

“Take a Film Where It Will Be Most Appreciated”

The First Decade of New Line Cinema

It started small. Robert Shaye founded New Line Cinema in August 1967. The following month, the company got its first public notice in a blurb, buried deep on a page of *Variety*, stating simply that “New Line Cinema Corp. registered to do business in New York.”¹ At this moment, the company was more of an aspiration than an organization dedicated to distributing films. By 1978, however, New Line would be a strong force in both the college cinema and midnight movie scenes, with a catalog of more than one hundred films, a small but dedicated team of employees, and an Academy Award for the film *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* (1978).

This chapter charts New Line Cinema’s development during the 1960s and 1970s, a trajectory that appears haphazard but ultimately demonstrates nuance and strategy. During this time, New Line functioned primarily as a nontheatrical distributor of films to college campuses, an area of the film industry that was small compared to Hollywood. Yet this was a heyday for viewing films on college campuses, as the study of cinema began to enter the academy in an organized, robust way, supported by the cinephilic and politicized youth culture centered on college campuses. The campus culture of this time was energized by all manner of issues, such as the antiwar movement and civil rights activism, and New Line’s programming was similarly diverse, eclectic, and energetic.

New Line displayed notable opportunism throughout this time, distributing a diverse selection of films that proved successful enough on campuses to allow the company to grow. In addition to art films, rock documentaries, and experimental shorts, New Line branched out into the midnight movie realm, serving an urban counterculture that rejected mainstream culture and values. New Line’s opportunism derived from economic necessity; the company remained financially

marginal throughout the period. This combination of opportunism and eclecticism, this *opportunistic eclecticism*, allowed New Line to flourish. Not only did New Line respond with unusual savvy to the highly varied taste cultures found on college campuses and in midnight movie theaters during the 1960s and 1970s, programming films and genres that resonated with dedicated fan communities; but it also nurtured and contributed to the sense of eclectic fragmentation within this cultural field. As later chapters make more apparent, New Line's experience with the college campus and midnight movie cultures proved to be key to the company's long-term strategy and identity. It was during this time and in these cultural realms that New Line developed the tactic of identifying, exploiting, and cultivating small, dedicated audience communities and, further, attempted to expand a "niche" film's audience beyond that expected community. College campuses and midnight movie theaters served as a training ground in how important social identity was to the formation of cinematic tastes and, further, how such tastes could be hailed and nurtured for economic gain. These were training grounds in the power of demographics, a lesson that New Line would take with it all the way from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

THE "NEW" IN NEW LINE

It would be difficult to describe the beginnings of New Line Cinema without also describing that of New Line founder Robert Shaye; indeed, New Line was a one-man operation for its first year of operation.² Shaye grew up in Detroit, where his father owned a wholesale grocery business. Although Shaye was interested in being an actor or filmmaker, his father strongly encouraged him to go into business. Shaye attended the University of Michigan in the late 1950s, where he studied business administration. Ann Arbor was fertile with philosophical, artistic, and political energy. In 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society, led by Tom Hayden, whose time at Michigan overlapped with Shaye's, wrote the Port Huron Statement. The Ann Arbor Film Festival, dedicated to avant-garde film, was founded in 1963 and initially screened its films on campus.

Shaye studied law at Columbia University and graduated in 1964. During this time, he made a short, experimental film titled *Images* and entered it into festivals and contests. The film received an enthusiastic response from the judges of a contest organized by the Society of Cinematologists, the precursor organization of today's Society for Cinema and Media Studies. The award was established in 1962 with the aim of "the encouragement of young American talent in the art of the moving image."³ Through this film and the award, Shaye connected with an alternative intellectual cinema culture that brought together aspects of the youth culture of the moment, the academy, and the experimental film scene. And while Shaye made only one other film before founding New Line—a short documentary

about witchcraft that he made while on a Fulbright in Sweden—the award from the Society of Cinematologists encouraged him to continue working in cinema.

Following his time in Sweden, Shaye returned to New York, where he worked in the photo stills department at the Museum of Modern Art, a job that brought him squarely within the city's intellectual film community. As Haidee Wasson has explained, MoMA was instrumental in the creation of a film culture in the United States that celebrated film as an *art*.⁴ Specifically, the museum's film library circulated films widely throughout North America and helped to shape the film culture at many universities that used the library as a resource.⁵ It helped cinema become part of a public intellectual discourse. However small his job at MoMA was, Shaye thus lived at one of the major centers for specialized film culture in the time leading up to the founding of New Line.

In fact, MoMA helped shape New Line's trajectory. New Line struck its first deal in 1967, to distribute two Czech films, *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* (1967) and *Martyrs of Love* (1967).⁶ The first film had played as part of the "Festival of New Czechoslovak Cinema" at Lincoln Center, presented by the Film Department of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art.⁷ This series, which played in June 1967, featured such films as *Daisies* (1966) and *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), among others. The festival brought Shaye into contact with foreign film producers who sought distribution for their pictures in the United States. Because of Shaye's position at MoMA, and because of the festival's presentation by the museum in a venue associated with an intellectual film culture, it made sense that Shaye would take foreign films onto college campuses and other sites that valued nonmainstream cinema. Further, this festival accorded with the recognition within the United States of what has become known as the Czech New Wave. This festival helped solidify these films into a coherent corpus for American viewers, in the wake of other "new waves" from various international locations.

