.

Returning to the Past in Postmodernism

Recycling older media texts was just one example of referencing and quoting the past, which scholars have identified as a major trend in postmodern art. A return to the past can mean revisiting past styles, portraying the historical past, or even a combination of the two. However, returning to the past creates a few dilemmas for filmmakers and audiences, as the past is always filtered through the lens of the present. Linda Hutcheon outlines a few dilemmas regarding the separation of past and present in fiction. She explains: we "constantly narrate the past, but what are the conditions of the knowledge implied by that totalizing act of narration? Must a historical account acknowledge where it does not know for sure or is it allowed to guess? Do we know the past only through the present? Or is it a matter of only being able to understand the present through the past?" (1989, 72). If postmodern films that portray the past are often self-referential, then they must acknowledge their present-ness as well.

The preoccupation with revisiting or portraying the past aligns with the larger task of postmodernism to identify and interrogate the metanarratives of history, particularly at the end of the Cold War. "Historical revisitation appears indeed to be responding to the postmodern urge to find a place in history," Cristina Degli-Esposti writes (1998, 12). While films set in the past do not act as substitutes for historical documentation, they are nonetheless impactful in how they shape public perception of earlier times—a phenomenon labeled by Alison Landsberg as "prosthetic memory," in which mass media stands in for an experience of a time that a viewer never lived in (2004, 26). The task of remembering and recycling the past becomes more peculiar when that earlier time is not far removed from the present. The proximity of past and

present was often the case in what scholar Frederic Jameson labeled the "nostalgia film" cycle, which he saw as a symptom of commercial art in post-industrial America. Nostalgia films are defined by a contradiction, between the social context of the present and the representation of the past, that is marked aesthetically rather than through any genuine sense of historicity (Jameson 1991, 19–21). As Jameson writes, "the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but [instead it] approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion" (1991, 67). In Jameson's view, nostalgia films and postmodernism in general involve pastiche, a recycling of past styles with no ideological commentary. Offering a dissenting view, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism's defining trait is the paradoxical way it both highlights and acknowledges the past *and* subvert it with irony. She writes, "Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity" (1989, 1). Questions related to postmodern duplicity are central to the subsequent three chapters, which consider the production and reception context of 1990s films that recycle music, stars, and narrative elements lifted from the seventies.

Portraying the past through the lens of comedy can provide additional subversive qualities in popular entertainment. Marcia Landy argues that comedies about the past can offer counternarratives that undermine "official," or mainstream accounts of the past (2010, 177)—like the trends of multiculturalism and genre revision mentioned earlier. Moreover, comedic treatments often include not just parody, but also farce and satire—which, like parody, foster critique of "official" remembering. Postmodern films' potential to challenge what Schlesinger called "traditional structures" provides the framework for understanding how some films in the 1990s re-narrativized the past by exploring disenfranchised perspectives.

Another aspect of postmodern films revisiting the recent past is that their representations intertwine with audience memory, especially for people who lived through the time portrayed. In part, memory was especially pertinent in the 1990s because computers and CD-ROMs brought about new possibilities for storing sounds and images. Not only did this technology create multiple definitions of the word "memory"—now also applicable to digital storage—but the very storage of material now altered how information and knowledge could be cataloged to exceed the capacities of human memory (Degli-Esposti 1998, 5). Equally important, postmodern cinema's intertextual references relied on the memories of creators and audiences. "Memory, the archival site of the past, and intertextuality work together to reproduce a collective recollection of the past into the present," Cristina Degli-Esposti argues, with postmodern films becoming a form of collective or popular memory through their visitations to the past (1998, 5; 11). Thus, by both setting films in the past and making references to past styles, the act of remembering is an integral part of the experience of consuming postmodern entertainment.

Mobilization of elements associated with the past is essential to some of the project's case study films, which often revisit the past without being set in an earlier time. Given the centrality of quotations and the recreation (or subversion) of past styles, these postmodern films can be set in the present but use references to intimate a relationship between the past and the present. For example, John Singleton's *Shaft* (2000) is a revival of the famed Black detective franchise from the 1970s, updated to be set in late 1990s New York. However, it is difficult to use the traditional terms of "remake" or "sequel," since Samuel L. Jackson is ostensibly the titular character Richard Roundtree originated, but Roundtree also appears in the film as his legendary character, positioned here as the uncle to Jackson's version. The fluid relationship

between past and present in postmodern films is examined in the next three chapters, along with ways that postmodernism's recycling of the past becomes an integral cog in the cultural machine.

The socio-political context of the 1990s created an added wrinkle in the relationship among cinema, memory, and portrayals of the past. As previously established, Multiculturalism had become a topic of political, academic, and cultural debate in American society. Debates about multiculturalism are just one example of 1990s sociopolitical discourse commonly associated with the "culture wars." The term can be traced to sociologist James Davison Hunter's 1992 best-selling book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, although the term achieved greater visibility through a speech by presidential candidate Pat Buchanan at the 1992 Republican National Convention (Williams 1997, 1–3). Hunter argues that cultural conflict is a struggle for domination in the arena of "public culture"—in which rules of communal life are established, symbols of national identity affirmed, and collective myths are embraced (1992, 53–55).

While the culture wars in America are often associated with the arena of political discourse, mass media and the entertainment industry have been battlegrounds due to their wide reach in popular culture. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, vocal lobbyists from both sides of the political aisle pushed for censorship of music that older generations deemed too vulgar for consumption by young Americans. This new music was positioned as a regression from the moral standards that once supposedly upheld American entertainment. "Much has changed since Elvis' seemingly innocent times. Subtleties, suggestions, and innuendo have given way to overt expressions and descriptions of violent sexual acts, drug taking, and flirtations with the occult," said Florida Senator Paula Hawkins in 1985 (Hartman 2015, 174). Through evoking a past era of music, Senator Hawkins's statement falls in line with the rhetoric that yearned for, as President

George H. W. Bush termed it in his 1988 nomination acceptance speech, a "kinder and gentler nation" (The American Presidency Project n.d.). The irony of name-dropping Elvis, of course, is that it reveals the selective memory of nostalgia that can "forget" the earlier uproar over Elvis's outward sexuality. The debates in the 1990s were not restricted to the world of music either, as consumer products, theatre, film, and more became involved in a tug-of-war between freedom of expression and moral concern (Phillips 1990).

One effect of the culture wars in the 1990s is that the past and cultural history became a place of heated contention. Cultural commentators and politicians used the past in different ways: as a place to harken back to, as a time to forget, as a lesson for how far things have come, and so on. Thus, films engaging the past and the present could be relevant, raising a series of questions. Has American society progressed, or should it return to the good old days? That then naturally begs the question of who exactly these older times were good for. Postmodern films that recycled the past in the 1990s provide an opportunity to see how American popular culture explored these questions, as had 1980s films set in the fifties. Writing on nostalgia for the fifties prominent in the 1980s, Michael D. Dwyer labels this trend as "a rejection of the conditions of America in the 1980s, after years of social unrest, economic stagflation, and flagging national pride. The fifties thus served as a fantasy alternative to an unsettling present" (2015, 21). In a film like *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), Dwyer argues, the past is "repaired, made to more closely represent a vision of a bygone period that embodies particular values perceived to be absent or under threat in the present" (2015, 22). If the stage was set by early postmodern films in the 1980s, then the 1990s took this trend of returning to the past in a variety of new directions.

Conclusion

The project's first two chapters describe the industrial and aesthetic context for the case study films. It is difficult to provide an exhaustive account of the 1990s, yet the trends discussed thus far (consolidation, deregulation, audience fragmentation, synergy, postmodernism, and multiculturalism) illuminate different ways American cinema developed at the end of the millennium. As studios looked to revive older properties, filmmakers returned to the past through both setting and aesthetic references. The next chapter shows how independent filmmakers—but not their distributors—reimagined the traditional nostalgia film. Chapters four reveals how characters and narratives from the seventies became important to corporate synergistic deployment of intellectual properties. Chapter five illustrates ways that present and past intertwine in film narratives that are set in the '90s but feature seventies music, stars, and imagery. In all three cases, Hollywood found a middle ground to align the postmodern tendencies of the filmmakers of the period with their synergistic priorities to reach multiple audiences at once. While the fifties were a common object of focus for cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, Hollywood in the 1990s used the seventies as a canvas for remembrance, referencing, recycling, parody, and more—reflecting both the industrial and culture trends of the time.

CHAPTER 3. DAZED AND MISUSED: CONSTRUCTING AND MARKETING THE SEVENTIES COMING-OF-AGE FILM

"It's like the 'every other decade' theory. The '50s were boring. The '60s rocked. The '70s, my god, they obviously suck," muses Cynthia (Marissa Ribisi), a cynical seventies teen in Richard Linklater's seminal independent dramedy *Dazed and Confused* (1993). "Maybe the '80s will be totally radical," she then adds. The second film from 31-year-old filmmaker Linklater, *Dazed and Confused* follows a group of Texas high schoolers on the last day of school in 1976. As indicated in the opening quote, Linklater's film is self-aware about how the past is narrativized and generalized on a scale of "good times" to "bad times." Of course, Cynthia's dialogue is also postmodern in its use of anachronistic comedy where audiences in 1993 could realize that the '80s were not as radical as the characters may have hoped. And to the audiences who helped turn *Dazed and Confused* into a cult sensation, perhaps the '70s didn't suck either—at least not completely.

In a few different ways, *Dazed and Confused* is emblematic of the changing industrial landscape of Hollywood in the 1990s. Linklater made his debut feature *Slacker* (1990) at the age of 29, and the film would resonate with younger generation, with some going as far to label Gen X the "slacker generation." Despite its minuscule budget of $23,000, *Slacker*'s relative success caught the eye of producer Jim Jacks, who recruited Linklater to make his next picture at Universal. The problem, however, is that the studio was less patient with the more laid-back style of Linklater's set and so the *Dazed* production was fraught with conflict. Despite being initially envisioned as a nationwide Universal release, the studio eventually gave the film to its smaller arthouse label, Gramercy Pictures, where the film's widest release was less than 300 screens (Macor 2010, 179). Unsurprisingly, the film struggled at the box office as a result and was considered a failure at the time of its release. While the film's semi-independent release is one

way that it embodies the changing film landscape in the ‘90s, the film’s reputation post-release is just as crucial in this equation. Almost immediately, the film gained a devoted cult following when it came to home video, despite Universal underselling it to video stores (Macor 2010, 180). Additionally, its soundtrack was also an undeniable success after reaching double-platinum status. These two developments indicate that, during this time, downstream markets could expand a film’s commercial value beyond its initial theatrical release.

The film’s growing popularity can also be found in the perceived influence it had on the wave of ‘70s nostalgia in the years following its release. By the release of *The Brady Bunch Movie* in 1995, *Entertainment Weekly* was already pointing to *Dazed* as an example of pop culture looking back on the ‘70s with irony (Kenny 1995). Mark Brazill, one of the co-creators of *That ‘70s Show* (Fox, 1998–2006), has said that his show was one of several being pitched at the time that were set in the ‘70s, which he attributes to Linklater’s film (Maerz 2020, 390). In the late 1990s, other independent filmmakers would follow *Dazed*’s path in observing teenage life in the 1970s, remixing aesthetic markers of the past with a more cynical perspective in line with Gen X sentiments. This wave includes *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *54* (Mark Christopher, 1998), *Slums of Beverly Hills* (Tamara Jenkins, 1998), and *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999). This chapter focuses on how these films used their independent status to portray the dissatisfaction of growing up in the 1970s and how, despite deviations in tone, their independent distributors positioned them as commercial products within the larger industry phenomenon of ‘70s nostalgia.

The Coming-of-Age Nostalgia Film from *American Graffiti* to *Dazed and Confused*

Before talking about the unique attributes of the coming-of-age ‘70s films in the 1990s, it is worth establishing some background on postmodern nostalgia films. Jameson first used the

term “nostalgia film” to describe a filmmaking mode directly tied to commercial art in the age of postmodernism. Rather than being an “old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content,” this mode of filmmaking instead “approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image” (1984, 67). “[T]he desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the ‘generation’,” he writes (1984, 66). Essentially, what is occurring is that the past becomes commodified through a set of stylistic markers that, over the course of time, come to supplant the actual lived reality. This is how the 1950s became “the fifties,” which is a set of imagery with cultural connotations. As Jean Baudrillard puts it, “when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (1994, 6). The film that Jameson signals as a primary example of the postmodern nostalgia film is George Lucas’s 1973 smash hit *American Graffiti*. The film follows a large ensemble of teenagers on the last night of the summer in 1962. “Where were you in ‘62?” the poster famously asked, posing a direct question to its audience to recall memories from their past. Often, these films are as much about the cultural context within which they are made and the present context of its consumers than they are about the period they are portraying. Jameson argued that *American Graffiti* and the nostalgia film provided an escape to a more innocent time in response to the loss of historicity in the present (1991, 19). Jameson’s writing on the film came after *American Graffiti* had helped influence a wave of ‘50s nostalgia in the 1970s, including the hit show *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984), which starred *Graffiti* star Ron Howard.

Beyond its contribution to ‘50s nostalgia, *American Graffiti* is just as important for setting the groundwork for the “coming-of-age nostalgia” story. These are not just movies set in the past but, importantly, the films focus on young protagonists who experience a seemingly

seminal event in their lives, often passage into adulthood. This mode of film thus brings together a nostalgia for a specific time in the past and a "nostalgia for adolescence" (Sayers 2020, 149). *Happy Days* and *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) are a few examples of this pattern in the aftermath of *American Graffiti* while *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–1993) would continue the trend on television, but with the '60s now as its backdrop. The coming-of-age nostalgia film, in the style of *American Graffiti*, is usually comedic and fun-loving in nature but with an underlying bittersweetness—which ties directly to the inherent dilemma of nostalgia, which is that you can never actually go back. This is accentuated by the focus on teenagers at a transitional point of their life, crossing the point of no return from childhood to adulthood. Thematically, the past becomes conflated with youth. Another crucial component of these stories is that they often have ensemble casts. By using an ensemble, these films also emphasize a collective experience of the past over an individual one.

Perhaps the most important aesthetic marker of the past that makes these films distinct is their recycling of popular culture, and particularly music. *American Graffiti* is seen as a milestone film for establishing this format as its soundtrack contains dozens of songs from the late '50s and early '60s and ended up going triple platinum, spawning several additional volumes in the years that followed. The potential for selling the soundtrack thus becomes a key part of the appeal to making these films in an entertainment industry increasingly reliable on synergy. Importantly, these are not just ancillary to the film but instead central to its story, as the songs on the radio are used diegetically to tie together the various storylines, characters, and locations. Diegetic, here, refers to sounds that the characters directly encounter within the world of the film—thus, the songs being played on the radio create a shared experience for the characters.

Music thus becomes a key association with adolescent identity in films set in the recent past, which then becomes a marketable aspect of the films as well.

While *American Graffiti* is seen as the first major example of starting a nostalgia wave of this type, it would go on to be repeated in future years with the fifties being replaced with more recent times. Nicola Sayers argues that the second significant wave of nostalgia films came about in the 1990s with films set in the 1970s, most notably *Dazed and Confused* in 1993 (2020, 128). At the time of its release (exactly twenty years after Lucas's seminal film), film critics often linked Linklater's film with *American Graffiti*. "*Dazed and Confused* is *American Graffiti* for the stoned," wrote John Lyttle of *The Independent* (1994). In a review for *The Baltimore Sun*, Stephen Hunter points out the cynical side to the connection between the two films, as some stood to financially benefit from this strategy (1993). Interviews with the film's director reveal this to be the case as the studio wanted a product that fit into a pre-established genre and so Linklater pitched the film as "*American Graffiti* in the '70s," which was appealing to the producers given that film's success and enduring cultural legacy (Maerz 68). As he crossed over from independent cinema to studio Hollywood, Linklater realized that support for the film was reliant upon its commercial appeal and that meant working within the confines of the "youth film" and the "nostalgia film."

There are a few ways that *Dazed* follows the blueprint set forth by *American Graffiti* twenty years prior. Both feature sprawling ensembles of predominantly white teenagers over the course of one day in their lives. Those specific days even mirror each other as *Dazed* takes place on the last day of school and *Graffiti* is set on the last day before school starts, establishing summer vacation as a pivotal coming-of-age period for the characters in these films. While perhaps not as integral to this film's structure as it is in *Graffiti,* cruising and car culture is

nonetheless prominent in *Dazed* as we see characters move from location to location. Finally, both films have soundtracks that are essential to their identity and cultural legacy. Nearly thirty rock hits from the '70s are played in *Dazed*'s 103–minute runtime (some diegetically and some non-diegetically)—meaning that some piece of popular music accompanies nearly every scene. Around ten percent of *Dazed*'s budget went to securing music rights, which is a similar proportion to *Graffiti*'s music budget (Maerz 297). The film's soundtrack, released in September 1993, was such a success that it eventually led to the release of *Even More Dazed and Confused*, a second soundtrack, the following year.[10] Ironically, Universal was not able to benefit from this synergy because the studio's record label, MCA Records, was convinced that a soundtrack full of '70s arena rock would be unpopular and so they wanted a current band (Jackyl) on the soundtrack to appeal to the MTV generation. When Linklater eventually convinced Jackyl not to perform on the soundtrack, MCA pulled out of the deal and sold the soundtrack to Irving Azoff's label Giant, where it would experience its success (Maerz 2020, 311). When taken alongside the smash success of *Graffiti*'s soundtrack in the '70s, these two films helped firmly establish music as an area that could extend the commercial afterlife of coming-of-age nostalgia films. This is something that becomes abundantly clear when looking into the marketing of coming-of-age films in the 1990s.

Given the fourteen-year gap between 1962 and 1976 (when each film is set), *American Graffiti* and *Dazed and Confused* also connected in their portrayal of the adolescence of the Baby Boom generation. The post-war "baby boom" is generally used to refer to the spike in birth rates from 1946 to 1964 and so the two films bookend this through the portrayal of teens born in the mid-40s (in *American Graffiti*) and then those born in the late '50s and early '60s in *Dazed and*

[10] This once again creates a symmetry between the film and *American Graffiti* as that soundtrack's second volume was called *More American Graffiti*, which would eventually also be the title of the film's 1979 sequel.

