

Introduction

New Line Cinema and the Shape of the Modern Movie Business

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MATERIALS, METHODS, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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