The "newness" promoted in this festival partook of a larger celebration of "the new" in cinema culture of the 1960s. The French "Nouvelle Vague" was identified in 1959, so clearly distinguished that an article in *Variety* declared: "The so-called 'new wave' of filmmaking, which brought a flock of newcomers into the directorial setup . . . looks to be building into a tidal wave here."⁸ At this same time, Jonas Mekas wrote, "The 'new American wave' is not yet as accomplished a body of film-makers as its equivalent in France; but it is undeniably on its way."⁹ Over the next few years, Mekas published "The First Statement of the New Cinema Group" and "Notes on the New American Cinema," among other articles that sought to distinguish a "New American Cinema."¹⁰ Newness was a value to be sought after in filmmaking.

As yet another indication of a celebration of the "new" in 1960s film culture, MoMA ran a screening series titled "New Cinema: An International Selection" in January 1967, when Shaye was working there.¹¹ In addition to *Black God, White Devil* (Glauber Rocha, 1964), *Man Is Not a Bird* (Dušan Makavejev, 1965), and

Unreconciled (Jean-Marie Straub, 1965), the artist documentary *Vali: The Witch of Positano* (Sheldon Rochlin, 1965) was screened as part of this series, a film that New Line distributed shortly thereafter. Further, the series was accompanied by a symposium titled "Is There a New Cinema?" the panelists of which included Mekas, Amos Vogel, and Annette Michelson.¹² This series represented still another indication of a larger youth culture that sought the creation of a "new cinema" that better accorded with contemporary culture of the 1960s. In this swirl of an energetic cinema culture, Shaye hoped to name his company "New Wave Films" but found the name was taken. Years later, he wrote, "So New Line [was] as close as I could get. Added Cinema to get some respect."¹³ A second choice, perhaps, the name New Line Cinema might be seen nevertheless as one answer to the MoMA symposium's central question, "Is There a New Cinema?"

CAMPUS FILM CULTURE

By the time Shaye secured a contract to distribute the two Czech films, the company's name and activities lined up with a larger discourse of "the new" in film culture, carrying with it associations with youth, artistic innovation, and the hint of an oppositional politics. At this early stage in the company's history, its marketing materials featured the slogan "New Line Cinema: Film Distribution of the New Generation."¹⁴ From the start, New Line attempted to establish a legend for itself, an identifiable set of characteristics and meanings that might enhance its business by way of its perceived cultural value. New Line distributed films in a manner that similarly fit within the cultural register of newness and youthfulness. Operating as a "nontheatrical" distributor, New Line programed these and later films for college campuses. The nontheatrical distribution sector catered to many types of settings and venues. The major nontheatrical distributor Films Incorporated, for example, listed schools, colleges and universities, social service centers, boys' clubs, neighborhood houses, summer camps, churches, and a number of so-called "shut-in institutions," including hospitals, prisons, and reformatories, as among the clients it might serve.¹⁵

College campuses were among the most important of these venues in the 1960s. Although this was the period when film studies became institutionalized more broadly in American universities, surprisingly little has been written about film societies, campus film culture, or the industry that serviced that culture during the 1960s.¹⁶ As media scholar Andrea Comisky writes, "In the 1960s and 1970s, movies saturated campus life," and "campus film exhibition is fundamentally tied not just to the development of cinephilic culture (epitomized by the film society), but also to another marginal domain of film culture . . . 'useful cinema.'"¹⁷

The nontheatrical film distribution industry that fostered this culture was strong and lucrative. Smaller than the conventional, Hollywood industry, nontheatrical distribution was rich and dynamic during the 1960s and 1970s. As Comisky

writes, “Students of the 1960s and 1970s were bombarded with opportunities to watch movies,” and “virtually every imaginable kind of film appeared on campuses in the period.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the nontheatrical business sector that served college campuses entailed a range of companies, both small and large, that distributed a wide selection of movies, including “classic” Hollywood films, foreign art films, documentaries, and other genres not appearing contemporaneously in commercial theaters. An article from 1966 in *Billboard* stated, “An active business in renting entertainment films to college campuses and their students is in full swing,” a business “primarily built around several major companies, with scores of small local companies offering supplemental libraries.”¹⁹

Films Incorporated was the largest of these companies. Headquartered in Chicago, Films Inc. began operation in 1927 as a distributor of Hollywood films to nontheatrical venues.²⁰ By the mid-1960s, the company was distributing educational programming and handling nontheatrical engagements for multiple Hollywood studios, including 20th Century Fox and Paramount.²¹ The company’s catalog from 1962 is over 160 pages long and lists more than 1,500 films for rent, organized into broad, generic categories like “Comedy” and “War Themes” and then subdivided by more precise criteria, including the names of certain performers or subgeneric labels, such as “Backstage” musicals.