Confused. Thus, while the fashion, music, and drug use in *Dazed* seems like a far cry from the clean-cut rock-n-roll of *American Graffiti*, the generation difference between the two ensembles is not as far apart as it may seem at first glance. For Hollywood studios, making a direct appeal to Baby Boomers and their youth meant targeting a massive generation that was reaching the height of its buying power in the 1990s. Baby Boomers were also in key creative positions within the entertainment industry at this point, something that Linklater had noticed in terms of how the 1960s were celebrated compared to other times. "Why was it that only this frothy perception of what the '70s were about got passed along as the official history? Was it an attempt to solidify the 60s (by comparison) as this ultimate in our cultural history by people who had obviously "peaked" and were content to nostalgically repeat it over and over for the rest of their lives (and ours)?" he wrote in a companion book to *Dazed* (Linklater and Montgomery 1993).

Nostalgia films were not merely products sold to the generation that had experienced those times, but also to the younger generation born after. In fact, some have argued that it is the newer generation with whom these nostalgia films have the most appeal. When talking about the resonance of these films with younger generations, journalist Tom Junod has said, "*American Graffiti* was really popular with people who graduated high school in 1976 rather than in 1962. And it was the same way with *Dazed* being popular with people who graduated in the '90s" (Maerz 2020, 127). When considered together, these two films show the cyclical nature and enduring appeal of the coming-of-age nostalgia film. The *nostalgia* of the coming-of-age nostalgia film is not necessarily a yearning for any specific time but instead for the feeling of youth, something shared by all generations. These films could thus connect to generations who lived the period being portrayed as well as younger generations experiencing it only through prosthetic memory.

Despite its similarities with *American Graffiti*, it is difficult to say that *Dazed* is merely warmly yearning for more innocent times. While the film borrows heavily from director Richard Linklater's personal experiences growing up in the mid-70s, he has made it clear in interviews both before and after its release that he did not want to make a film glorifying the "good old days" in any way. "I'm glad as teenagers we were aware that the time we were living in sucked—it's impossible to have much nostalgia for that time period," the director said at the time of the film's release (Linklater and Montgomery 1993). In more recent interviews, he has stuck to this belief, saying that he "tried to make the movie immune to nostalgia" (Maerz 2020, 404). This stance is reflected in the film itself as it portrays the norms of being a higher schooler in the '70s in a way that seems harsh, particularly the hazing of underclassmen and the chauvinistic attitudes of some of its male characters. The film's most iconic character, David Wooderson (Matthew McConaughey), is a burnout in his mid-20s who is still hanging around his hometown and hitting on high school girls. The kids in high school can't wait to get out of high school while the young adults who still cling on to their high school years like Wooderson and perpetual senior O'Bannion (Ben Affleck) are shown as pathetic. *Dazed and Confused* "is art crossed with anthropology. It tells the painful underside of *American Graffiti,"* wrote film critic Roger Ebert (1993). At one point, a character even explicitly says "if I ever start referring to these as the best days of my life, remind me to kill myself."

Having come after *American Graffiti* and the subsequent wave of '50s nostalgia, *Dazed* is thus conscious of its commercial position as a nostalgia film and attempts to counter that within the text. *Dazed and Confused*, thus, aligns more closely with Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of how the past is represented in postmodern art than with Jameson's positioning of nostalgia films as mindless escapism. To Hutcheon, postmodern films revisiting the past possess a self-

awareness that allows them to comment on and even confront the way that the past is constructed in the present. "[I[f nostalgia connotes evasion of the present, idealization of a (fantasy) past, or a recovery of that past as edenic, then the postmodernist ironic rethinking of history is definitely not nostalgic. It critically confronts the past with the present, and vice versa," she writes in critique of Jameson (1988, 39). This confrontational approach is applicable to the coming-of-age films that would come about in '90s independent cinema, which reflected on the seventies with a sense of cynicism that more closely reflected the cultural outlook of Gen X. *Dazed and Confused* is relatively muted in this respect, in part due to clashes between Linklater and Universal in the post-production process which saw the nuanced film made into a shorter comedic product (Maerz 2020, 282). However, the film's cult success would contribute to a wave of films in the latter part of the decade that expand upon the potential for films of this nature to reflect on how American culture historicizes the past.

The Darker Turn of the '70s Coming-of-Age Film After *Dazed*

From 1997 to 1999, a trend emerged of films that focused on coming-of-age narratives set in the 1970s. Most of these films would follow a similar path to the big screen as *Dazed and Confused*, coming from young filmmakers in the liminal space between the major studios and independent cinema. As Gramercy had been for Universal, most major studios developed specialty labels that would allow them to use their resources to capitalize on the success of independent cinema and assimilate it into their conglomerate model. This placement within the industrial landscape is worth keeping in mind as it helps explains both the films' thematic content and status as commercial products of the Hollywood system. If *Dazed* was intended to be an anti-nostalgia film, as Linklater implies, then these films take that a step further. Rather than adopt the one-night ensemble style of *American Graffiti*, they examine a deep sense of isolation

and dissatisfaction through sadder stories that span months and even years. This section examines the production history and content of those films.

Fox Searchlight, the specialty label of 20th Century Fox, had multiple '70s-set films in the late '90s with Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Tamara Jenkins's *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998). *The Ice Storm* is based on Rick Moody's 1994 novel about a group of adults and teenagers in 1973 who are dealing with the changing sexual norms of the time. The film was Ang Lee's second English-language directorial effort after *Sense & Sensibility* (1995) and his first to be set in the United States. Given the split generational focus and its heavy dramatic undertones, the film is less of a coming-of-age nostalgia film in the *American Graffiti*-sense, but it does present itself as being about growing up in the 1970s. The film's press materials describe the source material as "a scathingly witty novel of the Seventies," meaning the film is essentially trying to encapsulate an entire era of the past. *Slums of Beverly Hills*, on the other hand, is a decidedly more light-hearted and coming-of-age films that comedically follows teenager Vivian Abromowitz (Natasha Lyonne) as she hits puberty in 1976. The film's setting is its most unorthodox aspect, as the Abromowitz family live nomadically, moving from cheap apartment to cheap apartment in Beverly Hills.

New Line Cinema, which was owned by TimeWarner but operated independently from Warner Bros. throughout the 1990s, produced Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997). The film follows high school drop-out Eddie Adams (Mark Wahlberg) as he becomes porn star Dirk Diggler in Southern California from 1977 to 1984. The coming-of-age arc that Dirk experiences is quite different from the other films from this wave, due in part to the industry where its plot takes place but also because Dirk's formative years are not spent with family or high school friends. Mark Christopher's *54* (1998), distributed by prominent independent

Miramax, shares some stylistic and narratives similarities with *Boogie Nights* as Shane O'Shea (Ryan Phillippe) becomes embedded in the nightclub culture at Studio 54 from 1979 to the club's downfall in 1981. *54* was the first feature film from Christopher, whose short films earlier in the decade were influential to what B. Ruby Rich defined as the New Queer Cinema (1992). Finally, the last film of this wave to reach audiences in the '90s was Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), which was produced by specialty label Paramount Classics. The film, an adaptation of a 1993 Jeffrey Eugenides novel, follows the tragic lives of the five Lisbon sisters living in suburban Detroit in 1975. In a departure from the other '70s-set films of this wave, *Virgin Suicides* frames its narrative through an anonymous narrator in the present—directly evoking memory because it seems to recount events of someone's youth.

All of these films fall relatively early within the careers of their respective filmmakers. Three directors—Tamara Jenkins, Sofia Coppola, and Mark Christopher—made their feature film debuts with a '70s coming-of-age tale. For Jenkins in particular, *Slums* was an autobiographical story from her own time growing up in the '70s (Gross 1998). For both Ang Lee and Paul Thomas Anderson, they were making their second feature in the Hollywood system. When considering that *Dazed and Confused* was also Linklater's second film, a trend clearly emerged in the 1990s in which young filmmakers helped establish their careers through revisiting the '70s. These films thus are all situated within the larger movement of Generation X filmmakers who emerged in '90s independent cinema and who, as Jesse May Mayshark writes, "were deeply concerned with ethics and morality, the obligations of the individual, the effects of family breakdown, and social alienation" (2007, 5).

These artists relied less on the winking postmodern irony in the works of Quentin Tarantino and instead used deconstruction as an analytical tool to understand their place in the

world (Mayshark 2007, 6). “They are emphatically not nostalgic for some simpler ‘past.’ They are at home in the complicated present. But that does not mean they are comfortable here, exactly; they are not products of comfortable times” (Mayshark 2007, 14). So, while these filmmakers tend to revisit the past, at least in their early films, it is less about postmodern self-awareness, irony, or sampling (which appears to some degree) and more about understanding what looking back can say about the world. This type of inward reflection is prevalent in most of these films, even the ones that are not explicitly autobiographical. It is also worth noting that, like *American Graffiti* and *Dazed and Confused*, these films overwhelming portray the lives of white Americans—another typical narrative trait of these Gen X indie films (Mayshark 2007, 11). That is not to say that diverse portrayals of ‘70s youth were totally absent from ‘90s cinema, as Spike Lee’s *Crooklyn* (1994) is an autobiographical film about a group of siblings growing up in Brooklyn in 1973. Yet *Crooklyn*’s characters are distinctly younger than the teenagers in the other coming-of-age films. It was also a major studio release, thanks in part to Spike Lee’s independent success in the ‘80s that led to an in-house deal with Universal.

Stylistically, the late ‘90s coming-of-age films share a few aesthetic markers with *Dazed and Confused* that help establish the look and sound of the cinematic seventies. Costuming, hair styling, and set design are often pointed to as contributing to the nostalgic mode, and these films all call attention to those details when recreating their time. For example, Justin Wyatt notes that in *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola “is very precise in including artifacts, products, and icons of 1970s consumer culture to build the Lisbon household” (2018, 77). Different forms of popular culture are also seemingly ever-present in the lives of the young characters. Sometimes these pop culture details play on screen while others are referenced in dialogue. Such references are a hallmark of postmodern filmmaking in ‘90s, where allusions to past media are made either

directly or through pastiche, as evidenced in Chapter 4's case study of *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997). In terms of pastiche, Colin Tait points out that many of these films include what he calls "The 70s Sequence," which sets a '70s song over a slow-motion montage that pays homage to '70s New Hollywood filmmakers like Martin Scorsese—which combines '70s visuals with music video aesthetics of the '80s (2009). Justin Wyatt has noted how, in *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola leans on "visual bursts" of the Lisbon sisters throughout the movie—an aesthetic technique that incorporates brief images of the Lisbon sisters in moments of bliss, which visually borrow directly from 1970s print advertising (2018, 66). Pop culture references can also be used to directly evoke past media by showing them on screen. For example, in *Slums of Beverly Hills*, the television is almost always on, even as their surroundings constantly change. This is sometimes used for comedic effect, such as a smash cut from Vivienne using a vibrator for the first time to a rerun of children's show *H.R. Pufnstuf* (NBC, 1969). Even *The Ice Storm*, which relies less on its soundtrack than others, opens with a voiceover monologue from Paul (Tobey Maguire) about a narrative arc in 1973 Marvel comic *The Fantastic Four*. Discussing the appeal of popular culture in nostalgia waves, sociologist Fred Davis points out that mass media becomes a cultural touchstone in nostalgia cycles given the amount of people it reaches simultaneously, unlike nostalgia that is tied to more specific individual memories (1979, 130–31). Of course, cultural rather than individual associations extend to music as well, which is ever present in most of these films. It is thus no surprise that films connect youth and identity with recycled cultural imagery, which in turn provides continuity with coming-of-age nostalgia films that came before them.

However, when looking beyond the aesthetic similarities that align the late 1990s coming-of-age films with the Jameson model, their narratives depart from the innocent days of

adolescence typically found in nostalgia films. The teens in these coming-of-age films are rarely holding on to their innocence. Notably, in contrast to *Dazed and Confused*, all five of the case study films were rated R. This suggests that the films dealt with what the MPAA determined to be adult themes and could be more serious in nature, an affordance of the specialized independent film landscape of the time. But what exactly constitutes adult themes here?

When examining the MPAA ratings of the six films, a few trends emerge. Drug use is the overwhelming commonality, showing up in the ratings for every film except *Virgin Suicides*. This helps illustrate how liberalized drug use became a defining image of the seventies due to films such as these. Two other major concerns raised by the MPAA are language and sexuality, both of which appear in the ratings of the five non-*Virgin* films. In some cases, such as *Boogie Nights*, *Slums of Beverly Hills*, and *54*, the MPAA objection is to *strong* sexuality/sexual situations. In addition to concerns about drugs, sex, and language, the MPAA censorship also highlights that these films portray these elements in relation to children. *Dazed*'s rating refers to "pervasive, continuous teen drug and alcohol use" while *The Ice Storm* deals with "sexuality and drug use, including scenes involving children." Even *Virgin Suicides*, which has a rating less specific than the others, is given an R for showing "strong thematic elements involving teens," namely, suicide. The MPAA's primary concern was showing teenagers involved in mature behavior. These films thus approach adolescence with a less sanitized lens than earlier teen films, while also approaching adult elements in a more serious manner than R-rated teen sex comedies of the '80s like *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981). Moreover, in the late 1990s, filmmakers could find independent distributors that did not require them to censor their films to reach the wide PG-13 audience.

The ratings' recurring focus on sexuality in these films is indicative of a sociocultural theme that runs through all them. The 1960s and 1970s are often associated with the "sexual revolution," in which America's sexual climate changed due to decades of activism, scientific developments, and legal rulings (Levine 2007, 9). During this time, female pleasure and queer sexuality became more visible in mainstream culture, and the connotations of sex moved from reproduction to individual gratification (Levine 2007, 10). More relaxed social norms towards gender roles and sexual expression are present in these films, to varying degrees. Unlike *Dazed*, which primarily focuses on its male characters, *Virgin Suicides* and *Slums of Beverly Hills* shift the focus to teenage girls as they hit puberty. In the former, the Lisbon sisters live in a strict, socially conservative household that puts them at odds with the changing culture norms around them. Meanwhile, the latter starts the film with a bra-fitting for its 14-year-old protagonist, which sets up the character's discomfort as she reacts to her changing body and consistently clashes with her divorced father over what is the appropriate way to present herself. *The Ice Storm* examines the sexual revolution through both the adults and teenagers in the story. The teens find themselves in a confusing spot of coming to terms with their sexuality at the same that their parents are re-discovering their own sexuality through key parties and partner-swapping, making the theme of self-discovery apply to both the teens and adults. Finally, *Boogie Nights* and *54* both shift the focus from an individual level to the industries that (at least partially) emerged from the sexual liberation movement. As media studies scholar Elana Levine writes, one result of the sexual revolution was a commercialization and commodification of sex as something that could be "sought out and acquired" (2007, 10). The booming porn industry in *Boogie Nights* clearly represents these newfound attitudes, but so does the nightclub scene in *54*. The opening scenes of *Boogie Nights* depict Dirk being recruited by insistent porn producer Jack Horner (played by

‘70s star Burt Reynolds) because of his looks while, in *54*, Shane gains his initial entry into Studio 54 by removing his shirt and showing off his abs. In both cases, the young male protagonists find that their bodies are the primary form of currency in these environments and move up their social hierarchies through sexual performance.

However, just because these films tackle more adult themes does not mean that they are simply glorifying them. The coming-of-age films in independent cinema often portray their characters in moments of vulnerability that show the darker side of the changing norms and increased freedom for teenagers at the time. “While the bell-bottoms-and-disco era has spawned mostly fond recollections during the past few years, a time in which T-shirt designers capitalized on smiley faces and the movies mined The Brady Bunch for camp laughs, Hollywood is now looking back darkly,” wrote Rebecca Ascher-Walsh of *Entertainment Weekly* in 1998. She continues, “And filmmakers too young to have experienced the sex, drugs, and partying that the ’70s had to offer are both wary of and fascinated by the pre-AIDs era of experimentation and permissiveness” (Ascher-Walsh 1998). These films all examine a crisis in the domestic sphere that is simultaneous with the sexual revolution. Melissa Maerz, author of an oral history on *Dazed and Confused*, wrote of its appeal to younger audiences growing up in the ‘90s: “The ‘90s were safer, but the ‘70s were the last decade which teenagers were largely unsupervised, unscheduled, and footloose” (2020, 126).

For the filmmakers behind this wave of ‘70s coming-of-age films, many of whom grew up in that time, being unsupervised is not necessarily positive. Instead, the freedom of adolescence in the seventies is shown as isolating and a source of pain. Characters in these films come from households where only one parent is present or both work full-time and thus are often away, reflecting the “latchkey kid” label often given to members of Generation X. This

development cuts across different social classes as some films look at upper/middle-class families (*The Ice Storm, The Virgin Suicides*) while others, like *Slums of Beverly Hills,* show the impact on working-class families. Even in *54* and *Boogie Nights*, which focus less on the domestic sphere than the others, there is still an underlying notion of "found family" as Dirk and Shane both go from broken homes to places of acceptance. But even those are only temporary solutions as their utopian worlds eventually fall apart amidst addiction, violence, and industrial changes. In *Boogie Nights*, the Golden Age of Porn in the 1970s gives way to the rise of video in the 1980s, where pornography moves back into the private sphere and its stars are impacted as a result. Since *54* includes some historical figures like the club's initial owner Steve Rubell (played in the movie by Mike Myers), the film ends with the club being raided by the FBI and Rubell's arrest for skimming money from the club (and eventually a title card that notes his death in 1989 of AIDs). In its original iteration, *54* had storylines that more openly addressed the importance queer culture to Studio 54 and included Shane's open bisexuality, but clashes with Miramax head Harvey Weinstein led to those elements being cut out from the film (Biskind 2004, 321). [11]

At times, these films deal with the past not as a place to be remembered fondly, but instead a time of traumatic experience. The clearest example of this is in *The Virgin Suicides*, where all five sisters commit suicide by the end of the film. Since it is told from the perspective of their male peers, who have since all grown up and are now looking back on their youth, the film reads like a therapy session. Nicola Sayers writes that the narrator(s) of the film "have not forgotten, and cannot forget, the question of the girls' lives and deaths that consumed them as teenagers [and] the fact that they are still consumed by this question is the most defining

[11] Miramax's *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes, 1998) was released the same year and chronicles the life of a fictionalized British glam rocker from the '70s. Curiously, its bisexual and queer elements remained a part of the final cut.

characteristic of an otherwise amorphous narrator(s)" (2020, 147). Similarly, by the end of *The Ice Storm,* most of the characters seem as dissatisfied as they did at the start of the film. At the climax of the film, as the parents are away at their fishbowl party, one of the unsupervised teens goes outside during a terrible ice storm and dies from electrocution due to a fallen power line. Even in the more light-hearted films that do not end with death or tragedy, there are hints of danger in the lives of the characters. For most of its runtime, *Slums* plays like a comedy and treats Vivian's father Murray (Alan Arkin) and his old-fashioned views as idiosyncratic but ultimately rather harmless. Late in the film, however, a drunken Murray fondles his adult niece Rita (Marisa Tomei) and his daughter witnesses this through the crack of the door. This is a pivotal moment given that, throughout most of the film, Vivian has a "sort of antagonistic relationship with her breasts," in the words of director Tamara Jenkins (Gross 1998). Growing up, for Vivian, means being sexualized by grown men every time she is in public—which makes witnessing her father in that moment even more painful.