Among the “scores” of other companies that *Billboard* noted, a number specialized in foreign films and art cinema, the most notable among these being Audio Film Center Inc., Brandon Films, Contemporary Films, and Janus Films.²² Audio Brandon, which resulted from the merger of two of the aforementioned companies, offered an incredibly large and diverse selection of films in the 1970s. The company also offered a separate catalog, “International Film Classics,” which included “outstanding foreign language and English language 16mm sound features gathered from all corners of the globe.”²³ The company aimed this catalog at “the more mature viewer—the language student, the college student, film societies . . . and the more discriminating social or church groups.”²⁴ In this fashion, Audio Brandon targeted an intellectual, cinephilic population that could properly appreciate “quality” films. Similarly, Contemporary Films offered such movies as *Children of Paradise* (1945), *Boudou Saved from Drowning* (1932), and *Woman of the Dunes* (1964), as well as a number of pictures by Jean-Luc Godard.²⁵ Janus Films stood as a particularly distinguished company in this field because, first, it successfully distributed foreign art films to commercial theaters and, second, because its catalog featured some of the most celebrated art films of the time, including *The 400 Blows* (1959), *Rashomon* (1950), and *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

Such distributors of “quality cinema” commonly addressed and appealed to college-based audiences that sought a form of intellectual, “difficult” entertainment considered artistically and culturally superior to mainstream or exploitation cinema (though the audiences for all these types of films commonly overlapped).

That is, these specialty film distributors offered a cinephilic, intellectual cinema that combined entertainment with prestige and edification. Of course, companies like Films Incorporated and others *did* distribute “educational” films, too. Indeed, this odd mixture of edification, entertainment, artistic pretension, and politics characterizes campus film culture during this period.

New Line navigated and contributed to this campus film culture after entering the small but dynamic nontheatrical distribution sector. The company’s promotional and marketing materials from the time indicate how it sought to distinguish itself and its films in the late 1960s and early 1970s; in doing so, these materials point toward an active and heterogeneous movie culture on US college campuses. As film historian Haidee Wasson has explained, one of the ways MoMA framed cinema as “serious” was through the publication and circulation of program notes that provided information about the films.²⁶ The program notes that New Line produced and circulated for its films served both as promotional devices and as tools to educate college programmers and audiences. These newsprint newsletters were titled “Seymour: Program Notes for New Line Cinema.” “Seymour” was nothing more than a homophone for “see more,” as in “See more New Line movies.”

The notes for *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* demonstrate the dual promotional and educational function of these texts. On the first page appears a still image from the film, of a woman walking with a white horse, along with a description of the film, as well as an interview with director Jan Schmidt and quotes from reviews of the film.²⁷ Alongside this material, the notes situate the film as an important and acclaimed work that viewers will find accessible and intellectually engaging. The description of this postapocalyptic film states that the director’s method is “unpretentious” and that “it would be a mistake to take this film as a ‘parable.’” Instead, the document advises, “like the very best of science fiction and fantasy, its energy is directed toward an intense vision of what it really would be like—in the details, in the smallest details, in the texture and feel of the possible world it envisions.” Here, the notes promise viewers a film that combines formal brilliance and generic accessibility, following a logic of refinement and populism that would characterize much of New Line’s programming and promotional materials through the 1960s and 1970s.

This description, the interview with Schmidt, and the review quotes continue for the next several pages of the newsletter and are followed by smaller sections devoted to two short films, *Summer War* (1965) and *Dodge City* (c. 1967). At the very end of the notes, advertisements appear for two other New Line films, *Vali: The Witch of Positano* and *Martyrs of Love*. The “Seymour” notes for *Martyrs of Love* resemble those for *Hotel Ozone*, though the tone of the document appears to seek an even greater air of significance and artistic refinement. The description of the film states that the film “epitomizes a genre of stylized cinema—‘film of the

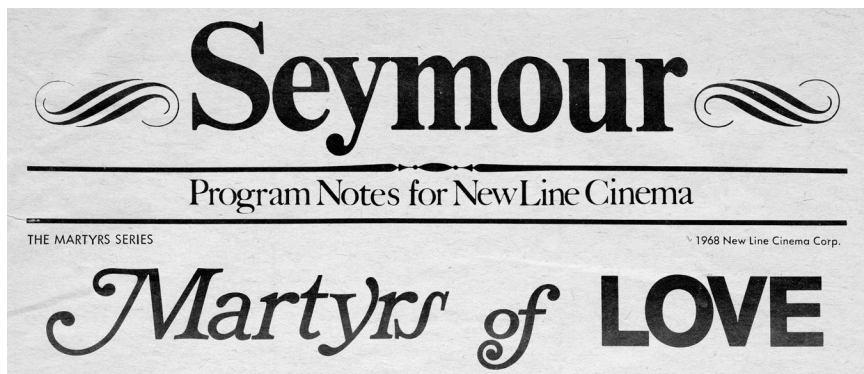


FIGURE 1. New Line distributed “Seymour” program notes in its newsletter to promote its films on college campuses, as well as to educate audiences about obscure films. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.

author’—which as an essence of personal vision, might be traced as far back as the film classics of Dali, René Clair, or Jean Cocteau.”²⁸ The subsequent pages are again filled with quotes from reviews and an interview with *Martyrs of Love* director Jan Nêmec, accompanied by images from the film. This edition of “Seymour” notes provides a short but informative description of the history of the Czech film school and film faculty at the Academy of Music Art. New Line sought to educate its college audience regarding the film, providing multiple aspects of a “preferred reading” of *Martyrs of Love*. It aimed to situate the film as formally innovative, reflecting an auteur’s personal vision, and as socially and historically significant due to its connection to the renowned film school. Clearly a promotional tool, the “Seymour” program notes point toward New Line’s early ambition to engage with a thoughtful and curious cinema audience.

New Line promoted its films to college audiences with additional materials, for instance sending programmers glossy production stills and promotional photographs related to *Martyrs*, likely intended to help the societies promote the film in their different locations. One picture taken from the film, for example, announces “A new CZECH comedy” following the title, while others have typed notes attached to contextualize them for programmers. One, for example, reads: “ANASTASIA’S DREAM is part of a trilogy called MARTYRS OF LOVE, a feature film from the New Czech Cinema to be sneak previewed . . . in association with New Line Cinema Corporation.”²⁹

In its attempt to entice and cultivate positive relationships with programmers on college campuses around the country, New Line advertised directly to them and, further, helped these programmers advertise themselves with materials related to the films. Because New Line handled offbeat fare, including comparatively

obscure, black-and-white, subtitled films from Czechoslovakia, promotion for the company consistently looked like educational material.

New Line's early films played at a number of noteworthy locations, and local and student newspapers reveal how college programmers appealed to audiences with New Line titles. One ad in the *Cornell Daily Sun* advertised *Martyrs of Love* in September 1969, playing at Ithaca College. The ad announces, "EUB presents New Line Cinema's 'The Martyrs of Love,' and indicates that the film will be playing in a room in the Union at nearby Ithaca College."³⁰ Similarly, an ad from 1968 in the *Michigan Daily* at the University of Michigan advertises that "CINEMA II presents WORLD WAR III in three award-winning films," consisting of *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* and the attached shorts.³¹ Both of these cases show how campus-based groups promoted themselves, the distributor, and the films. New Line worked to appeal not just to college audiences but also to the people and groups on the local level that sought those audiences. Further, the note in the *Michigan Daily* ad regarding "WORLD WAR III" indicates that these groups had some power over the ways New Line and its films were promoted. It was important for New Line to guide these programmers toward preferred understandings of the films through educational advertising materials.

One can get an even deeper sense of New Line's complex relationship with college film groups by looking at Columbia University, where there was a student group called the Board of Managers. The group's 1968 winter program included such art cinema standards as *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), *Masculin-Feminin* (1966), and *The Virgin Spring* (1960).³² At the end of the term, the group presented *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone*, which it advertised multiple times. Although most of these ads were small notices including only the title, date, location, and occasionally the price, the paper featured a full-page advertisement for the film on April 17.³³ This ad featured a sizable black-and-white image from the film, of a woman leaping onto a moving horse, which took up more than half the page, as well as a substantial excerpt from the film's review in *Time*, a review excerpt from *Newsday*, show time and price information, and the titles of the two accompanying short films. Even for a student newspaper, it is a bold advertisement. The ad declares, "ONLY PREVIOUS NEW YORK SHOWING: SELL-OUT AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART," attempting to create a sense of exclusivity and prestige.

Although it is unknown how many people attended this screening, *Late August at the Hotel Ozone* made enough of an impact that it earned a review in the *Daily Spectator* on the day it opened. Largely positive, the review relies heavily on New Line's marketing materials, with passages that closely paraphrase and even copy elements of the "Seymour" notes.³⁴ Thus, not only was New Line effective at working with campus groups to promote the company and its films, but its advertising and marketing materials at times influenced the reception of those films. These were early, small steps in legend building.