Altogether, these moments reveal a darker side of the sexual revolution that is so central to representations of American culture in the 1970s. As with Linklater's comments on nostalgia, the cast and crew of these films were skeptical that the 1970s could be looked back on fondly. "They keep saying the Seventies are coming back. They are not coming back. They could not come back. They would not be allowed in," said *Ice Storm* star Sigourney Weaver, who was born in 1949 (*The Ice Storm* Press Kit 1997, 15). The film's screenwriter James Schamus, born in 1959, explains that "all the growing pains the kids are going through in *The Ice Storm* are still with us in the young adults of the generation that grew up in the Seventies" (*The Ice Storm* Press Kit 1997, 8). The independent cinema scene of the 1990s thus allowed young creatives to reflect on the experience of growing up in a time most wanted to forget. So, when considering the

narrative themes and character journeys within the films, it is clear they are not "nostalgia films" in the traditional sense. Instead, they take Jameson's "cult of the glossy image" and interrogate the sadness embedded within memories of the past and explore the act of reflection itself, thus aligning with Hutcheon's perspective. But while independent cinema allowed for such affordances, the films were still commercial products. The following section looks at the marketing of these films that branded the cinematic seventies by leaning into their aesthetic pastness while, in some cases, also explicitly calling attention to the relation between past and present.

Selling and Celebrating the Seventies in Coming-of-Age Trailers

In the fall of 1993, the marketing of *Dazed and Confused* made headlines in industry trades when its advertising campaign clashed with the Motion Picture Association of America. Specifically, the MPAA rejected two lines, "Finally! A movie for everyone who DID inhale" and "the generation that fell between LSD and REM," because of their references to drugs and drug paraphernalia.[12] The film's distributor, Gramercy Pictures, objected to the MPAA's reasoning, telling the *Los Angeles Times*: "It's one thing in a G-rated trailer to show people talking about cocaine [and] this is an R-rated adult movie in spirit of people having fun" (Eller 1993). The marketing of the film eventually relied on not-so-subtle puns to circumvent the MPAA's restrictions, as exemplified by the tagline "See it with a bud." Even still, this conflict set the stage for the complicated terrain that independent studios and filmmakers had to traverse in marketing their darker films set in the '70s. How do you properly convey to audiences the message of your film when its advertising is held to different standards than the content of the films? "All we're trying to do is depict the times," said Gramercy president Russell Schwartz on

[12] The first line is in reference to President Bill Clinton's 1992 speech in which he claimed he tried marijuana but did not inhale.

their approach, which is in some ways prophetic of what was to come in the rest of the decade (Eller 1993). This section discusses how the marketing behind the independent coming-of-age films narrativize the past by highlighting what made the 1970s distinct from the 1990s while also undercutting some of the darker themes in the movies themselves. The analysis focuses on the theatrical trailers for *Boogie Nights*, *Dazed and Confused*, and *The Ice Storm* and examines the marketing for *The Virgin Suicides* as an exception that proves the rule.

Examining the marketing of a film as an extra-textual phenomenon can help reveal its place within the entertainment marketplace as it becomes a product to be sold. Lisa Kernan, a leading scholar of movie trailers, notes that studying trailers can give a glimpse into who Hollywood imagines its audience to be and how viewers can be targeted (2004, 3). Kernan also argues that trailers offer audiences comforting spaces where they wish to be (13). In that way, it is only appropriate that the marketing behind these coming-of-age films would exploit nostalgia for seventies imagery in multiple ways. Not only do the trailers attempt to make viewers want to be transported into the world of the film but, since these films are all set in the past, the trailers also advertise the past as a time to be longed for—despite the films themselves rarely long for a return to the past. This advertising tactic serves the multi-faceted purpose of targeting any adults who are nostalgic for a time in which they grew up while also offering younger viewers a chance to live in a time they've never experienced. This approach shows the capitalistic benefit of the glossy imagery that these films typically have, as distributors can be package the fashion, music, and more together into a readymade product. For films set in the past, advertising choices distill the past into a handful of central ideas, images, and sounds to provide a general feeling of the time. In the trailers for the late 1990s coming-of-age films, there is less of an emphasis on the plot as there is on the pastness of the films' subjects. The trailers are essentially trying to "depict

the times," to quote Schwartz. In the trailers, there are two main aesthetic tools used to convey this, which often work together: music and narration (both voiceover and inter-titles).

Given the central role of soundtracks in the coming-of-age genre, it is no surprise that music is integral to the marketing campaigns. Popular music is often central to the identity of the young characters on display in the coming-of-age films. Moreover, the songs in the trailers are sold as commodities. As much as they are advertisements for the films, trailers simultaneously act as a promotional tool for ancillary materials like soundtracks. That is especially the case for these films, which utilize multiple music cues in a short time frame. The trailers for *54, Boogie Nights,* and *Slums of Beverly Hills,* for example, each use three music different music cues within the span of two to three minutes. The rapid succession of songs not only gives the trailers a kinetic energy, it also evokes films like *American Graffiti*, where nearly every scene has a song. The trailers' short-form format also reflects the aesthetic of 1990s music videos. By shuffling between tracks, the trailers emphasize the transporting experience of listening to a jukebox or radio of the time.

Outside of *Dazed and Confused*, which heavily relies on rock music of the '70s, the most common musical genres in these trailers are funk and disco. The upbeat nature of both music genres, along with shots of dancing scenes, help to aesthetically represent the themes of liberation and self-expression in the '70s. As Mayshark observes about the *Boogie Nights* soundtrack: *"*The songs are a well-curated assortment that progresses from 1970s good-time funk into 1980s electro-rock" (2007, 79). By marketing these films with disco music, the seventies are thus often presented with a "good time" feel. It is worth pointing out that most of the artists whose work is played in these trailers are African American, despite the films themselves largely lacking actors of color in prominent roles.

In some cases, the music feels like the central driving force of the story being told within the trailer's short run time. This is particularly true for *Boogie Nights,* where the music is diegetically changed in the trailer's editing. After the opening narration in the first 45 seconds sets up the film's general premise, the music abruptly ends as the camera shows a tape stopping, followed by Buck Swope (Don Cheadle) putting in an 8-track into a music system, indicating the start of the trailer's second stage. By putting the soundtrack at the front of the viewer's mind, these trailers reveal synergistic possibilities for films set in the past, even if they are not based on any pre-existing intellectual property. At the end of the *Boogie Nights* trailer, a title card reads "Soundtrack Featuring: ELO, The Emotions, Marvin Gaye, Melanie, Night Ranger" with a Capitol Records logo, just before the final "Coming Soon." Similarly, the final shot of the *54* trailer reads "*54* Soundtrack Vol. 1 & 2 Available on Tommy Boy Music" before listing a few artists included.

While music is often the trailers' focus, narration and intertitles are also important. Kernan argues that narration and graphics "serve to distance viewers from ordinary spectatorial involvement with the scenes presented and remind them of the film's status as a package" (2004, 33). Therefore, narration and graphics are often extra-textual elements that form the bridge between the texts themselves and their advertising as branded entertainment. This is largely a departure from the way music is used, as the songs are often in the films and thus provide continuity between film and trailer. Ad copy is used to package a film's narrative into a short time frame and summarize it for audiences in an easy-to-digest way. In the films from this chapter, the distributors primarily use these elements to summarize and narrate the past to its audience. In other words, for these films set in the 1970s, how can "the seventies" be effectively conveyed in a quick and efficient manner? The trailers are distinct from the films themselves

because explicitly acknowledge audiences of the present and thus the act of looking back. While lines like "the 70s obviously suck, maybe the 80s will be totally radical" can play with a winking irony within a film, the ad copy for these films highlight the films' connection to present concerns and emphasize how American culture has changed over the last few decades.

The first theatrical trailer for *The Ice Storm* reveals that appeal to the present. The trailer lacks the overabundant soundtrack of popular music so prevalent in the others. This is in part due to the movie's design, which is anchored by Mychael Danna's score. However, the trailer strikes a tone that feels disconnected from the film and instead focuses on explaining the seventies. The trailer begins with an instrumental harp score that establishes a light-hearted, almost whimsical mood, a tone that the film never approaches. A pleasant-sounding narrator says, "Once there was a time when families were stranger…Neighbors were lovers…And America was learning the truth. It was 1973 and the climate was changing." These words accompany images that have an ironic link to those themes, as when the image of Richard Nixon on the television coincides with line about truth. The trailer's imagery also evokes the type of kitsch aesthetic imagery crucial to '70s nostalgia, such as Kevin Kline's character trying out a waterbed for the first time.

In *Dazed and Confused*, the film's early marketing is also about looking back at the seventies through the lens of the present. It accomplishes this through the ad copy and the scenes from the film that it chooses to show, such as the "every other decade" line. However, unlike the way that *The Ice Storm* attempts to define what was happening in American culture in 1973, the *Dazed and Confused* marketing focuses on what came *after* 1976: "Before MTV, Before Safe Sex, and Way Before Beavis & Butthead," the trailer's inter-titles read. Despite there only being seventeen years between when the story's setting and the film's release, the seventies were packaged as a time distinctly different from America in the 1990s. Additional marketing

materials for the film, such as its theatrical poster, lean heavily into the marijuana puns despite drug use never being strongly emphasized in the movie itself. The film's trailer also includes a shot of a hot-rod car from the '50s, which certainly feels like a direct nod to the coming-of-age nostalgia film that critics found it most indebted to (*American Graffiti*). In drawing connections with *American Graffiti* and pop nostalgia more generally, the marketing directly contradicts some of the interviews that director Richard Linklater was giving around the time of release, in which he is wary of the cultural proclivity to remember the past through the fads, fashion, and kitschy elements of a decade. Recent accounts of the film's production have detailed the clashes Linklater had with Gramercy over the marketing of the film. Interviews with the label's head Schwartz and director of creative marketing Samantha Hart reveal that Gramercy intentionally leaned into the drug angle in the film's marketing to Linklater's chagrin. "There was no real story. It was difficult to market, because had no stars. It wasn't really a genre film. It was art-house leaning, but the subject matter was very non-art-house. So, finally we just, 'screw it, we're going the pot route,'" Schwartz recalled (Maerz 2020, 318). The distributor's clash with the MPAA, which Schwartz claimed reflected the film's "rebel spirit," was also a commercial move; in his view, "when the marketing or advertising is banned for a movie, it sometimes helped" (Maerz 2020, 319). Despite Linklater's objections, his film about the high school experience was marketed to an audience of stoners and its themes narrowed down to smoking puns and a smiley face symbol.

The marketing for *Boogie Nights* shares similarities with these campaigns. The film is a tale of the 1970s and the 1980s, with the latter portrayed as the "bad times" of the story, perhaps because the '80s were too recent to experience as nostalgia in popular media. "It was a time when disco was king, sex was safe, pleasure was a business, and business was booming," the

voiceover narrator says, referring to 1977, the year the story begins. The voiceover also establishes the classic American Dream narrative in which "a kid from nowhere had a dream of getting somewhere." (What makes this film unique, of course, is that the path to that dream is through the adult film industry.) The trailer contrasts the hopeful seventies with the eighties portion of the film. "But in 1980, the party was over," the narrator says as the trailer takes a darker turn. The trailer's final tagline summarizes the film as "a portrait of two decades in the life of a business, the days of a dreamer, and the Nights in between." Thus, the marketing of the film positions it as being about vague concepts of "the seventies" and "the eighties."

That focus on branding the past also extends to the film's promotional website.[13] The homepage is adorned with a wood-panel background, a pattern that evokes a common interior design aesthetic of the '70s. Unsurprisingly, many of the website's links serve synergistic benefits for New Line; the top banner directs the user to buy "Boogie Nights gear" in New Line's online store while the bottom of the page has links to both the store and the film's soundtrack. Notably absent on the homepage is any mention of sex or pornography, although a "Performers" page provides fake biographies for the characters in the film. The homepage does, however, have links to pages about "the 70s" and "the 80s." Like the narration in the trailers, these pages highlight how adult film was "innocent" in the 1970s and lost a sense of purity in the 1980s. In addition to the background wallpaper and design of the film's logo, aesthetic markers of the past are also emphasized on these decade-specific pages as they provide a glimpse into the style that supposedly inspired the film's production team. The site's "Production" page similarly summarizes the past through its fashion, stating that the film "captures an authentic snapshot of

[13] Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are from December 1998, pulled from the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (hence why some image links are now broken).

Los Angeles during the late 1970s and early 1980s—an era when disco and drugs were in vogue, fashion was in flux and the party never seemed to stop."

Figure 3.1 - www.boogie-nights.com, December 12, 1998

Figure 3.2 - *Boogie Nights* '70s Style

Like Linklater's frustrations with the marketing of *Dazed and Confused*, *Boogie Nights* director Paul Thomas Anderson has also spoken out against the way the film was marketed

through a nostalgic lens. A conversation on the film's commentary track between Anderson and then-girlfriend Fiona Apple reveals a distance between the film as art and as a product to be sold. "This is this movie that I came up with when I was seventeen years old, when the last thing you ever wanted to be wearing was a flared shirt or flared pants or anything like that. It was the story that dictated the time. It wasn't like I wanted to make a movie with a hot soundtrack and the whole thing," Anderson says (Anderson and Apple 2021). Apple adds, "It's a coincidence. It's just getting played up by the people in marketing. They go 'well that movie's doing well, and it is set in the seventies. This movie is [also] set in the seventies and it's got good potential, so let's market it like 'Seventies, seventies, the movie's about the seventies.' And then people think 'oh yeah, seventies movies are the trend'" (Anderson and Apple 2021). Essentially, if a late-90s film was set in the 1970s, nostalgia was market-tested way of advertising it to audiences young and old. Despite being independent distributors that allowed the films to be released in less censored forms, aiming for commercial success, they positioned the reflective, sometimes dark coming-of-age stories as easily accessible movies *about* the seventies and the cinematic experience of going back to a time before.

The Virgin Suicides, the last of these coming-of-age films to be released in the '90s, took a different approach to its marketing towards audiences. The film's framing narrative made it more explicitly about remembering than its 1990s counterparts, which diegetically never leave the past. The film's narrative approach connects to Paramount Classics marketing, which does not employ techniques found in the advertising of the other coming-of-age films. While the pop music soundtrack is a major marker of the coming-of-age nostalgia film, like *The Ice Storm*, *Virgin Suicides* largely refrains from this by using a commissioned score from French electronic duo Air. The film itself uses songs from the 1970s at select times, but they are rarely used

wistfully. At multiple points, the film has a music cue of a popular song, which Coppola then ends abruptly, creating a jarring effect that Wyatt likens to the "aural equivalent of a jump cut" (2018 53). In the trailers, there are no '70s music cues, and instead the Air score conveys a feeling of mystery. Echoing the film's use of Fatboy Slim's "Right Here, Right Now," a hit in the summer of 1999, the trailer has a more contemporary feel than the ones that promote their films' 1970s soundtracks. The use of out-of-time music would later appear in other Coppola films, such as *Marie Antoinette* (2006) having a New Wave soundtrack for a film set in the

For the *Virgin Suicides* trailer, the narration and inter-titles also remain mysterious rather than leaning into the pastness of the story. "There are times when mystery and beauty find you, touch you, haunt you. Moments you never forget. Questions you never answer," the trailer reads. Rather than summarizing cultural changes between the past and the present, the *Virgin Suicides* marketing addresses *you*. Even though the film portrays adolescence as a time from which the characters want to escape, viewers in the 1990s and the years since have responded to the film nostalgically in a way that yearns for their teenage years and, for some, being a teenager in the '70s (Sayers 2020, 131). This reveals the odd dynamic at play when examining films of this type, particularly when it comes to a film's reception. As Coppola had done and Linklater attempted to do before her, filmmakers can portray the past with cynicism, but the very nature of it being an escape from the present means that some viewers will nonetheless attach to its themes wistfully. This tendency reveals the many commercial benefits of making these types of movies, since audiences will resonate with the text and even buy the ancillary materials that come with it.

Conclusion

While the '70s-set coming-of-age films of the '90s may be identified as part of the second major wave of nostalgia films after '50s nostalgia twenty years prior, they clearly mark a

variation of the form. Young filmmakers capitalized on the thematic potential of independent cinema, where films with smaller budgets could portray the sadder undertones of their youth. Yet because the films were set in the ‘70s, they could be grouped together and marketed with a distinct brand identity of “the seventies” through simplified aesthetic markers of a time before. The marketing strategy suggests how waves of popular nostalgia in the entertainment industry are, at least in part, manufactured by commercial entities that have something to gain from making the past into a marketable brand. The following two chapters examine how ‘90s Hollywood seized on ‘70s nostalgia in different yet still synergistic ways. Rather than simply setting movies in the past and selling their soundtracks, the studio conglomerates and independents alike recycled the seventies by using intellectual property and stars. While marketing “nostalgia films” is one of the most visible representations of revisiting the past, cultural recycling spread in synergistic ways to become a defining feature of the entertainment industry at the end of the century.