COUNTERPROGRAMMING AND COUNTERCULTURE

In its first several years of operation New Line quickly established a distribution presence on many college campuses. By May 1969, the company had distributed films to such schools as Penn State, Harvard, Pratt Institute of Art, University of Rochester, University of Washington, University of Buffalo, Hofstra University, University of New Hampshire, University of Windsor, Indiana University, and Princeton, along with the schools already mentioned.³⁵ In addition, the company occasionally programmed films at repertory and midnight movie venues, including the Elgin Theater in New York. Nevertheless, its catalog remained quite small, entailing short films, odd foreign films, and the occasional American independent or underground feature. In his review of *Martyrs of Love*, Vincent Canby noted, "The picture is the first release of New Line Cinema, a small independent company whose aim is to handle movies that other distributors wouldn't touch with a pole of any imaginable length."³⁶

This was a pivotal moment of change in movie culture that ultimately benefited New Line and its slightly haphazard approach to cinema. Within Hollywood, this moment was defined by the continued corporate conglomeration and the rise of new auteur-minded directors that would define the emerging "New Hollywood Cinema."³⁷ The financial success of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Easy Rider* (1969) represents a dedicated shift toward youth culture and the counterculture on the part of the studios, at the same time that these studios became part of new, diversified corporations that often had no previous dealings in film or media. As Jon Lewis has discussed, Hollywood engaged with the counterculture to varying degrees of success between 1967 and 1976, particularly as a number of Hollywood figures and aspirants lived counterculture lifestyles and also tried to forge careers in the movie business.³⁸ Some films that embodied countercultural values did well, perplexing studio bosses: *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) were all "timely, hip, and political."³⁹ Even so, Hollywood struggled to consistently engage with or represent the youth culture of the moment, opening cracks at the edges of film culture that small companies like New Line could enter and exploit.

The protests of May 1968 in France and the other student and public uprisings in various parts of the world that year politicized a good portion of the cinephilic youth culture of the moment.⁴⁰ This newly energized, politically motivated movie culture inspired journals and magazines, including *Cahiers du Cinema*, to claim a new revolutionary stance toward cinema. Likewise, a number of filmmakers became overly political in their filmmaking, or more so, with Jean Luc-Godard standing as one of the most prominent examples. New Line Cinema gained some of its first financial success and public attention in 1970 when it distributed the first film that Godard directed following May 1968, *1 + 1*, or *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968). The film was supposed to premier at the 1968 New York Film Festival,

along with *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1967) and *Weekend* (1967). However, it was pulled at the last minute due to processing delays.⁴¹ New Line acquired the nontheatrical rights to *Sympathy for the Devil* after it played at several other festivals.

The ostensible main attraction of *Sympathy* is the Rolling Stones, and it features long takes of the Rolling Stones in the studio recording the song "Sympathy for the Devil." Many of these passages suggest the tedium of the recording process, as long moments pass before anyone sings, plays an instrument, or interacts with someone else. Further, the quality of the music performed during these scenes often indicates how highly manufactured rock 'n' roll music actually is. While these passages undermine the myth of the raw genius and intuitive brilliance of the Rolling Stones, and by implication rock 'n' roll music more generally, the film's other segments take the form of leftist agitprop through speechifying and parable. The juxtaposition of these scenes with those featuring the Rolling Stones asks viewers to connect contemporary radical politics with contemporary pop culture in dialectical fashion.

Upon its commercial release in April 1970, the film got a middling review in the *New York Times*.⁴² Yet Craig Fisher has indicated that this film, along with Godard's other "late," more political films, had more difficulty finding commercial distribution and exhibition than his earlier films of "personal expression and romantic ambiguity."⁴³ And, indeed, it appears that the film played for only a limited time at a single movie theater in New York.⁴⁴ What Fisher overlooks, however, is that New Line distributed the film primarily to college campuses and the film played extensively in these venues. Indeed, before the film played at the commercial theater, New Line programmed it to play multiple nights at Hunter College in New York City. Afterward, New Line continued to show the film at colleges and universities around the country continuously for a number of years.

Although *Sympathy's* didactic political messages might have stymied its exhibition in commercial theaters, its combination of leftist politics and the appearance of the Rolling Stones appears to have made it a good match for exhibition at colleges, which at the time were scenes of student political engagement and activism. As the film's distributor, New Line drew on the film's dialectical form and marketed the film according to two distinct premises: first, the appearance of the hugely popular Rolling Stones and, second, an appeal to viewers with a taste for ideological and political filmmaking.

The company distributed multiple posters, fliers, and advertising proofs to the colleges that showed the film, each of which played up one of these marketing angles—or offered them both in juxtaposition. Cornell Cinema, which appears to have played the film in 1972, had a flier for the film, one side of which reads "Jean-Luc Godard on Black Power, Rape, Murder, Fascism, Acid, Pornography, Sex, Gore, Brutality . . . and all the other things that make life worth living."⁴⁵ This list of otherwise unconnected topics addressed viewers with a taste for provocative and political cinema; by invoking drugs, violence, and sex as keywords, the flier

even suggests an exploitation model of advertising. The bottom of the page reads, “Starring the Rolling Stones.”

The flier’s reverse side features a picture of singer Mick Jagger that takes up most of the space. The remainder is filled with quotes from reviews of the film in national magazines and newspapers. In making such prominent use of Jagger’s image, this side of the flier sells *Sympathy for the Devil* as a Rolling Stones movie. The quotes from the published reviews establish the film’s artistic legitimacy as well as its “revolutionary” position, as most of the blurbs discuss the film’s political content. Through this promotional flier, New Line framed the film as simultaneously politically radical, artistically innovative, and popularly accessible through its connection to the Rolling Stones.

New Line maintained this set of associations through the marketing materials sent to university film groups to “assist” them in their own efforts to promote screenings of the movie, as can be seen in an advertising proof sheet the company sent to Cornell Cinema.⁴⁶ This proof similarly features a large image of Jagger beneath big block letters that declare, “Godard. The Rolling Stones. ‘*Sympathy for the Devil* (1 + 1).” Multiple quotes from critics appear next to the image, announcing the film’s artistic and political significance. Instructions for college groups appear on the edge of the proof, giving technical advice about different kinds of print reproduction in print ads or leaflets. Not once but twice, the instructions state that the ads or fliers need to “to include information on time, place and date for your showing” at the bottom of the ad. This document demonstrates how New Line sought to promote its films and shape the ways people and groups promoted and exhibited these films.

Such materials indicate that New Line imagined a college film audience that would respond to the combined attractions of oppositional politics, artistic experimentation, and a rebellious hipness. That is, these ads suggest how New Line imagined, constructed, and even responded to a cinematic counterculture that sought resonant entertainment. Some evidence shows that this is precisely the audience that the film found. In his review of the film, Vincent Canby discusses not just the film’s form and content but the audience at Hunter College as well, where he evidently saw the film during its premier run. Canby noted, “From the amount of sweet, grassy effluvia wafting about the hall, it was apparent the audience was fairly hip, and one that was intent on being turned on, even if without the help of Godard’s ascetic, non-Head images.”⁴⁷ Canby’s comments suggest that the film served as a vehicle for people to get stoned in addition to, or instead of, engaging in serious art and political thought. We may surmise that this audience took the movie’s advertising to mean that it combined politics and rock ’n’ roll and chose to declare their own opposition to traditional values by getting high en masse.

A review of the film from a screening at Wayne State University in Detroit noted that “nearly one-third” of the audience walked out of the film. “If one plans

on an entertaining evening ogling over the Rolling Stones, ala the Beatles productions,” the critic wrote, “one might as well stay home.”⁴⁸ Yet the reviewer actually praised the film, suggesting that a considerable portion of the audience did not understand or chose to ignore the film’s double-inflected advertising. Thus, while the film may have sought a politically charged, counterculture audience, a portion of this audience appeared to prefer more conventional entertainment.

Nevertheless, the film’s advertisements in both major and college newspapers maintain the film’s double appeal—politics and rock ’n’ roll. Many of these ads indicated some slippage regarding the film’s title, including both the film’s original title, *1 + 1*, and the title given to it later by one of its producers, *Sympathy for the Devil*. Yet these different names actually represent two versions of the film. *1 + 1* is the film originally directed by Godard. Notoriously, however, one of the film’s producers, Iain Quarrier, added the fully mixed, complete version of the song “Sympathy for the Devil” at the end, providing audiences with the final product of the recording sessions they witness during the film. Yet Godard famously protested this addition, disowning it and, in fact, punching Quarrier in the face and stomach at the (modified) film’s London premier.⁴⁹

New Line split the difference and distributed *both* versions of the film to many venues.⁵⁰ This is perhaps unsurprising, given New Line’s position as a profit-seeking company. Although it might appeal to audiences with a taste for leftist, even Marxist politics, it did not discriminate as to how this audience might articulate their politics in terms of ticket purchases. That is, New Line’s business may have catered to the college-based counterculture, but this was business nevertheless; ideological rigidity appeared to serve no real purpose. Opportunism did.

The film appears to have been a modest hit for New Line and helped the company gain some prominence. Following its premiere at Hunter College and its run at the Murray Hill Theater, *Sympathy for the Devil* did play at some commercial theaters in 1970–72 and appears to have done quite well in those venues.⁵¹ Yet the film played primarily at college venues and found considerable financial success there. As one story put it, “New Line Cinema is bypassing theatrical distribution completely with Godard’s ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ and amassing impressive grosses at university screenings across the country.”⁵² This story highlights how the film was held up as a financial success early in its nontheatrical run, consequently positioning New Line as a small but successful company.

Although the film combined radical politics and pop culture icons in a way that appeared logical to some audiences but confusing to others, *Sympathy for the Devil* helped define New Line within the field of nontheatrical distribution and college movie culture more generally. Shaye and others at New Line used this film’s success to distinguish the company as “political” in its own right. “Exhibitors that cry for youth-oriented product,” *Variety* observed, “very often don’t recognize potential blockbusters when they see them, and as a result are forcing at least one indie distributor to seek whole new channels of exhibition. That is the opinion of

Bob Shaye, president of New Line Cinema Corp.”⁵³ In this characterization, New Line comes off as responsive to hip movie audiences. The company’s marginality appears here as an unwanted but nevertheless strategic asset, allowing it to define itself as opposed to Hollywood and connected to youth culture.