CHAPTER 4. RERUNS AND REUNIONS: BRINGING BACK *THE BRADY BUNCH* IN THE AGE OF SYNERGY

"It's more than a show, Eileen. It's a way of life." Or so says the protagonist of 1988 NBC sitcom *Day by Day,* in reference to the television series *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–1974). The "Very Brady Episode" of *Day by Day* featured Ross Harper (Christopher Daniel Barnes) being magically transported into an episode of *The Brady Bunch,* with a majority of the show's original cast returning to play their roles. Throughout the episode, Ross's parents and friends criticize him for not having outgrown his Brady Bunch obsession—a show he grew up on through reruns over the years. But the ironic twist throughout the episode is that, even if Ross's family believe the Brady Bunch is silly or annoying, they still know the lyrics to the theme song. For these characters, the Bradys are inescapable whether they like it or not. Airing in February 1988, "A Very Brady Episode" feels strangely prophetic of the "Bradymania" that would permeate in the 1990s. For some, it may have been a way of life and for others, a fun little punching bag. As for Viacom, the media conglomerate who owned the rights to the Brady IP, there was value in both as long as there was money to be made. For the multinational corporations running Hollywood in the 1990s, their collection of media channels provided a multi-layered platform to revive their back catalogs of intellectual property. This chapter details how Paramount and their parent company Viacom capitalized on the rerun boom, postmodern irony, and '70s nostalgia to bring back the Bradys in a variety of ways.

Reruns on TV, Reruns at the Movies

Before examining the Brady Bunch as a case study, it is important to first establish why IP based on older television shows was so valuable in the 1990s. While the television medium had been a part of American culture for fifty years at that point, the entertainment landscape of the 1990s solidified television *history* as a part of American culture. Chief among the reasons

behind this was the expansion of outlets on television itself and the syndication of older shows on those new outlets. As the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in 1989, "[T]he explosion of new channels in the 1980s meant a need for programs to fill them. Many of the programs were movies and TV shows of the past, providing an instant sweep of U.S. social history never before available on the tube in such detail" (Du Brow). With a prolific portfolio of cable channels and television libraries, Viacom was at the forefront of this celebration of television history. In the mid-80s, Nickelodeon (the conglomerate's premiere children's channel) branded its nighttime block as "Nick at Nite." Nick at Nite adapted the popular "Golden Oldies" radio format to television, devoting its late-night hours to showing reruns of shows from television's Golden Age such as *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS/ABC, 1957–1963) and *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958–1966). Nick at Nite's programming strategy proved a success and would eventually spin off into its own network as TV Land in 1996. Media studies scholar Derek Kompare has labeled these channels "television boutiques" as they did not just use reruns to fill time—they were cable shrines to America's television heritage (2006, 181). While Nick at Nite's initial programming strategy targeted older baby boomers, the nineties brought a gradual shifted to accommodate "younger" adult audiences by expanding its portfolio to include shows from the late 60s and 70s such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Happy Days,* and yes, *The Brady Bunch* (Cross 2015, 135). That continuously evolving strategy would essentially set the stage for the nostalgia TV format in the years since; as each subsequent generation comes of age, a new selection of older media becomes valuable for its nostalgic appeal.

However, marketing materials make it clear that the intended audience of nostalgia networks was not limited to the people who watched the shows when they originally aired. "Early on, Nick at Nite recognized the possibilities of branding its reruns as nostalgia for older

audiences and as camp to reach younger viewers who might find the ancient shows amusingly corny," writes historian Gary Cross (2015, 134). An ad campaign for TV Land in 1999 exemplified this very strategy with the tagline "Times Change. Great TV Doesn't." In the network's print ads, seemingly wholesome characters like Wally and Theodore Cleaver from *Leave It to Beaver* received modernized updates with tattoos, piercings, and 90s-appropriate slang. A subway poster featured Andy Griffith's smiling face alongside the quote "Aunt Bee, that thong fits you right nice." These advertisements accentuate a culture clash between the utopian worlds of Golden Age TV and a drastically different society in the 1990s. They also show the willingness of a company such as Viacom to poke fun at itself if only to provide more publicity. As Kompare writes, "the gap between now and then is humorously amplified in these short bits of television, which have reveled in the constructions of the past, the present, and our modes of understanding the differences between them" (2006, 183).

The humorous gap between present-day realities of the 1990s and the fantasies of Golden Age sitcom would go beyond just reruns on TV Land. Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998) explores that clashing dynamic as the film featured modern-day teenage siblings (played by future stars Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon) who are transported into the ho-hum world of a 1950s sitcom. Maguire's character of David is reminiscent of Ross Harper from *Day by Day*—a Gen Xer who has grown up on reruns and prides himself in his encyclopedic knowledge of the show. His sister Jennifer, meanwhile, is defined by her jadedness and thus is meant to represent the cynical nature of nineties teen culture. Over the course of the film, David realizes that seemingly perfect world of Pleasantville provides less a window into the real 1950s as it does a whitewashed repressive vision constructed by the tight censorship of fifties television.

The irony and contradictions of old school reruns that were popular in the nineties would similarly form the basis of Betty Thomas's *The Brady Bunch Movie* in 1995.

Syndication was not the only avenue through which older television IP was revived in the 1990s. Repackaging decades-old television properties into new feature films became a popular trend for the media conglomerates throughout the decade. Given the popularity of reruns, some of these brands were the more relevant than they had been in decades. While hosting reunion shows or reviving the show with the same cast were still options, the theatrical film market became an appealing avenue to expand the brand's reach. If the company also owned the syndication rights to the IP, that was even better, as a successful theatrical film could drive up interest in the show's reruns and thus make a more valuable brand. One of the major decisions that the creative teams behind these films had to make was whether to update the stories for the 1990s. Some, such as *Maverick* (Richard Donner, 1994) and the live-action *Flintstones* (Brian Levant, 1994), maintained the original settings of the source material while others like *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis, 1993) merely transplanted the characters and basic structure of the story into a present-day context. A unifying factor between these three films is that they were all successful at the box office-signifying a new potential revenue stream for the owners of the properties. The TV adaptation business would wax and wane in popularity over the next decade; for every *Fugitive* there was a *McHale's Navy* (Bryan Spicer, 1997), which grossed a paltry $4 million against its $42 million budget.

Paramount was one of the most active studios to produce these TV-film crossovers in the 1990s. Industry trades at the time believed this TV adaptation strategy to be a direct result of the hiring of Brandon Tartikoff as Paramount CEO in 1991 (Frook 1993). Tartikoff had come from the world of television, having been the president of NBC from 1981 to 1991, overseeing a

plethora of primetime hits, and the first films under Tartikoff's Paramount tenure were of the TV-based variety. The studio had already learned full well the value of reviving brands in this cross-media manner after *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise, 1979) capitalized on renewed interest in the TV franchise and led to a new Star Trek movie every few years during the entire 1980s and 1990s. In 1996, Paramount would find similar success with *Mission: Impossible* (Brian De Palma), which spawned a franchise that has continued nearly for three decades.

For the Brady Bunch, though, it was most likely the success of *The Addams Family* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) and *Addams Family Values* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1993) that laid the groundwork for what would become *The Brady Bunch Movie*. Dating back to the original *New Yorker* comic strip and 1960s television show, the Addams Family had long been a property that reveled in the culture clash between a macabre 19th-century family and wholesome mid-20th century America. The two movies from Sonnenfeld updated the TV show's formula to place the family in the 1990s, which creates a different fish-out-of-water dynamic than the original show. Rita Kempley of the *Washington Post* writes "since nothing really bothers the Addamses, except normalcy, the writers are at their funniest when pitting the characters against straight society" (1991). Thus, in the 1990s, the Addamses were less representatives of Victorian-era culture than they were a secular counterpoint to the opponents of multiculturalism that were detailed in chapter two. *The Addams Family* was a massive hit for Paramount in the winter of 1991, grossing $191m worldwide on a budget of $30m. It spawned a sequel, an animated series, and opened the door for more '60s and '70s sitcoms to be updated for modern times—chief among them *The Brady Bunch.*

The Brady Bunch and Bradymania

Unlike the Addams Family, the Brady Bunch's creators never intended the show to be a fish-out-of-water tale. In fact, upon their debut in 1969, the Bradys represented a modernized break from the traditional nuclear structure of family sitcoms in some ways. *The Brady Bunch* was based on the central premise of a blended family, consisting of a widower father and his three sons and a single mother and her three daughters. In interviews, show creator Sherwood Schwartz has often claimed that the show was a direct response to the lack of blended families on screen despite nearly thirty percent of American families being blended in 1965 (Pugh 2018, 51). The fashion, phrases, and can-do attitude of the characters were also intended to represent some of the most current trends in dominant American culture of the early '70s. Twenty-five years later, though, those attributes now made them feel like time capsules of a very different time.

Oddly enough, the Bradys were nearly as relevant in the mid-90s as they were when the show originally aired. Media scholars have often pointed to *The Brady Bunch* as a classic example of a show that reaped the benefits of syndication. Despite never a big hit during its original run on ABC, reruns of the show's 117 episodes entered near-constant rotation in the late afternoon rerun slot from the mid-70s onward. The resurgence in popularity puts the show in similar company to *Leave It to Beaver,* itself a white-bread sitcom that was never a top-ratings draw but became a syndication juggernaut for decades to come.[14] In 1986, *Brady Bunch* reruns were the top-rated show on cable superstation TBS (Marinucci 2005, 509). However, reruns were just one component of what would come to be called Bradymania.

[14] The show also got its own theatrical remake in the '90s. *Leave It To Beaver* (Andy Cadiff, 1997) was a flop with critics and audiences alike.

For a sitcom with a relatively simple premise and subpar ratings, the Brady Bunch brand was revisited an inordinate amount of times following the show's syndication success. Paramount Television was the owner of the Brady IP and so Viacom stood to benefit from any new iterations no matter the network. Just two years after the show's cancellation, *The Brady Bunch Hour* aired on ABC and acted as a strange combination of a sequel series (everyone is still in character) and a variety show with sketches, musical numbers, and so on. A few years later in 1981, NBC put *The Brady Girls Get Married* in development as a TV movie but, in a last-minute decision, broke the film up into smaller episodes and expanded it into a TV show called *The Brady Brides*. In 1988 (the same year as the *Day by Day* Brady episode), the Bradys finally came to CBS with a holiday-themed reunion titled *A Very Brady Christmas*.[15] The special was one of the highest rated television films of the year, which led to CBS green-lighting one last series revival, *The Bradys* (which ran for one season in 1990). Altogether, the Brady IP accomplished the rare feat of appearing on all three major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) at some point in time (Edelstein & Lovece 1990, 20). When considering this fact in conjunction with their mainstay status on syndication, the Brady Bunch were improbably becoming one of television's iconic properties.

By 1992, however, any reunions or revivals would take on a different tone following the death of Brady patriarch Robert Reed in May of that year. Reed's death is likely one reason that producer Schwartz pivoted to the theatrical market, where the entire family could be recast, and the characters could return to being a youthful, blended family (instead of the adults that the aging actors had become). By that point, the Brady Bunch brand had already been expanding

[15] Viacom was originally CBS's broadcast syndication division and was spun off into its own company in 1971 before eventually growing large enough to purchase both Paramount and CBS itself.

into areas beyond television. Music compilation albums, cookbooks, and trivia books all hit store shelves in the early '90s. *Entertainment Weekly* observed this trend in 1992:

> Say you're a Martian doing some research on that beloved Earthling series *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–1974). In 1992 you could have 1) read *Growing Up Brady: I Was a Teenage Greg*, by Barry Williams; 2) mourned the death of Brady dad Robert Reed; 3) applauded *The Real Live Brady Bunch*, a stage version of original episodes; 4) giggled at Melanie Hutsell as Jan Brady on *Saturday Night Live*; 5) decided to stick around the planet long enough to see *The Brady Bunch Movie*, now in development at Paramount. Talk about unsolved mysteries.

That article came on the heels of the success of *The Real Live Brady Bunch,* a tongue-in-cheek stage production of Brady Bunch episodes that became a cult hit in the early 1990s. When the Paramount legal department learned of the play, it was reportedly ready to shut it down until Sherwood went to see the performance and recognized the appeal (Willman 1992). "It was poking fun at the early '70s—the kind of costuming, the colors people wore, the hairstyles—and the dialogue was direct from the show, so it was like a gentle spoof of the life and times of the Bradys," he told the *Los Angeles Times* (1992). Paramount's initial combative response and the subsequent acceptance from Schwartz is indicative of the company's changing stance towards the IP in the '90s; if people wanted to make fun of the Brady Bunch or point out how outdated it was, Paramount could produce that parody in-house and profit from it.

Bradys on the Big Screen: *The Brady Bunch Movie*

The TV-to-film trend provided a timely opportunity to update *The Brady Bunch.* "Some of the most successful movies or series of movies at Paramount have been based on television series. We're hoping that 'The Brady Bunch Movie' will be part of that tradition," executive producer David Kirkpatrick told *The Hollywood Reporter* ("The Saga Continues" 1992, 54). It is safe to assume that Sherwood's experience of seeing *The Real Live Brady Bunch* was a catalyst for the development of *The Brady Bunch Movie,* which Schwartz initially wrote with his son

Lloyd. Sherwood would later describe his initial draft as "an affectionate satire" of the original show (Goodman and Tomashoff 1994). Schwartz would later complain about subsequent drafts that he viewed as "trashing the Bradys" (Goodman and Tomashoff 1994). The second version of the script pushed heavier into the stark contrast between the overly saccharine world of *The Brady Bunch* and the cultural climate of the mid-90s. Husband-and-wife writing duo Bonnie and Terry Turner would eventually touch up the film's final script and subsequently create another seventies love-fest in *That '70s Show* (Fox, 1998–2006). Ultimately, the result of this development process is a film that combines both elements—affectionate satire and biting spoof. Through each step of the development process, the Schwartzes stayed on as producers, meaning the film always had the blessing of the original creator. But that also meant that there were likely some limitations on how much could be lampooned. As much as the film could laugh at the Bradys for their outdated ways, there also had to be jokes directed at nineties culture so that the viewer could laugh *with* the Bradys. For Paramount, it would not make sense to alienate a devoted fanbase and devalue a property that was working well for them in syndication. At the same time, if you are attracting a new (younger) audience who watches to make fun of the old product, then Paramount would still stand to benefit financially as it is still money in the studio's pockets.

Appropriately, given the IP's television origins, Paramount assembled a cast and crew filled with TV veterans. It was the second feature film for director Betty Thomas, who got her start as a television actress on shows such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) before transitioning into directing television and eventually movies. The film's adult stars included Shelley Long, Gary Cole, Michael McKean, and Jean Smart, all of whom had built careers in television in the 1970s and 1980s. Long and Cole play Carol and Mike Brady respectively, two

single parents of three who unite their families together. Carol has three daughters: Marcia (Christine Taylor), Jan (Jennifer Elise Cox), and Cindy (Olivia Hack). Mike, on the other hand, has three sons: Greg (Christopher Daniel Barnes),[16] Peter (Paul Sutera), and Bobby (Jesse Lee Soffer). McKean and Smart play a married couple who are slimy real estate developers trying to push the Bradys out of their neighborhood.

The film's press kit lays out the central joke of the premise: "The setting of the film is the Los Angeles suburbs, 1995: a community beset by economic adversity, a crime rate spiraling out of control and the challenges of the information superhighway. In the midst of it all, the Brady family live a chaotically idyllic existence where '70s values reign and the astro-turf is always green" (1995, 1). Viacom's media channels placed them in a perfect spot to capitalize on Bradymania and promote the film through corporate synergy. Television was the logical first step for promotion given the show's popularity in syndication. As *Newsweek* noted at the time, "Paramount's 'Brady' movie was heavily promoted on Nick at Nite, the classic-TV cable service owned by Viacom, Inc., the media monster that also owns Paramount, whose TV division syndicates reruns of the original series around the country—and the globe" (Chang and Marin 1995). Nick at Nite also produced a Ken Burns-esque mockumentary about the family titled *Brady: An American Chronicle*, which even had fake historians calling the show "a beacon of unity after the dark divisiveness of the '60s" (Chang and Marin 1995). A few months after the film's release, Viacom's sister company CBS aired *Brady Bunch Home Movies*, a primetime special that featured behind-the-scenes Super 8 footage from the set of the original show. To reach younger audiences, Viacom also used the internet to promote the film with an interactive site that let users morph Greg from a nerdy teen to the big-man-on-campus he becomes by the

[16] Barnes also starred as Ross Harper in Day by Day, including the Brady episode mentioned earlier.

end of the show's run (Chang and Marin 1995). For *A Very Brady Sequel* (Arlene Sanford, 1996), Viacom would set up an entire promotional website that included tacky desktop wallpapers and personalized diary entries from the Brady teens. For a family seemingly stuck in the early seventies, the Bradys as a brand was adapted to the new media landscape.

The filmmakers behind *The Brady Bunch Movie* utilized the seventies-ness of the Brady IP to satirize the changing nature of American society at the end of the 20th century. The film opens with a glimpse at Los Angeles in the mid-90s: traffic jams, trash littering the streets, people isolated by their technology, and riot warnings. Immediately, the film is setting up a hyperbolic image of the present that clashes with the Brady aesthetic but also feels reactionary to some of the multicultural changes in American culture. The first look at the Brady house establishes such. The film's color palette becomes over-saturated as the exterior looks seemingly unchanged from the opening of every episode of the original show. Here is how the screenplay describes that scene: "There is an aura of peace and tranquility that envelops it. Even though smog hovers above the rest of the neighborhood, a clear blue sky hangs above the Brady abode. Birds chirp happily in the immaculate yard. This is the house we all remember. It looks exactly as it did in the 70's" (Elehwany & Copp 1993, 2). This opening image sets the stage for the comedy that would follow as the filmmakers look at both the '70s and the '90s through an exaggerated lens. Just as the '90s weren't all riots and smog as the opening suggests, neither were the '70s purely a time of bell-bottoms and families who talked out their issues like *The Brady Bunch* may suggest.

In an early draft of the film's screenplay, writers Laurice Elehwany and Rick Copp lean into exaggeration when describing the sets and costumes for the film. "The obnoxious orange-colored kitchen with hideously mismatched brown cupboards that was the scene of many classic

Brady family moments," is how they introduce the home (1993, 2). On the Brady outfits: "The kids wear their usual fashion disasters—bell bottoms, polyester print shirts, mini-skirts, white go-go boots, knee socks, platform shoes … too loud to describe" (1993, 6). Gary Cole, who played Mike Brady in the film, echoed this sentiment and said the film's costume design provided "an opportunity to look back on fashion 20 years ago and say, 'let's hope that never happens again'" (*The Brady Bunch Movie* Press Kit 1995, 9). These colorful, dated fashion statements act as a distinct contrast to the dark, muted look of the modern-day teens. "Next to the blissed-out Bradys, the movie's '90s characters seem terminally jaded," notes *Newsweek* in their review of the film (Chang and Marin 1995). Set and costume design are two of many ways that the film uses its production design to convey the cynicism of the '90s (as exemplified in the coming-of-age films of the time) versus the perceived optimism of the Bradys. In the 1990s context, the Bradys were a metaphor for different mainstream American culture had become in the short span of twenty years. For example, the film ends with a performance of the happy-go-lucky Brady Bunch songs that feel like a far cry from the hip-hop and grunge that was popular in the early nineties.