Seth Williamson, New Line’s director of marketing at the time, took the point even further, according to a story in *Billboard*. In his characterization, New Line’s objective was to connect to existing student groups and have them build excitement for New Line’s films as a kind of viral marketing: “Supporting the groups that develop an audience, creates a sure-fire promotion for a motion picture.”⁵⁴ The story displays New Line’s strategy of harnessing existing cultural energies and turning them toward ticket sales. Williamson elaborated: “The audience [for *Sympathy for the Devil*] was there because a film based on revolutionary ideals and the Rolling Stones would, we felt, receive the most response from a campus audience. Our philosophy is to take a film where it will be most appreciated. This brings a built-in promotion by word of mouth.”⁵⁵

The implication is that New Line would latch on to the political, artistic, and cinematic energies of campus culture and turn this into profit. Just as important, however, Williamson implies that New Line is actually providing a service to college campuses, distributing to these venues not simply because it can’t book conventional theaters but because this is the social field that has the most desire for New Line’s films. A chain of associations appears: *Sympathy for the Devil* is political, artistic, and hip, and so is New Line Cinema. College film cultures are political, artistic, and hip, and so is New Line Cinema.

New Line’s roster of films continued to grow during the early 1970s, and the company largely maintained its specialization in foreign art films and American independent and underground films. By the time the company organized its first official catalog in 1973, it boasted dozens of movies from all over the world. It included films from European auteurs like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Robert Bresson, and Werner Herzog, as well as pictures from American literary figures Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut. Many New Line films at this time upheld an interest in politics or artistic distinction, or both, though perhaps none brought these issues together as closely as *Sympathy for the Devil*.

New Line’s first catalog also made clear that the company aimed at college audiences: “Films in the 70s offers an unprecedented variety of styles and influences which should be an important part of any campus entertainment and cultural program.”⁵⁶ Here, the catalog acknowledges the heterogeneity of movie culture at this historical moment, a diversity it tries to align with the heterogeneity of films found within the catalog itself. But it celebrates this multiplicity of film styles and genres as a cultural good. The catalog asserts that cinema is both a form of entertainment and culture, and that this blend of interests in fun and enrichment is especially important on college campuses. Appealing directly to campus programmers, the catalog declares: “As film programmers, you have the opportunity to go beyond

standard film exhibition routine. Hollywood and traditional classics are no doubt an important part of a program, but film today goes further than these tried and true narrow limits. A campus film program should be more than just another movie theater in your community.”⁵⁷

Conventional cinema may be fine, the catalog argues, but college audiences should push themselves beyond such fare and “graduate” to a more advanced cinema that New Line can provide. “College is the only time when students will have the opportunity to be exposed to the important variety of independent film programming,” it asserts. “These are films that inform, entertain and fascinate on a broad level.”

Like the marketing materials discussed above, the New Line catalog also discussed ways the company could assist film societies and other campus groups with whatever they needed to screen a film. The catalog states that the company can send a variety of promotional materials to be used on campus, including trailers, posters, “advertising design sets,” production stills, one-sheets, and recordings to be used as prepared radio advertisements.⁵⁸ Here we see again how New Line sought to overcome the possible variations among film groups and local institutional conditions by providing materials to be used in promoting the films, much in the way a traditional theatrical distributor might promote its products. More interesting, perhaps, the catalog claims that New Line “has a trained staff of recent college graduates whose job is to work with you and your film program.”⁵⁹ With this, the company seeks to distinguish itself as organically connected to youth culture and tastes. The catalog implies that New Line literally *embodies* college film culture.

In addition to narrative features, New Line distributed a collection of experimental films and documentaries that the catalog placed in a section called “New Line, New Wave.” The catalog touts such films as representing important cinematic innovations comparable to recent work made “in major studio productions such as ‘Easy Rider’ or the NEW AMERICAN CINEMA of Jonas Mekas.”⁶⁰ The catalog points out that such short, underground films have had difficulty finding distribution, thereby positioning New Line as providing an important cultural service. Although some of the films in this section are more straightforward documentaries or experimental works, many of the films in the “New Wave” section connect directly to the oppositional politics of the counterculture at the time. For instance, New Line distributed Morley Markson’s feature-length documentary *Breathing Together: Revolution of the Electric Family* (1971), which features interviews regarding culture and politics by such figures as R. Buckminster Fuller, Allen Ginsberg, and Abbie Hoffman. Likewise, this section of the catalog offered *Paradise Now* (1970), a film of the play by the radical leftist, experimental theater troupe the Living Theater.

Some of the films distributed by New Line to college campuses actually reflect the political and cultural life on those campuses. One notable example is

Confrontation at Kent State (1970), a documentary made during the week following the shooting of students at Kent State by members of the Ohio National Guard during an antiwar protest on May 4, 1970. Directed by filmmaker and Kent State faculty member Richard Myers and produced with help from students, the film includes interviews with students, local citizens, and members of the National Guard. It also includes footage of the campus both before and following the tragedy.