The film positions the Bradys as completely oblivious to the world around them. When eldest son Greg Brady (played by Christopher Daniel Barnes, who played Ross on *Day by Day*) arrives at school, he tries to act cool in front of his crush, but she is creeped out when he tells her things like "you are really happening in a far out way." Things go down quite differently for his sister Marcia (played by Christine Taylor, who played the same role in the *Real Live Brady Bunch*). Marcia strides through the halls practically glowing, unaffected completely by the doom and gloom society established in the film's opening minutes. While this does earn her disdain from most of her female peers, the film immediately establishes that the boys in her grade are

attracted to her aura. Doug Simpson (Shane Conrad), looking like every male teen idol from the '90s, comments, "God, she drives me crazy. I gotta have that." But it is not just the boys who feel this way. Marcia's best friend Noreen (Alanna Ubach) also harbors a not-so-secret crush on her, although this is played for laughs as Marcia seems completely unaware that same-sex romantic feelings are even a thing. That subplot is reminiscent of a similar direction that *Pleasantville* would take a few years later, where the worldview of the characters inside the TV world is seemingly limited to what TV censors allowed in the 1950s. Here, the Bradys represent a version of the world that turns a blind eye to anything deemed remotely controversial. One scene especially highlights the odd rules of TV censorship when a neighbor (played by sitcom veteran James Avery) comments that he visited the Brady house and was creeped out by them not having a toilet—an inside joke about how toilets were often excluded from being shown on-screen on television sets due to censorship.

One of the film's main sources of humor is through highlighting the limitations of network television censorship and the main way it does this is through the sex lives of its seemingly wholesome characters. As explored in chapter three, changing gender roles and the sexual revolution have often become a reference point for coming-of-age films set during the 1970s, and yet the original *Brady Bunch* could hardly hint at those cultural trends at the time. *The Brady Bunch Movie* exploits the irony of this contradiction to the highest degree, as evidenced by the film receiving a PG-13 by the MPAA for racy innuendos. Outside of the two youngest Bradys, the individual plot lines for nearly every character involve sex in some way. Greg is constantly trying to impress the girl in his class by using outdated techniques that would've made him cool back in 1972. Marcia's male classmates interpret her glowing innocence as a virginal quality that is waiting to be corrupted by modern '90s sensibilities. "I live

next door to her and she's harder to get into than a Pearl Jam concert," says one of the boys. Jan (Jennifer Elise Cox), meanwhile, is jealous of her older sister and so is constantly trying to find ways to make herself more attractive.[17] Peter (Paul Sutera) struggles with puberty and the challenges it brings, most notably his changing voice that repeatedly squeaks. And then there are the parents Mike and Carol, which is where the film has its most fun with its parody of seventies TV conventions. At one point, after a successful workday for Mike, Carol sits on his lap and they begin passionately kissing. The kids come trotting down the stairs one-by-one, blissfully unaware of what their parents are doing as Mike and Carol hurry to separate themselves and fix their hair. That dynamic repeats in a scene later where they are in bed and are interrupted by Cindy. In these scenes, the film is fully leaning into the odd nature of sitcom parents of early television. Mike and Carol are a seemingly happy couple who each have three kids and yet it cannot even be implied that they have a sex or a sexual attraction to one another.

To what extent are scenes such as those making fun of the purported innocence of the Brady Bunch? Cast interviews take on a near-defensive tone, adamant that the intent of the film was not to poke fun of the characters. Marcia actress Christine Taylor says, "this film is laughing with the Bradys, not at them. They haven't let society change them at all. You have to respect them for that. It's their way—the Brady way" (*The Brady Bunch Movie* Press Kit 1995, 7). Star Shelley Long tried to identify just what that "Brady way" was: "[*The Brady Bunch Movie*] in no way downplays the importance of the core of the Bradys' lives, which is love and family values" (*The Brady Bunch Movie* Press Kit 1995, 3). There is a certain irony to Long's stance, given that Florence Henderson, the actress who played Long's role in the original show, publicly voiced her

[17] At one point during this sequence, the film makes a direct allusion to Jodie Foster's young prostitute character in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976)—creating a juxtaposition between the saccharine imagery of *The Brady Bunch* and the gritty crime films of the '70s.

displeasure with the concept of the movie during its production. “I love Sherwood Schwartz but—I loved that show and I have to be careful of parodies. I wish them luck but I turned it down,” she told *Variety* after Paramount offered her a role as a truck driver who picks up Jan as she is running away from home (Archerd 1994). Ultimately, the filmmakers made the adjustments to appease Henderson as she joined original cast members with Christopher Knight, Barry Williams, and Ann B. Davis with cameos in the film. Producer Jenno Topping offered a differing perspective from the cast members. “The reason the Brady Bunch have endured into 1995 is that there is something bizarre about them. They represented such wholesome values that they were even unrealistic for the era when they first thrived. Each week, the Bradys would have a problem at the beginning of the episode and in thirty minutes it would be solved. *The Brady Bunch Movie* is somewhat irreverent about these characters that inspire such great curiosity” (1995, 9). The bizarreness that Topping references is essentially what was spurring on the overall Brady revival: whether you found the show campy, endearing, or somewhere in between, most could agree that there was something artificially out-of-time about it. While this may seem contradictory, it reveals the way that studios could recycle older intellectual property in a way that could play the middle and reach both the people who endorsed the family values of the show and those who found it to be an out-of-date depiction of American life. This is in line with film scholar Robert B. Ray’s writing on how Hollywood found ways to maintain its conservative ideological tendencies, even in films that are seemingly subversive (1985, 296). The Brady Bunch brand was thus the perfect vessel to combine the concurrent trends of winking postmodern irony and ‘70s nostalgia.

Early versions of the script had a different feel to the final product as the plot was more centered on the Bradys entertaining potential buyers for the house. The catch, though, is that

most of these potential buyers were other TV characters and so the script is loaded with cameos from various other sitcom stars. The proposed cameos include an older June Cleaver (Barbra Billingsley's 1950s matriarch from *Leave It to Beaver*), as the villain's secretary as well as Donna and Brenda from *Beverly Hills 90210* as the classmates who rebuff Greg's flirtation. While most of these cameos never made it into the actual movie, they provide insight into the potential uses of a modern-day Brady Bunch movie. On one hand, featuring cameos throughout makes the script a forty-year celebration of television history. On the other hand, the cameo characters exemplified the changing nature of sitcom families over the last thirty years. In an altercation with Carol Brady, Roseanne Conner (the character played by Roseanne Barr from her eponymous sitcom) tells the Brady mom, "Keep your perfect kids away from my dysfunctional ones! They're a bad influence!" (1993, 38). *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997), one of the highest rates sitcoms of the '90s, was about a working-class family and so a quite different world than the upper-middle-class comfort of *The Brady Bunch*.

A 1993 ABC anniversary special titled "Bradymania" featured a similar segment that compared *Brady Bunch* storylines to similar plots from modern-day sitcoms. "Times certainly have changed: Denise Huxtable's whining at not being allowed to spend $1,600 on a new car is a long way from Greg Brady's polite plea to be able to use the $109 he has saved to buy some wheels," reads a *Variety* review of the special (Rosenbluth 1993). Nowhere is that difference highlighted more than in the last scene from that second draft, in which the Bradys are having a potato sack race as an unusual set of neighbors look on: the animated duo of Beavis & Butthead. For the newly formed partnership between Viacom and Paramount, this cameo would have added synergy between one of the brand's most valuable syndication properties and a hot new show of the moment; *Beavis & Butthead* was one of MTV's highest rated shows in the mid-

1990s. Even moreso than the Conners, the characters of Beavis and Butthead are polar opposites of the Bradys since they are foul-mouthed and totally dismissive of family comfort—which was also directly evoked in the marketing for *Dazed and Confused*. The joke at the end of the scene, however, is that the duo come around to the idea of family values when thinking about suddenly living in the same house as three girls their age.

It has been common practice for cultural pundits to use television sitcoms as signifiers of the changes to the "American family" over the course of the 20th century. For example, when talking about the break in the 1970s from the '50s ideal of the nuclear family, conservative historian Allan Carlson commented in 1980, "*Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver,* and *I Love Lucy* gave way to *One Day at a Time, Three's Company,* and *Miss Winslow and Son*" (42). The three latter shows all featured single-parent households or, in the case of *Three's Company,* three adults cohabitating. By the '90s, though, the Brady Bunch had themselves also become shorthand for an outdated picture of family life and domestic tranquility. For example, Fox promoted its new sitcom *True Colors,* about a blended interracial family, in the fall of 1990 with the tagline "It Ain't the Brady Bunch." In the summer of 2000, *Entertainment Weekly* reported that Nick at Nite and Sherwood Schwartz were developing *Another Brady Bunch*—the Brady Bunch with a new twist to reach more audiences. "The twist? The Bradys are an interracial family," the article reads (Keck 2000). Unsurprisingly, *Another Brady Bunch* never made it off the ground because it was years behind the multicultural trend. Part of the strange appeal of *The Brady Bunch* is how disconnected they felt from any of the important political changes of the late '60s/early '70s, which naturally aligns them with more white conservative images of American life.

There have been differing perspectives on the *The Brady Bunch*'s tendency to shy away from hot-button issues of its time. A 1990 retrospective book titled *The Brady Bunch Book* observed that "[t]he real world avoided the Bradys as if a dome had been placed over their split-level house on Clinton Avenue. Alice's meat loaf, not Watergate, was discussed over dinner. Never did Mike yell upstairs for Greg to turn down the volume on *The Dark Side of the Moon* or investigate that strange smoky smell coming from the girls' bedroom" (Edelstein and Lovece, 119). Christopher Knight, the actor who played Peter on the show, remarked in 1992: "We didn't deal with any social dilemma, we only dealt with moral dilemmas […] that's why every different generation can grow up in it and grow through it. Because it's teaching the same things. If I watch *All in the Family*, it loses a little bit of its meaning because we've developed as a society" (quoted in Moran 1992, 92). According to this argument, the fashion may not be timeless, but the core family dynamic at the center is because it is untethered to the social upheaval of the late '60s and early '70s.

The catch here, of course, is that the Bradys *could* act unattached to the world that surrounded them because they were a well-off upper-middle class white family with a maid. That, too, was part of the appeal to some. On the show's rerun success, the authors of *The Brady Bunch Book* posit that the Bradys provide a comforting domestic and financial stability for viewers who may have lacked that in their own home. They write, "beneath our laughter is a slight yearning for the kind of family life many of us wish we'd had. We may have worn the plaid bell-bottoms, same as Greg and Marcia, but most of us didn't have a live-in housekeeper, financial luxury, or—most important of all—those open and sympathetic lines of communication" (Edelstein and Lovece 1990, 5). Actress Henriette Mantel, who played Alice in the movie, shared similar sentiments: "The television show was their half hour a week to think

that a family could be perfect" (*The Brady Bunch Movie* Press Kit 1995, 8). *Brady Bunch* reruns were a 30-minute retreat to a white well-off home that purported to be some sort of wholesome.

However, the lack of prominent social issues in *The Brady Bunch* also contributes to a sort of alternate window into dominant American culture of its time. Is it the appeal of having a housekeeper that makes *The Brady Bunch* a comforting fantasy or is it the prospects of living in a world unaffected by Vietnam, political assassinations, and changing family structures? In a *Brady Bunch* retrospective for *Entertainment Weekly* in 1992, Jess Cagle believed it was a bit of both. On the "Bradymania" popular during the time, Cagle wrote:

> Why does this sitcom play such a major role in the psyche of a generation? Because the show was a picture of stability while Vietnam and the sexual revolution rocked the rest of the world. While our real-life parents were splitting up at an alarming rate, those goody-goody Bradys were telling us a shameless lie about family life. We desperately believed it. Most of all, this was the family that the latchkey kids came home to every day after school, the family we could always count on.

In 2002, the "Sunshine Days" episode of *The X Files* (Fox, 1993–2002) reflected on this found-family-through-television dynamic. In the episode, Oliver Martin (Michael Emerson) is a loner with supernatural telekinetic powers that he uses to project the illusion that he is living inside the Brady house with the family. At the end of the episode, the reveal is that Oliver is using his powers as a coping mechanism for the broken family life of his own childhood and that the continued use of his powers was negatively affecting his health—perhaps a statement on the dangers of nostalgia. But, in general, what exactly does this fantasy version of life entail? Does it also erase the advancements of movements such as civil rights, feminism, and environmentalism made in the '60s and '70s? On the difference between the Brady kids and those coming of age in the '90s, Christopher Daniel Barnes said in the film's press kit that "history has culminated in a generation that is environmentally and politically correct, so it's refreshing to see in *The Brady Bunch Movie* kids who haven't been committing themselves to saving the planet since the age of

five" (*The Brady Bunch Movie* Press Kit 1995, 7). For some, then, the Bradys acted as a throwback to a time when adult concerns had not permeated into kids' lives—or at least "concerns" that conservative values did not approve of (race relations, class differences, environmentalism, etc.).

On the surface, the Brady Bunch as signifiers of a "better time" or stable family life may seem like an exclusively white phenomenon. However, interviews and personal reflections from diverse Gen Xers reveal a more complicated picture. The impact of *The Brady Bunch* on an understanding of family is not solely limited to white America. In an auto-ethnographic content analysis of the show, Miroslava Chávez-García reflects on her experience watching *Brady Bunch* reruns in a lower-class Mexican-American household. To Chávez-García, *The Brady Bunch* represented a "pristine, white, idealized family, with its worry-free environment" that she wanted to be embraced by (2019, 433). But her content analysis of the original series reveals a startling lack of representation from Mexican Americans and Asian Americans despite being set in one of the most diverse cities in the United States, which had the internalized impact of making whiteness feel normal (and anything else other) (2019, 436–37). Chávez-García's experience reveals the type of complex relationship that can form with the media audiences consume from a young age; the very thing that provides a comfort zone could also be negatively warping understandings of the world.

Matty Rich, a New Black Cinema success story who made his directorial debut with *Straight Out of Brooklyn* at age 20, similarly detailed a conflicting relationship with the show and how it led to his own creative ambitions. In interviews with the *Los Angeles Times* and *Ebony* in 1991, Rich relayed stories about how the Bradys were the only white family he'd seen growing up and watching those reruns had him reflecting on the lack of Black familial struggles

on screen—something he would later tie into his own work (Benson; Collier 162). There *were* contemporary examples of seventies sitcoms that focused on more diverse families, of course. *Good Times* debuted on CBS in the same year that ABC cancelled *The Brady Bunch* and ran for six seasons. *JET Magazine* would later declare "what TV's *Brady Bunch* was to White America is what *Good Times* was and still is to Black America—family" (Christian 2008, 32). But *Good Times* did not experience anything near the amount of play in syndication, as *The Brady Bunch* had, indicating that even reruns could contribute to the normalization of white families.

Given that the late '60s and early '70s have come to be associated with sexual revolution and the gay liberation movement, the Brady Bunch's relationship with the queer community is also worth noting. During the years of *The Brady Brunch*'s initial run (69–74), openly gay characters began debuting on American television but not *The Brady Bunch*, which seemed to avoid social issues of the time (unlike other television programs and the "New Hollywood"). Just as racial minorities were often stuck on the margins of the show, any hint of non-heterosexuality was rare and, at times, even chastised by the show's dialogue. However, as Tison Pugh writes, there is something inherently queer in the show's focus on youthful innocence. "*The Brady Bunch* made an impossible promise of sexual innocence to its viewers, for issues of sexuality inevitably crept into its plotlines and production and thus subverted the innocence that the show purportedly endorses" (Pugh 2018, 52). That type of subversion is at the heart of later parodies like *The Real Live Brady Bunch* or the more recent *Dragging the Classics: The Brady Bunch* TV special on Paramount+, in which contestants from *RuPaul's Drag Race* recreate an episode of the show while in drag.[18] According to the creators of the stage show, putting the show's scripts in a larger-than-life theatrical setting created a surreal experience by making everything "bad or

[18] RuPaul made appearances in both *The Brady Bunch Movie* and *A Very Brady Sequel* as the school's guidance counselor.

unreal about it stand out" (Willman 1992). Queer readings of *The Brady Bunch* also took on a new meaning after the news of Robert Reed's HIV-positive status and homosexuality following his death (Pugh 2018, 69). The revelation that the character who said "if my boys wanted to play in anybody's dollhouse, I'd take them to a psychiatrist" was played by a gay man highlighted the experience of closeted individuals conforming to societal pressures (Pugh 2018, 60). Thus, while the show's latent sexual undertones can be fodder for comedy, they can also tell a tragic narrative about the transformation of gender roles and sexuality in American society. That duality also shows the repressive power of censorship and media in mainstream culture to maintain certain traditional values, hence the importance of mass media in the culture wars of the nineties.

When considering how ubiquitous the show's reruns were shared amongst diverse audiences (in terms of class, race, and sexuality), the enduring relevancy of the Brady Bunch property can likely be defined as a generational experience more than anything. In his 1998 book *Gen X TV*, Rob Owen conducted an internet poll of the most memorable shows growing up for children of Generation X (~1965–1980); *The Brady Bunch* was number one by a healthy margin (18). In an odd way, they were a part of America's dominant culture. "People remember the names of the Brady kids long after they've memorized and forgotten the name of all the state capitals," Owen says (17). That type of pop culture obsession is essentially the central ethos of future Viacom show *I Love the 70s* (Vh1, 2003), a whimsical clip show that targeted Gen Xers by laughing at the pop culture they grew up with. Part of the enduring appeal of *The Brady Bunch* is certainly how easy the show is to laugh *at*. For example, the title page of *The Brady Bunch Movie*'s second draft includes a quote from a 1990 *New York Times* article that reads: "To teenagers and members of the 20-something generation, Cheese isn't simply something that

comes on top of a pizza or burger; it's an esthetic concept, what Camp was to an earlier generation in the 60's. […] The Brady Bunch is the definition of Cheese" (Kakutani 1992).

While some Gen Xers may have looked back on *The Brady Bunch* fondly and others as a cheesy relic, the reality is that most held both feelings simultaneously. **"**For many Brady Bunch viewers, a kitschy sense of nostalgia is doubly refracted because many perceive the program's impossibly innocent foundations, outmoded even during its airing in the early 1970s, while also recognizing their childhood enjoyment of its guileless narratives," writes Pugh (2018, 72). "[F]or the 25-to-35 generation, *The Brady Bunch* is both camp and comfort zone," read *Newsweek*'s review of *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995). In her analysis of the show's relationship to Third Wave Feminism, Mimi Marinucci is critical of the notion that her generation mindlessly consumed *Brady* reruns as a fantastical escape: "[T]he special sort of love we have for The Brady Bunch is symbolic of the sarcasm and irony that are the hallmarks of the Gen X attitude. Other members of this generation understand what it means to love *The Brady Bunch*. It does not mean that we think that the show is good, at least not in any customary sense, and it does not mean that we buy (or bought) into the values it fosters" (2005, 511). Of course, there is something campy and unrealistic about *Brady Bunch* reruns but that does not negate their ability to capture a version of family life where issues could be resolved by talking it out and a teenager did not have to worry about sexually transmitted diseases nor being drafted to fight in a war. For some, this provided a utopian escape through their television set. For others, it was a portrait of conservative values that were increasingly at odds with the culture changing around them.

Conclusion

Viacom's concerted effort to capitalize on the shared Brady experience was a bit of a mixed bag. *The Brady Bunch Movie,* for its part, was a success. While not reaching the heights of

their *Addams Family* counterparts, the film nearly made its budget back in its opening weekend alone. The critical reception was also decent, with many critics highlighting the film's ability to lampoon seventies American culture.

The success of *The Brady Bunch Movie* led to a number of producers putting new films in development based on campy '70s TV shows to which they held the rights. In the weeks following the film's release, *Variety* reported that producers were eyeing Chris Farley for a film version of *The Partridge Family* (ABC, 1970–1974) while a *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976–1981) reboot was also put into development at Columbia (1995). A *Partridge* film never saw the light of day, but Columbia released *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) five years later, with the film leaning into the tongue-in-cheek kitsch of seventies television. Paramount itself was quick to put a Brady sequel in development. *A Very Brady Sequel* (Arlene Sanford, 1996) premiered a year later, which took the Brady family to Hawaii and introduced Carol's long-lost ex-husband (the show never explicitly stated if she was a divorcee or widow). Critics met the sequel with a lukewarm reaction and the film only made half of what its predecessor had at the box office. A second sequel would later be relegated to the made-for-TV realm with *The Brady Bunch in the White House* airing on Fox in 2002.[19] As a synergistic venture, Bradymania was losing steam. In 2000, Paramount TV produced *Growing Up Brady* for NBC, an adaptation of Barry Williams's memoir recounting the production of the original show. "Sex! Booze! Backstage battles! *Growing Up Brady* blows the lid off TV's squeaky-clean clan," *Entertainment Weekly* exclaimed in its review of the TV movie (Fetts 2000). Given that *Growing Up Brady* revealed tension on set and romances between cast members, it was clear that Viacom had become less protective over the Brady brand than they had once been. So, while the Bradys were brought back many times in

[19] Not only is this the same year as the Brady-themed X-Files episode on the same network, it also means that the Brady Bunch IP had now been on a fourth major network.

the 1980s and 1990s, these revivals were often short-lived and rarely sustained long-term success; how much did people actually want new versions of the Bradys as opposed to the unique comfort of the reruns themselves?

In January 2021, *WandaVision* premiered on Disney+ as a limited series about Marvel Comics superheroes Wanda Maximoff and Vision. The show's first seven episodes are each a pastiche of a past era of the American sitcom, spanning from the '50s to the 21st century. The third episode, "Now in Color," sees Wanda and Vision raise a family in a 1970s split-level with, as the *Brady* script would describe them, an "obnoxious" color scheme and wearing outfits "too loud to describe." Later in the series, the show reveals that Wanda is creating these worlds within her mind and shaping them after TV shows that she watched with her family when she was young, including *The Brady Bunch* (the clear inspiration for "Now in Color"). Despite the thirty-year span between shows, the Brady episodes of *Day by Day, The X-Files*, and *WandaVision* function in similar manners. Present-day characters hallucinate a world that looks, sounds, and feels like the reruns of *The Brady Bunch* they grew up on, a world without the existential threat of supervillains nor the changes brought upon by multiculturalism. Interviews, articles, and popular press reveal that this is how the Brady Bunch functioned in the '70s and beyond for the generation who grew up with it on nonstop syndication as they came of age. The Brady Bunch brand is a time machine to a past that never existed, just as it was a fantastical escape for some kids when it initially aired.

CHAPTER 5. THE FOX AND THE HAMMER: THE RETURN OF SEVENTIES BLACK ACTION STARS IN NINETIES INDEPENDENT CINEMA

In the year 2000, detective John Shaft was having quite the moment. *Shaft*, Gordon Parks's groundbreaking box office smash of 1971 starring Richard Roundtree, was selected by the Library of Congress as one of the twenty-five titles inducted into the National Film Registry of that year.[20] Parks himself was honored by the Library of Congress with their Living Legend honor for "significant contributions to America's diverse cultural, scientific, and social heritage." Cable channel TNT hosted a ten-hour *Shaft* marathon that showed the original film, *Shaft's Big Score* (Gordon Parks, 1972), *Shaft in Africa* (John Guillermin, 1973), and two *Shaft* television films that aired on CBS, all supported synergistically by interviews and articles on the channel's website. The biggest marker of Shaft's comeback, however, was Paramount's summer release of *Shaft*, a remake from director John Singleton starring Samuel L. Jackson and featuring Roundtree in a supporting role as Jackson's uncle. Like *The Brady Bunch* a few years prior, Shaft was a valuable piece of older intellectual property that could be reused across various media platforms.

The genre cycle that Parks's film helped to spawn, labeled by some as "blaxploitation," was also the most relevant it had been since its initial surge in popularity in the 1970s. The 2000 *Shaft*'s promotional website included a deep-dive retrospective on blaxploitation, including a thirty-year timeline that featured the important films of the genre alongside the films it helped inspire, from the original *Shaft* to the new one.[21] "These '70s icons aren't headed for an art-house retrospective, and you haven't been sucked into a time warp. In the latest chapter of our cinematic obsession with the Bicentennial decade—see *Boogie Nights* and *The Ice Storm*—

[20] The film's soundtrack was also inducted into the National Recording Registry that same year.
[21] This timeline is included at the end of the document in Appendix A.

blaxploitation is roaring back," wrote Chris Vognar of the *Tampa Bay Times* in 1998. This genre recycling primarily occurred in the realm of independent cinema, which was appropriate given that blaxploitation originally started from smaller independent studios in the 1970s. However, this cultural revival and celebration of 1970s Black cinema in the late 1990s did not simply come out of the blue. Hip-hop culture was a major influence on this phenomenon through its heavy reliance on sampling both music and fashion of the 1970s, creating a cultural synergy between music, film, and different generations. Beyond those aesthetics, though, Black stars who made their mark in the Hollywood Renaissance of the 1970s also began taking roles that both evoked and reflected on their status as icons of another cultural era. Beyond Roundtree, two examples of actors who participated in this trend were Fred Williamson and Pam Grier.

Chapter four explains how the intellectual property of *The Brady Bunch* was recycled in a way that poked fun at the past. This chapter examines a simultaneous yet different trend. While *The Brady Bunch* and *Shaft* were properties that major corporations owned and could reuse in synergistic ways, this chapter shifts focus to the semi-independent cinema of the 1990s and how studios on the margins of Hollywood used aging stars as a form of IP. As with "the seventies," blaxploitation had become a brand that could be revived, and so independent studios turned to Williamson and Grier (and their established personas) as representatives for the seventies brand. In that position, the two stars provided cultural commentary on '70s culture while striking different tones in doing so. Using *Original Gangstas* (Larry Cohen, 1996) and *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997) as case studies, this chapter shows how independent studios and filmmakers used legacy stars Williamson and Grier as entry-points into the larger trends of '70s recycling that distinguished some '90s entertainment.

The Blaxploitation Film and Its Enduring Legacy in the 1990s

In general, blaxploitation has been a label used to refer to "black exploitation" films that were made on cheap budgets and starred African-American actors throughout the 1970s. According to film scholar Allyson Nadia Field, a broader definition would encompass "the numerous filmic iterations of black urban life, politics, and style visible in the proliferation of hip, eroticized, and often-violent urban-themed films that burst onto America screens in the early 1970s" (2016, 157). In this context, these films were part of a larger upsurge in Black-oriented films from 1972 to 1976 (Quinn 2019, 170). The term blaxploitation, however, has had a contentious status in the industry and film scholarship. Stars of the cycle like Fred Williamson and Ron O'Neal have lamented the label as a marketing term generated by white media executives who latched on to it after the head of the Southern California NAACP coined it in the early 1970s, while others have questioned what exactly is being "exploited" (Walker 1996; *Original Gangstas* Press Kit 9). Some critics called out the films' use of stereotypes and their portrayal of the ghetto, adding to what Eithne Quinn calls a "contradictory complexity" that the films possessed (2019, 205). Alongside criticism from the stars, some film scholars have found it too reductive to combine a group of films that touch on a diverse array of topics into one single genre because of their budget and the race of their lead actors. Additionally, as scholar Walter Metz has pointed out, reducing the cycle of films to "blaxploitation" also separates it from the larger Hollywood Renaissance of the late '60s and early '70s despite sharing many of the same aesthetic traits and culturally progressive views (2016, 225). At the same time, blaxploitation is still the most commonly used term to refer to this era of filmmaking and is thus a label that audiences are familiar with. Therefore, this chapter will use the term blaxploitation while

acknowledging that is clearly a marketing tool for predominantly-white Hollywood studios, used both in the '70s and again in the 1990s.

The Hollywood Renaissance arose from an economic crisis in Hollywood, in which all the major studios endured a significant number of big-budget flops. Independent studios and young filmmakers helped fill the void by making lower-budget films that appealed to the increasingly younger filmgoing audience who were nearly 40% Black in some cities (Butters Jr. 2019, 84). The first wave of Black-led Renaissance films—*Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Ossie Davis, 1970), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1970), *Shaft*—shared the traits of other Hollywood Renaissance films but a key difference was that the filmmakers behind the films were African-American directors who likely would not have been given the same shot in the traditional studio system. However, once producers noticed the films' popularity, small companies like American International Pictures ran with the concept but turned to white directors to helm the Black-themed films (Quinn 2019, 177). As with most exploitation cycles, blaxploitation's popularity waxed and waned and, by the 1980s, the genre had become dormant until it was revived through the form of parody. Midway through *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka,* a 1988 blaxploitation parody directed by and starring Keenan Ivory Wayans, protagonist Jack Spade meets with a Black nationalist named Kalinga (played by *The Mod Squad*'s Clarence Williams III). To Jack's surprise, Kalinga's wife is white and yet dressed in an orange dashiki and with beaded dreadlocks for comedic effect. Notably, the actress playing Kalinga's wife is Eve Plumb, most famous for playing Jan on *The Brady Bunch.*[22] For a film parodying one of the most visible representations of African American popular culture from the 1970s, the choice to also poke fun at the Bradys as a representative of white America is no coincidence. Just as the

[22] When the couple's children run into the room, the opening notes of *The Brady Bunch* theme even plays in the background.

Bradys were making a pop culture comeback, blaxploitation also returned to the public consciousness in the late 1980s, primarily through comedy. The revival would eventually move beyond that over the course of the next decade; as Paula J. Massood writes: "By the 1990s, blaxploitation evolved away from parody and became fashionable once again as filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino appropriated the narrative style, character types, and (sometimes) the performers from the 1970s films in a nostalgic celebration of urban—and not uncoincidentally black—cool" (2003, 218). Thus, the return of blaxploitation during this time could go beyond just parodying the archetypes and style and instead comment on its legacy and cultural impact.

For a multitude of factors, the 1990s were a time ripe for both filmmakers and stars to return to Black cinema of the 1970s. For one, the New Black Cinema movement that emerged in the late '80s and flourished in the '90s reflected some of the trends of those '70s films. As with some of the first blaxploitation films, New Black Cinema depended on partnerships between independent studios and young African-American filmmakers. A significant number of these films focused on the lives of young protagonists in an urban setting, another common trait of blaxploitation films. It is from this movement that John Singleton, director of *Shaft* (2000), emerged after directing the preeminent hood film *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). The hood films had crossover success, effectively appealing to more than just young Black audiences. Celeste Fisher attributes the crossover appeal of "urban youth films" to "the status of rap music in American society, a general cultural attraction to violent images, and the influence of various genres in which race and ethnicity create culturally specific (albeit stereotypical) representations of 'foreign' spaces" (2003, xiv). As mentioned by Fisher, the influence of hip-hop on the crossover appeal Black films of the '90s cannot be overstated. Given hip-hop's heavy reliance on sampling music that came before it, music scholar Joanna Demers has argued that "hip-hop culture prizes

and cultivates its memory," which in the '90s meant reaching back to the "ghetto sound" of the 1970s (2003, 41). The ghetto sound emerged from the Motown scene in the late 1960s and essentially brought together popular music and instrumentation that pulled from long African American musical traditions (Demers 2003, 44–45). The popularization of this music genre became the basis of soundtracks for the Black films emerging in the early 1970s, with artists such as Isaac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield becoming composers for films like *Shaft* and *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972), respectively (Demers 2003, 45).

The ghetto sound, blaxploitation soundtracks, and imagery from those 1970s films became frequently sampled in early '90s hip-hop. Demers argues that blaxploitation appealed to hip-hop artists for its use of anthems (which could then be easily sampled), its politicization, and its focus on the ghetto—all of which were just as relevant in 1990s American culture. Blaxploitation anthems became the basis of tracks such as Jay-Z's "Reservoir Dogs" (samples "Theme to *Shaft*") and Smoothe Da Hustler's "Hustler's Theme" (samples Mayfield's "Freddie's Dead" from the *Super Fly* soundtrack) while Dr. Dre's "Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat" starts off with dialogue from the 1973 Michael Campus film *The Mack.* Perhaps the most prominent example of the connection between 1990s hip-hop and 1970s blaxploitation is in Snoop Dogg's single "Doggy Dogg World" from 1994. Musically, the song does not sample any blaxploitation songs but instead features a hook recorded by soul group The Dramatics (who experienced their biggest success in the 1970s). It is the music video where Snoop most heavily acknowledges the pop culture of his youth. The video is filled with cameos from Black actors of the 1970s, including Grier, Williamson, Fred Berry, Rudy Ray Moore, Ron O'Neal, and Antonio Fargas. Each is specifically singled out by the video giving them an opening-credits name tag representing their most famous role (Fargas as "Huggy Bear," Moore as "Dolemite," Berry as "Rerun," etc.). A

decade later, Snoop Dogg would himself play the role of Huggy Bear in the film remake of *Starsky & Hutch* (Todd Phillips, 2004).[23] Even if the cameos in the video are brief, they act as an homage to the generation of entertainers that came before—anticipating a similar trend that would occur in the film industry in the years following the song's release.

It is rather appropriate that Black cinema would be revisited (through both music and film) in the 1990s because the 1970s films were often self-reflexive. Allyson Nadia Field argues that Black films such as *Watermelon Man* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1970), *Amazing Grace* (Stan Lathan, 1974), and *Car Wash* (Michael Schultz, 1976) consciously comment on how "blackness" has been constructed in American cinema, sometimes through casting the likes of Stepin Fetchit (a Black vaudeville actor who worked in Hollywood from the '20s through the '50s) in cameo parts (2016, 157). 1970s filmmakers were using their platform to comment on the ongoing debates about the character types and themes of blaxploitation films. Central to these themes is an interplay between different generations—of artists, of actors, of audiences. "With these films' enactment of the confrontation of the past and present, youth and elders, they function as palimpsests of multiple narratives of the past," Field argues (2016, 175).

A reflection of and departure from past representation was important for some actors. Discussing the Black characters that he watched growing up, Fred Williamson has lamented the lack of Black heroes who succeeded in the end. "We didn't have those heroes. We had Stepin Fetchit!" Williamson said in response to a question about the NAACP's push-back against the imagery in blaxploitation films (Haanen 2011). As is discussed in the next section, the screen persona of the blaxploitation hero became associated with an overtly-masculine (and often hyper-sexualized) figure that was distinct departure from the likes of Fetchit. On this

[23] Fred Williamson also appears in the film as the police captain of the titular duo.

phenomenon, Field notes that the "Black film culture of the 1970s mobilized its history as a way of negotiating blaxploitation and its attendant representational problems. In this sense, blaxploitation is a discourse and a mode that becomes the locus of black film historiography" (2016, 175). If blaxploitation is a discourse on the history of Black representation in Hollywood, then the return of its major stars in the 1990s is another example of Black film culture looking back at itself to understand the journey to the present.

In the 1990s, the actors most closely associated with blaxploitation were no longer headlining widely-distributed films and yet, in the place of more traditional intellectual property, they did possess value for studios wanting to synergize with the newfound appreciation for blaxploitation music and imagery. While conventional wisdom might identify Hollywood brands with franchises, studios, or even filmmakers, scholar Paul McDonald argues that a movie star can also function as a brand (2013, 41). This reverses the common conceptualization of branding as giving inanimate objects human-like qualities so that consumers can form a relationship with them, because, in this case, human performers are crystallized into a few key elements of their persona: namely their body and their name (McDonald 2013, 49). So, while the large studios were remaking older intellectual properties and decades-old songs were sampled by new music artists, aging stars could also act as pre-sold products that bring along their own set of cultural connotations. One strength of independent cinema was the platform that it provided for older stars to take roles that they might not get in the increasingly blockbuster-centric film industry; Burt Reynolds' appearance as porn director Jack Horner in *Boogie Nights* is an example of this. I would argue that instead of being brands unto themselves, as McDonald implies, that Fred Williamson and Pam Grier essentially acted as representatives for the brand of "blaxploitation"

(and "the seventies," more generally) for independent studios who could benefit from their likeness.

"I Don't Get Killed. I Win All My Fights. And I Get the Girl at the End": Fred Williamson & *Original Gangstas*

Fred Williamson came to the acting profession following a successful professional football career in the 1960s. After his retirement, Williamson made a handful of television appearances before making his theatrical film debut in Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H** (1970) playing a football player-turned-neurosurgeon. After the success of other Black-led films in *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Williamson quickly became a go-to leading man in the blaxploitation frenzy that followed. While he may not be identified with one character, like Richard Roundtree is with John Shaft, Williamson's most well-known parts are as the titular role in *Hammer* (Bruce D. Clark, 1972) and Tommy Gibbs in *Black Caesar* (Larry Cohen, 1973) and its sequel *Hell Up in Harlem* (Larry Cohen, 1973).

As the number of films in the blaxploitation cycle steadily dropped throughout the 1970s, Williamson was forced to make some adjustments. "[W]hen the studios stopped providing money for black action films, I was ready to go to Cannes and [pre-sell] my own films […] I learned the business by being fucked. You're trying to make a deal. Somebody screws you royally. You don't do that again," he said in 2011 (Haanen). Thus, Williamson was determined to control his own destiny in Hollywood, whether he got offers or not. This sense of control over his career also bleeds into maintaining a certain aura in his public image. In the roles that he took, Williamson wanted his characters to be tough and always win in the end—a conscious meditation on the history of how African-Americans had been represented throughout Hollywood history. "I don't get killed. I win all my fights. And I get the girl at the end, if I want

her," he has said of his characters (Haanen 2011). Williamson explains that he started his own production company to have control over the roles he would take. "I'm in total control and I know damn well I'm not dying in my own movie. And I'm gonna whip […] ass in my own movies," he said in an interview with film blog *The Action Elite.* When discussing the decline of blaxploitation in the late '70s, Williamson has frequently pointed to the lack of support from Hollywood's biggest studios as a cause. "When they stopped making the movies, the movies were still making money. They just weren't making enough money for the majors. Universal's light bill is $10 million and our movies were grossing $10–15 million," he quipped in 1996 (Walker). This is likely one of the reasons Williamson turned to foreign markets to continue making black action films, as evidenced by his work in the Italian blaxploitation homage *Black Cobra* (Stelvio Massi, 1987) and its three sequels. By the 1990s, the independent film scene provided an avenue for films targeting diverse audiences to be made, meaning that stars like Williamson now had an alternative to the major Hollywood studios. Through his company Po Boy Productions, Williamson sought assistance from independent distributors to help make *Original Gangstas*, a passion project designed to reunite Williamson with some of blaxploitation's biggest stars.

In terms of potential producing partners, Orion Pictures was a natural fit. At one time, Orion was one of the most successful outsiders in Hollywood, as exemplified by Best Picture winners and box office mega-hits *Dances With Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Damme, 1991). By the mid-90s, however, the studio had filed for bankruptcy and later acquired by MGM. Yet a bright spot for the company was its home video division. Orion's earlier acquisition of Filmways, Inc. in 1982 proved crucial here as that deal gave Orion distribution rights to the catalog of American International Pictures, a preeminent of

distributor of low-budget films from the 1950s to the late 1970s. This meant Orion could now re-release hundreds of exploitation films, including many blaxploitation titles from that genre's heyday. In 1988, Orion Home Video began releasing an impressive number of best-selling videos of films from the 1970s and 1980s that featured Black stars, including *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973), *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974), and *Cooley High* (Michael Schultz, 1975). Importantly, Orion was also the distributor for many of Fred Williamson's biggest films, including *Black Caesar*, *Hell Up in Harlem*, and *Bucktown* (Arthur Marks, 1975). Even beyond the 1970s, the studio also released two of his directorial efforts from 1986 (*Foxtrap* and *The Messenger*) on home video. Thus, while they were not contractually linked in the tradition of the old Hollywood star system, Williamson was a proven commodity on the home video market for Orion Pictures.

While a big-budget sequel/reboot to one of Williamson's older films may not have been feasible (as Paramount was doing with the Shaft franchise), partnering with Williamson and Po Boy Productions on a lower-budget blaxploitation reunion certainly had its economic appeal. A title designed to reunite blaxploitation's biggest stars could provide synergy for Orion with its successful home video library. In 1995, Orion agreed to finance *Original Gangstas* as its first production after the MGM merger. For director, Williamson brought on veteran Larry Cohen, who got his start in Hollywood as a screenwriter and director of blaxploitation films—including *Black Caesar* and its sequel *Hell Up in Harlem* (both released in 1973). These were two of Williamson's most successful films of the time, thus making Cohen a logical choice as director of a blaxploitation reunion film. In recent interviews, Williamson has said that clashes with Cohen led him to taking the reins of the film and adding director to his star-producer role on the film (Haanen 2011).

Original Gangstas starts with the murder of an up-and-coming basketball star, whose parents are played by '70s icons Pam Grier and Jim Brown. When an elderly shopkeeper is attacked for getting involved in the case, his son John Bookman (played by Williamson) returns to town to investigate. Bookman is a former member of the gang who attacked his father—a narrative reflection of Williamson returning to the gangster genre in his middle age. Beyond the names on the marquee, the supporting cast is filled with other popular African-American actors including Paul Winfield, Isabel Sanford, Ron O'Neal, and Richard Roundtree. The film's marketing unsurprisingly emphasizes the reunion aspect of the film, going so far as making the tagline "It's Time for Some Respect." In other words, Williamson's generation were no longer something that should be laughed at or seen as antiquated. Within the film, this tagline emerges thematically through the constant culture clash between the older generation (the '70s Black films stars) and their younger counterparts, who are meant to represent Black culture as represented in hip-hop culture and hood films. Within both the film itself and its marketing, Orion essentially samples elements from both cultural movements—blaxploitation and hip-hop—to position the film as relevant to audiences young and old.

One way that the film engages in conversations between past and present is in its setting. *Original Gangstas* makes a unique departure from the typical locale for a film of this type. In blaxploitation's most successful period, the films were almost exclusively set in neighborhoods in New York City or Los Angeles (Massood 2003, 1). *Original Gangstas,* on the other hand, is set and filmed in Gary, Indiana—a change that was important to Williamson. "We wanted people to know that this could happen in 'Anytown, USA,' not just in New York or Los Angeles. This is a 'street' film reflecting the reality of the streets. It's all there, all real, all live" (*Original Gangstas* Press Kit 1996, 5). Williamson had grown up in Gary and admitted that

autobiographical elements about his upbringing were incorporated into his protagonist (*Original Gangstas* Press Kit 1996, 5). An added benefit of shooting on location is that it provided jobs for the local economy; the film's promotional materials note that forty members of local gangs were cast as extras through cooperation with the city's police department (*Original Gangstas* Press Kit 1996, 5). Gary experienced a steady drop in population since the 1970s due to the declining strength of U.S. Steel, which was a pivotal cog in the city's economy. Gary's economic decline is made central in the film through an opening montage that details the impact of deindustrialization. So, while Gary marks a break from the locations popular in the original blaxploitation films, *Original Gangstas* is still centrally concerned with social issues prevalent in those films. Paula J. Masood has argued that the city is often a central character in both blaxploitation films of the '70s and hood films of the '90s as they engage "in a dialogue with [the city's] immediate socioeconomic, political, and industrial contexts" (2003, 1, 86). Given that *Original Gangstas* is a celebration of blaxploitation films while also coming after the '90s hood films, the film essentially acts as a meeting point between these two cycles by sampling elements from both and bridging them together. By using contemporary Gary as its central location and charting the city's economic decline, the film positions itself to examine both the economic changes in the second half of the 20th century and the changes in Black culture since the 1970s.

If location is one way that the relationship between past and present is interrogated in the film, the soundtrack for *Original Gangstas* is another major instance of sampling the cultures of both the younger and older generations. Specifically, the film has a system of leitmotifs in which the music cues of any specific scene match with the age of the characters on screen. For example, when Williamson's character first appears on screen, 1971's "(For God's Sake) Give More Power to the People" by the Chi-Lites accompanies his walk through the town. In

Williamson's own words: "[W]henever Jim, Pam or I am on the screen, the source music will be from the late '60s and '70s like the Chi-Lites. And, when we have Dru Down and Shyheim, we'll be playing hip-hop music so that the film will encompass the old music of the doo-wop days and the hip-hop of today" (*Original Gangstas* Press Kit 1996, 6). This creative decision gives the film's soundtrack the feel of constantly switching between two drastically different radio stations, one '70s soul and the other '90s gangsta rap.

In the 1990s, soundtracks had become one of the most reliable forms of synergy in the entertainment industry, and trade publications noted the massive benefit of a movie featuring a hit single that could play on commercials (Hochman 1996). So, it should come as no surprise that *Original Gangstas'* marketing materials heavily promoted the accompanying soundtrack (just as the coming-of-age films had done). For example, the bottom of the film's poster includes a list of artists featured on the soundtrack while the VHS cover spends a third of its space advertising the promotional music videos included on the tape. This is one of the most explicit ways that the film's dual-purpose marketing emerges; the actors are promoted to appeal to older audiences while the soundtrack is promoted to appeal to younger audiences. The irony here is that the film's plot is heavily critical of hood culture and the violence supposedly promoted in hip-hop music. At one point in the film, an older character laments, "I remember when it used to be about getting out," before another responds, "they care more about dying than living." Williamson is thus using his comeback as a platform to signal that cultural values have regressed since his time on top. This conflict between the film's themes and its synergized promotion once again shows the wide-reaching nature of marketing in '90s Hollywood. Just as *The Brady Bunch Movie* tried to appeal to people who both liked *and* hated the Brady Bunch, Orion attempted to appeal to younger audiences even while the film itself is critical of them.

On May 10, 1996, *Original Gangstas* opened on a limited number of 474 screens, much lower than the 2,414 screens for the studio film *Twister* (Jan de Bont, Warner Brothers) released the same week. Williamson's film ended up grossing $3.2 million, just under its relatively small budget of $3.6 million. Critically, it received mixed reviews, with most critics commenting on its relationship to the blaxploitation films of the '70s as well as the act of bringing together the various icons of that era. Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* saw the film as emblematic of the Black-led films from the '70s, where any social consciousness takes a back seat to the overwhelming soundtrack and action. "Still," Thomas notes, "there is a genuine sadness that inevitably permeates the picture, due to its setting in Gary and a quality of reflectiveness in the writing and the playing of the film's middle-aged stars" (1996). Writing for *Women in the Life,* a monthly periodical targeted towards Black lesbian readers, Sheila Reid found similar strengths and weaknesses. For Reid, the appeal of the film is in its reunion of Black stars, "even if it is naïve to believe they can come back 20 years later and wipe out today's dope dealers" (1996). Thus, the dynamic between generations is a common refrain in the film's reception, with Williamson and company essentially being used to represent not just blaxploitation but '70s Black culture more generally. This is also shown in this film's press materials, which feature interviews with the cast asking them to reflect on the legacy of blaxploitation films and their societal value. While *Original Gangstas* and Orion positioned Williamson as a cultural spokesperson for '70s culture, it was also the start of a similar trajectory for co-star Pam Grier, whose career comeback in would hit new heights in the years that followed.

"I'm Not a Good Victim": Pam Grier & *Jackie Brown*

Pam Grier's rise to becoming an icon of '70s cinema was quite different from her pro-athlete co-stars in *Original Gangstas*. In 1970, she moved to Los Angeles in hopes of enrolling

in UCLA's film program (Quinn 2019, 184). In the meantime, she was a switchboard operator for American International Pictures. It is there that she met director Jack Hill, who would cast her in four of his films: *The Big Doll House* (1971), *The Big Bird Cage* (1972), *Coffy* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974). It is this run of films (and particularly the titular roles in the latter two) that catapulted Grier into being an icon of 1970s cinema. By the 1990s, however, she was rarely getting lead roles. That is not say that she was not regularly finding work. In the same year as *Original Gangstas,* Grier had a small part in Tim Burton's big-budget sci-fi comedy *Mars Attacks!* (1996), a send-up of mid-century exploitation films. But roles such as this were never on the level of what was to come with *Jackie Brown*.

As the follow-up to the runaway success of indie film *Pulp Fiction*, many eyes in the industry were on Tarantino's next film. "Conventional wisdom states that some of the dogs in the speculative press and the more traditional quarters in the academy are waiting to pounce on Tarantino if *Jackie Brown* isn't a home run," read a *Variety* article before the film's release ('Jackie Brown kudo chances' 1997). This also meant that much attention would be paid to Grier as the film's star, who was Tarantino's top choice for the role from the start. When the film was announced, industry trades were quick to speculate on the impact it could have on Grier's career, with *Variety* noting, it "could get the power surge that John Travolta gleaned from *Pulp Fiction*" (Petrikin 1997). *Jackie Brown* also marked Tarantino's first adaptation, as it is based on the 1992 Elmore Leonard novel *Rum Punch.* Unlike *Original Gangstas* and its partnership with a struggling Orion, Miramax distributed *Jackie Brown*, coming off a run of awards successes in the mid-to-late '90s.

Given her starring roles in both *Original Gangstas* and *Jackie Brown,* Grier was often asked her thoughts on blaxploitation by interviewers in the promotion of both films—essentially

positioning her as the voice of that earlier film movement. In reflecting on the legacy of Black films from the 1970s, Grier has repeatedly talked about how her early career and blaxploitation films in general provide an educational window into Black culture of the 1970s, thus striking a different tone from that of Williamson on the same topic. While both endorse blaxploitation as a cultural artform, Grier did not criticize 1990s youth culture in the process. When talking about blaxploitation in the lead-up to *Original Gangstas,* Grier said, "[p]olitically and socially, these '70s films documented what was going on in fashion, politics and music. It's not all positive, but [the films] are almost a history lesson, a documentation of that time" (*Original Gangstas* Press Kit 1996, 10). In a 1998 interview after the release of *Jackie Brown*, Grier elaborated on her perspective. "Reaching back to the '70s is dipping into a time we will never have again, unless we suffer another 50 years of oppression and polarization. People want to see what it was like" (Vognar 1998). From this perspective, there is a value in revisiting the explosion of cultural representations of Black culture in the late '60s and early '70s—even if some of images from that time feel out-of-touch and dated by contemporary standards.

While *Jackie Brown* heavily samples elements of '70s culture, it is a film firmly set in mid-90s America. The film follows the eponymous 44-year-old flight attendant as she becomes entangled in a web of crime when federal agents target notorious criminal Ordell Robbie (Samuel L. Jackson), an acquaintance of Jackie's. Along the way, Jackie develops a flirtatious relationship with bail bondsman Max Cherry (Robert Forster) after Robbie connects the two characters. A major departure that the film makes from its source material is changing its protagonist from a white woman named Jackie Burke to a Black woman named Jackie Brown—the last name being a nod to one of Grier's most famous roles in *Foxy Brown*. Another change is moving the setting of the story from South Beach, Florida, to the South Bay area of Southern

California, where Tarantino grew up. These key changes in the adaptation to fit Tarantino's interests set the precedent for the film being, first and foremost, about his brand as a director.

An integral part of that brand was giving big roles to actors who had fallen out of the spotlight, as he had done with John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction.* In *Jackie Brown*, casting Grier in the lead role and Robert Forster as her primary love interest is clearly part of this trend, as neither had been in a lead Hollywood role in decades at that point. The film also draws connections to '70s cinema through the casting of Robert DeNiro in a supporting part, meaning that the film could benefit from his enduring star power while giving the likes of Grier and Forster the spotlight. Another exploitation genre of the 1970s was known as "women in prison" films, over-the-top action-adventures featuring scantily-clad women in a prison setting.[24] Before starring in "blaxploitation" films, Grier's first Hollywood roles were in this genre with films such as *The Big Doll House* (Jack Hill, 1971), *Women in Cages* (Gerardo de León, 1971), and *The Big Bird Cage* (Jack Hill, 1972). A frequent co-star of Grier's in those films was character actor Sid Haig, who Tarantino winkingly casts as the judge providing over Jackie's case in *Jackie Brown*.[25] In case the meta-textual connection was not obvious to the viewer, Tarantino makes another nod to Grier's history with that genre when "S. HAIG" and "J. HILL" are listed as tenants in a character's apartment building. However, in contrast to the way *The Brady Bunch Movie* laughs at its central subject, *Jackie Brown* uses its aesthetic references as a loving ode to the exploitation genres of the '70s culture that it samples. There is no hint of "isn't this stuff corny?" and the film instead positions blaxploitation as cool, just as hip-hop had started doing earlier in the decade.

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[24] *Jackie Brown* also features characters watching a fake video titled *Chicks with Guns*, imagery that also directly evokes the early-70s exploitation films.

[25] A couple of years later, Haig would be cast in Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) in another nod to his exploitation roots.

As with *Original Gangstas*, the main actors in *Jackie Brown* are treated like stars of Hollywood's past who deserve respect from the viewer. Paul McDonald has noted that star entrances in a film are a key component to star-as-spectacle because they immediately establish the star's importance (185). Williamson's entrance in *Original Gangstas* is an example of this practice, particularly because it occurs ten minutes into the film's runtime, which allows Williamson to stand out compared to the characters that have already been introduced. In *Jackie Brown,* on the other hand, the importance of Grier is established more immediately. Bobby Womack's "Across 110th Street" (1973) plays over the production logos in the opening credits, a music cue that directly calls-back to one of blaxploitation's most famous soundtracks. The song then accompanies a tracking shot of an isolated Grier on a people-mover in LAX—recreating the same shot from the same location that opens Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967). By replacing Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" with a blaxploitation anthem, Tarantino playfully combines multiple references to the Hollywood Renaissance. As Jackie proceeds to calmly walk against the movement of the airport crowds, the camera establishes both the character and actor as special objects of the viewer's attention. Grier's constant movement, along with the music, is a direct nod to a blaxploitation tradition, in which films often opened with a character moving while the theme plays in the background (Demers 2003, 47).

If the "coolness" that Grier gives off in this scene is a call-back to her characters of yesteryear, the film then begins to subvert the star persona as Jackie realizes she is late for welcoming passengers as they board the flight to which she is assigned. As her calm strut is supplanted by a panicked dash through the airport, the agency that Jackie has over her surroundings erodes. The opening thus sets the stage for how Grier is used in the film, mixing aesthetic nods to the cool '70s past with Grier's career trajectory in Hollywood following the

blaxploitation cycle. Grier's status as an aging star makes its way into the characterization of Jackie as the film's script makes a point of calling attention to her age throughout. In the script's opening scene, Jackie is described as "a very attractive Black woman in her mid-forties, although she looks like she's in her mid-thirties" (Tarantino, 1). Later, when she is interrogated, the other characters make note of her financial situation: "You've been in the service industry 15 years and all you make is $16,000 plus benefits?" one investigator asks.

Jackie's intersectional identity as both working class and a woman of color is in constant conversation with the added struggles of being a woman in an American workforce that values youth. At another point in the film, Samuel L. Jackson's gangster character Ordell Robbie points out the bias against working class women of color in the criminal justice system. "A 44-year-old Black woman with less than 2 ounces and it's 'intent.' The same thing happens to a movie star and they call it 'possession.'" Later, when venting to Forster's loan shark character Max Cherry, she stresses how important having a steady job is to her, thus revealing the true stakes of the film's plot: "Now with this arrest hanging over my head, I'm scared. If I lose my job I gotta start all over again, but I got nothing to start over with. I'll be stuck with whatever I can get. And that scares me more than Ordell." When considering these scenes in sum, the film possesses a meta-textual narrative that is essentially commenting on Pam Grier's career as a movie star and the hurdles of Hollywood's hiring practices. Jackie Brown, the character, once led a happy life before an incident forced her to start over from scratch in the margins of the service industry and she does not want to blow her one chance to find stable footing.

Meanwhile, interviews around the film's release reveal a similar symmetry between the role of Jackie and Grier's career in Hollywood. "[Jackie's] not a good victim. That's what I like about her, which I am not. I'm not a good victim. I've had the will to survive for twenty years in

this business and I've got the scars to show for it," Grier said in 1997 (*Jackie Brown* Press Kit 1997, 5). In Elmore Leonard's original novel upon which the movie is based, Jackie Burke does lament the prospects of starting over again but, since the character is white in the book, missing is the added layer of discrimination for Jackie because of her race. "Jackie's a gorgeous woman in her mid-40's who's had a tough life and has her back up against the wall. She's very vulnerable, and by making her Black instead of white puts her that much more into jeopardy," said the film's producer Lawrence Bender on the changes made to the protagonist (*Jackie Brown* Press Kit 1997, 4).

Beyond the dialogue, the film also comments on Grier's age and career in more subtle ways. Take for example the inclusion of the song "Long Time Woman" on the film's soundtrack, about a woman who's been locked up in prison for years and wants to be free. While those lyrics possess some symbolic value, an added layer of context is that Grier recorded the track herself in 1971 for the soundtrack to *The Big Doll House* (Mikilitsch 2004, 289).[26] In general, music cues and soundtrack are another way that blaxploitation is directly evoked in the film, giving it a seventies feel even if it is set in the present. As previously mentioned, the soundtrack starts loudly with Bobby Womack's "Across 110th Street," the titular track from Barry Shear's 1973 film of the same name, and it bookends the end credits with the same song. Unlike *Original Gangstas,* which used its soundtrack diegetically to highlight the cultural change between generations, the music cues in *Jackie Brown* and references to blaxploitation in *Jackie Brown* feel like winking nods and nothing more. If anything, they contribute to Tarantino's brand as an auteur filmmaker who has a penchant for mixing together different past styles through pastiche.

[26] It was unreleased at the time and so this is its first use in a film. In *Jackie Brown,* no attention is called to this being sung by Grier.

Blaxploitation, and by extension Grier, are representatives of Tarantino's love for low-budget cinema.

That emphasis on filmmaker over star is a repeated element throughout the promotion of this film, undercutting some of the potential symbolic power of Grier starring in a major Hollywood release at this stage in her career. While *Original Gangstas* and *Jackie Brown* share similarities in the way that they reference and at times revise blaxploitation, this marks one of the key differences between the two. Where *Original Gangstas* features a primarily Black cast and was produced by Williamson's own company, *Jackie Brown*'s odes to Black culture are more surface-level. Take for example how Miramax describes the films of the '70s that inspired *Jackie Brown.* "These urban action movies captured something of the political and social climate of the times. More importantly to the droves of teenagers (like Tarantino) who fueled this industry, they kicked ass," (*Jackie Brown* Press Kit 1997, 4). A statement such as this essentially brushes aside any cultural, social, or political value that films of that time had by emphasizing the importance that they had to white teenagers like Tarantino.

While Williamson's role as producer makes him a key driving creative force in *Original Gangstas,* most of the promotional materials for *Jackie Brown* prioritize Tarantino, and Grier becomes merely a representative of his interests. The *Variety* article mentioned earlier, which draws connections between Grier's casting and the reclamation of John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*, situates Grier in the passenger's seat of her career comeback with Tarantino as the driver. *Jackie Brown*'s own press kit heralds the film's casting (of Grier and Robert Forster) as the latest in Tarantino's mission to revive the careers of out-of-favor actors (1997, 6). "*Jackie Brown* heralds the return of 70's film star Pam Grier," the press kit exclaims (1997, 1). The irony of this, of course, is that actors like Grier and Forster had continued working in Hollywood after the 1970s,

including *Original Gangstas* the year before *Jackie Brown.* Looking back on her career, Grier has said that "there's no such thing as a small role" (Marchese 2019)—a statement that puts value in the non-leading roles that she took in the '80s and early '90s. Therefore, positioning Tarantino as a white savior who single-handedly rescued these actors from obscurity misrepresents the actual journey these stars took to get to their leading roles in 1990s films.

The narrative that Tarantino single-handedly revived Grier's career is further complicated by more recent interviews in which Grier has detailed some of the struggles she faced on the set of *Jackie Brown.* In a 2019 interview with the *New York Times*, Grier talks about shooting a pivotal conversation scene between Jackie and Max where, on her first take, Pam began to have tears falling down her cheeks. This was an acting touch that Grier and most of the crew thought felt right, even though it was not called for in the script (Marchese 2019). Despite her protests, Tarantino had her shoot a more restrained version, which is what ended up in the film, marking an invalidation of the actress's own ideas about the role. Grier's account of these on-set struggles perhaps reflects the continuing privileging of the white male perspective in Hollywood in the 1990s and why Grier did not experience the same level of comeback that Travolta had post-*Pulp Fiction*. Instead, she would go back to doing supporting roles and *Jackie Brown* was the last top-billed film role for Grier as of this writing.

Conclusion

Like *The Brady Bunch Movie,* both *Original Gangstas* and *Jackie Brown* are set in the 1990s but are imbued with aesthetic nods to American culture of the 1970s through music, fashion, casting, and more. However, while all three films attempt to capitalize on '70s nostalgia, there are a few key differences in their productions. While the Brady Bunch was a pre-existing property owned by Viacom and thus could be promoted across multiple synergistic platforms, the

blaxploitation-influenced films were made by semi-independent studios that had to rely on the stars as their own form of intellectual property. Additionally, instead of targeting white middle-class audiences, the 1990s films with Black stars pay homage to more diverse cultural representations of the 70s and thus open themselves more to multicultural audiences. There is also an ideological distance between the way that *The Brady Bunch Movie* parodies the past and *Original Gangstas* especially, because uses its aesthetic allusions as cultural commentary on issues impacting the African-American community.

In the new millennium, traces of blaxploitation in Hollywood would return to the arenas of comedy and parody—the very place the revival began in the late '80s with the Wayans Brothers. Films like *Pootie Tang* (Louis C.K., 2001), *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (Jay Roach, 2002), and *Undercover Brother* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2002) all recycle blaxploitation genre tropes and aesthetics in comedic ways. Perhaps the most interesting work to come out in the tail end of this revival was Mario Van Peebles's 2003 drama-comedy *Baadasssss!.* In the film, Van Peebles stars as his father, Melvin, during the making of seminal blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss* Song. At the same time, studios also began looking back to see what blaxploitation properties could be remade now that it was cool again. In October 1997, two months before *Jackie*'s release, Warner Brothers hired actor Don Cheadle to script a remake of *Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett, 1973)—an undercover agent action film starring Tamara Dobson that WB had distributed ('Cheadle to write, helm' 1997). In 2001, Miramax subsidiary Dimension Films acquired the rights to remake Rudy Ray Moore's cult action-comedy *Dolemite* (1975) with L.L. Cool J (Fleming 2001). Neither of these remakes made it to the production phase, although a comedy about the making of *Dolemite* would eventually be released in 2019 as *Dolemite is My Name* (Craig Brewer). *Super Fly* was another property that was almost remade in the aftermath

of *Jackie Brown* and would eventually get a modernized retelling in 2018 from filmmaker Julien Christian Lutz, known professionally as Director X. Finally, the most visible revival of blaxploitation in Hollywood came through 2000's *Shaft* and then the eventual second reboot/sequel also titled *Shaft* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2019).

While *Shaft* is a fictional character that can be recycled like *The Brady Bunch*, the use of Williamson and Grier by semi-independent studios show that the '70s could be recycled through more than just intellectual property. Here, aging actors could be cast in films that evoked their previous starring roles and that would allow for viewers to reflect on the importance of blaxploitation within American film history. Ultimately, both *Original Gangstas* and *Jackie Brown* pay homage to blaxploitation while also revealing the potential for social commentary within genre revivals. That commentary is often muted, though, given the film's status as semi-independent films in a predominantly white industry. Just as the '70s coming-of-age films were often distilled down to their glossy images and references to the past, these films were just as valuable to the studios in their ability to sell soundtracks and boost home video sales. The primary difference between the two is that, in the case of *Original Gangstas*, Williamson's involvement behind-the-scenes meant that he had more of an authorial role in his comeback and the messages of his film. *Jackie Brown*, on the other hand, is packaged as a tribute to blaxploitation from its white director and Grier is just one piece to that puzzle alongside other intertextual references. This chapter highlights that cultural recycling in '90s Hollywood meant than just promoting a soundtrack of '70s hits or remaking an older TV show for laughs. Stars, too, could be used to remind people of past popular culture and the studios had something to benefit from them as well.

CONCLUSIONS

While films of the 1990s were the primary focus of this project, the trend of recycling '70s culture in Hollywood did not simply stop at the turn of the new millennium. The end of chapter five highlighted some of the ways that blaxploitation continued to be revived in Hollywood, whether through parody or remakes of older films. A subsequent example of that phenomenon is Scott Sanders' 2009 action-comedy *Black Dynamite*, a blaxploitation homage that originated from a fake trailer made by Sanders and actor Michael Jai White. The independent film embraced its relatively small budget ($2.9 million) and limited schedule by recreating the low-budget look of films like *Dolemite* (Rudy Ray Moore, 1975), including showing filmmaking "errors" like having a boom mic show up in certain shots (Nunziata 2009).

As Paramount had done with *The Brady Bunch*, in the 2000s, studios continued to bring back popular syndicated IP in the form of tongue-in-cheek feature films, with Sony's summer blockbuster *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000) the most successful at the box office. In the years that followed, Warner Brothers produced two TV remakes of their own with *Starsky & Hutch* (Todd Phillips, 2004) and *The Dukes of Hazzard* (Jay Chandrasekhar, 2005). *Variety* labeled the former "an extended goof on the '70s" featuring many of the hallmarks of the case study films, including exaggerated fashion, an era-appropriate soundtrack, and even an appearance from Fred Williamson as the captain of the police force (Lowry 2004).

In 2000, Dreamworks entered the '70s coming-of-age game with Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*, a story about a teenager becoming a journalist in the early '70s rock scene. The film's budget was $60 million—amounting to nearly the combined budget of all five case study films from chapter three (*The Ice Storm* had the biggest budget of that bunch with $18,000,000). Setting the film in the music industry once again proved the synergistic ancillary possibilities of

this type of film. That dynamic was similarly at play in Malcolm D. Lee's *Roll Bounce* (2005) about a roller-skating crew in '70s Chicago that featured a disco-heavy soundtrack.

By the late 2000s, Hollywood had largely moved away from reviving the '70s as other decades (namely the '80s and '90s) were getting to be distant enough to become the basis of nostalgic entertainment. In 2013, in a Huffington Post article titled "'Dazed and Confused' Would Never Work Today," author Mike Ryan posits that American culture had changed so rapidly between when *Dazed and Confused* is set (1976) and when it was released (1993) that the film felt from a completely different era (despite only a seventeen-year gap). He argues that, in the new millennium, the distance between cultural events does not feel as drastic and so making a film in the mold of *Dazed* would not yield the same effect (Ryan 2013). "If *Dazed and Confused* were made today, would anyone care? Is there anyone feeling nostalgic for 1996?" Ryan asks (2013). But as we know, the same could have been said of the 1970s at the time of *Dazed*'s release. When the film was released, Jay Carr of *The Boston Globe* wrote in his review: "Linklater's new film deserves to click for more reasons than the current '70s revival. If anything, it makes you wonder what there was to get nostalgic about" (1993). Notably, Richard Linklater's was asking "is anybody nostalgic for 1976?" Yet in the contemporary mass media landscape, the recent past can almost always be recycled for *someone*'s entertainment, whether that be nostalgic or otherwise. The '90s film industry harnessed a yearning for the past with a variety of ancillary tools at its disposal—soundtracks, intellectual property, home video, celebrities, and so on.

The evidence of these trends is perhaps even more prevalent now, particularly as streaming services become a centralized hub for the conglomerates to both produce new content and recycle older material. Syndication has largely been replaced by content libraries that are

quickly accessible to the consumer and algorithms can recommend similar properties in an instant. In January 2023, *That '90s Show*, a sequel series to *That '70s Show*, premiered on Netflix. The show is set in 1996, twenty years after the setting of the original series, and it features a cast of second generation characters who are traversing the same locales as their parents—albeit with an updated look that replaces '70s decor, fashion, and popular culture with new aesthetic representations of the '90s. Two principal actors from *That '70s Show* return with Kurtwood Smith and Debra Jo Rupp as Red and Kitty Foreman, now grandparents to the new show's protagonist. Meanwhile, the young ensemble (now all in their late 30s and early 40s) from the original show make cameo appearances throughout, giving a glimpse of the life paths that these characters have taken.

The creation of *That '90s Show* reflects the trends that this project has outlined in a few different ways. Netflix, a content platform in competition with Hollywood's major studio, produced a spin-off to a series to which they held distribution rights and thus could revive in a way that benefitted their platform. The series, like its predecessor, is directly branded through its pastness as the title alone evokes a time gone by. There are several appeals that a show like this can possess. Did you grow up in the '90s? Maybe this show can bring you back to the feeling of youthful freedom or just your teenage years more generally, as projects like this often do. Perhaps you loved the original show and want to return to the familiar sets and characters. Maybe you are curious about seeing these actors, who became known as teenagers, return to their characters now in middle age. An appeal could also be the recycling of past styles as the series is a multi-camera sitcom with a live studio audience—a throwback to what was once the norm in American television comedy but eventually overtaken by the single-camera sitcom in the 21st century. Or maybe you are just looking for a momentary escape from the present to

"simpler times" (whatever that may mean to any individual). For an entertainment company, all that matters is that there is *some* appeal and recycling properties (and revisiting the past) in this way can cast a wide net.

Returning to the question of whether someone could possibly be nostalgic for 1996, the answer is definitively yes. *That '90s Show* was a ratings success for Netflix and has now been renewed for a longer second season (Porter 2023). The recycling of the '70s in the 1990s shows that the actual time depicted does not matter as much as the feelings it elicits in the viewer. Even as other decades become branded in the entertainment marketplace, traces of '70s nostalgia from the '90s still linger in today's entertainment landscape. In 2021, *Boogie Nights* director Paul Thomas Anderson returned to the '70s with *Licorice Pizza*, an autobiographical film about his time growing up in the San Fernando Valley. 2022 animated blockbuster *Minions: The Rise of Gru* is set in the '70s and has characters that resemble icons of the time, including a villain who some have said is styled after Pam Grier (Walsh 2022). Even the Brady Bunch IP is still promoted on various multimedia platforms, in unique ways. *A Very Brady Renovation* premiered on HGTV featuring the original cast of Brady children renovating the home used for exterior shots of the Brady home, making the interiors look like the studio sets in the process. In 2021, Paramount+ aired *Dragging the Classics: The Brady Bunch*, a combination of two Viacom properties as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo/Vh1/MTV, 2009–present) contestants recreate a *Brady Bunch* episode in drag.

These developments show there is room for more scholarship on ways that brand recycling can become even more creative and synergistic in the streaming age. Beyond just *That '90s Show*, creating content that recycles past IP and targets nostalgia for a past era is seemingly a crucial component to Netflix's business model. Two of the streamer's biggest hit shows—

Stranger Things (2016–present) and *Cobra Kai* (2018–present)—explicitly build their brand through recycling the 1980s. The latter is a sequel series to the *Karate Kid* film franchise, with most of the stars of those films returning, while the former is set in the past and acts as a pastiche of '80s horror and adventure films. Another area of expansion for this research is to look at how trends in American television accompanied the cultural recycling occurring in Hollywood at the time. Of particular interest would be *That '70s Show*, NBC mini-series *The '70s* (2000), and Vh1 series *I Love the '70s* (2003). For *That '70s Show*, it would be worth comparing it to its coming-of-age nostalgia sitcom predecessors, *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984) and *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–1993). *The '70s* is more dramatic as it follows a group of young characters from 1970 to 1980—trying, in part, to identify what were the most important events in American culture during that time frame. *I Love the '70s*, meanwhile, is perhaps the most postmodern of the group, because it features comedians recapping and reacting to the pop culture of the time.

When this project first began, I was interested in the researched collection of '70s films released in the '90s because I had grown up on them. As a young film viewer, my perception of "the seventies" was unmistakably impacted by these movies. The research project's examination of intellectual property, synergistic sale of products in multiple commodity forms, and cross-generational marketing strategies that reach multiple audiences reveals how '90s Hollywood established the framework that would foster my engagement with "the seventies." While filmmakers in 1990s revisited the past in new ways (darker coming-of-age films, postmodern ironic comedies, star-driven pastiche), all these cultural offerings could still contribute to the seventies brand and its various synergistic benefits.

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APPENDIX A. Blaxploitation Timeline (from www.shaft-themovie.com, June 21, 2000)