In the negotiations with the filmmakers, New Line attempted to set aside some of *Confrontation*'s rental revenue to support an award for other "politically oriented" films, though it is unclear if this plan ever came about.⁶¹ New Line apparently secured nonexclusive rights to distribute the film, to the chagrin of Robert Shaye as indicated in his correspondence with the filmmaker.⁶² Nevertheless, a deal was set for a fifty-fifty revenue-sharing agreement between New Line and the filmmakers, with the producers putting their share of the revenue into a fund that would support "worthwhile organizations, mainly medical and legal student aid groups."⁶³ According to the New Line catalog entry for the film, "After the initial cost of the film is paid, the rentals will be put in a memorial fund for the victims of the shooting. New Line is distributing the film as a public service."⁶⁴

Here, New Line gets caught in a *mise en abyme* of 1970s university culture. What began as an organic manifestation of the antiwar movement on the Kent State campus got transformed into a cinematic rendering of particular aspects of that same, local cultural scene. But the antiwar movement was a political and cultural phenomenon that shaped colleges and other institutions internationally. Ledgers show that New Line was able to book *Confrontation at Kent State* at colleges across the United States.⁶⁵ Many of these screenings were themselves articulations of the antiwar movement and the counterculture, making the film a medium of exchange of oppositional politics and, through its role as distributor, positioning New Line as the mediator of this political and cultural exchange.⁶⁶ The company facilitated the circulation of a politics of civic protest as a matter of business.

Another film within New Line's "New Wave" program was *Branches*, which also aligned New Line Cinema with the desires and ideals of college film culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The film was directed by illustrator and experimental filmmaker Ed Emshwiller and produced by "Cornell University Cinema," the same film society that exhibited numerous New Line offerings. Emshwiller took the opportunity of his residency at Cornell during the summer of 1970 to make a film about contemporary college culture with students themselves.⁶⁷

The film is picaresque, drifting from vignette to vignette, and follows a young man, Number One, who wanders through the film. It works in a highly conceptual, symbolic register, with Number One encountering people who represent different psychological, social, and political positions. A considerable number of scenes involve his sexual pursuit of a young woman, and indeed, the film appears very much invested in an exploration of the libidinal energies of college cultures. Other scenes depict Number One engaging in conversations regarding social issues and



FIGURE 2. Ed Emshwiller directing *Branches* on the campus of Cornell University, 1970. New Line distributed this film to colleges around the country. Cornell Cinema.

politics, including organic farming and Black politics. *Branches* thus offers a creative interpretation of college life in the early 1970s, generated from within that culture. The film brings together an admixture of values that Cornell students held regarding politics, social life, and cinema itself, channeled through Emshwiller.

EXPANDING TASTES, EXPANDING BUSINESS

In 1972, *Billboard* magazine referred to New Line as “one of the major non-theatrical distribs operating in the U.S. college market.”⁶⁸ The company had contacts at around a thousand universities and colleges in the United States.⁶⁹ By 1973, it had multiple employees and the apparatus necessary to handle distribution to colleges and some commercial venues across the country.

The company also expanded into new genres and cinematic registers during this period, following a logic of opportunistic eclecticism at once commercial and cultural. As indicated by the company’s first catalog from 1973, New Line was already defined by a wide range of films and genres, all of which differed from the commercial cinema of the time, including the auteur works of the Hollywood Renaissance. Indeed, even while playing an important role in college film distribution, New Line remained decidedly marginal within the larger movie business in the mid-1970s. But part of its expansion at this moment also involved expanding

FIGURE 3. Shaye obtained a print of *Reefer Madness*, which was in the public domain. Playing on numerous college campuses and at midnight movie screenings, the film was an early hit for New Line Cinema. Cornell Cinema.



into films *intentionally* aimed at marginal audiences. This was clear when in 1972 New Line ventured into the area of exploitation and camp cinema, first with *Reefer Madness* (1936) and the following year with John Waters's *Pink Flamingos*.

Reefer Madness is an anti-marijuana melodrama that tells the story of a handful of teenagers who get corrupted by a group of drug dealers, and features several hyperbolic sequences in which the characters act wildly under the drug's influence. Eventually the police arrest the dealers, and the teenagers are safe once more. Despite the film's original aim to serve as anti-drug propaganda, the head of the pro-legalization National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), Keith Stroup, screened it at fund-raising events in 1972.⁷⁰ Later that year, the film was also screened as a midnight movie at the Elgin and Olympia theaters in New York.⁷¹

The film was in the public domain, allowing anyone who had a physical print of the film to screen it for money, and multiple companies offered the film simultaneously in the early and mid-1970s. Having studied intellectual property law at Columbia University, Shaye knew well that controlling intellectual property was central to the business of film distribution; he even earned second prize in Columbia's Nathan Burkan Memorial Competition, which acknowledges academic studies about copyright law.⁷² For its part, New Line acquired a physical copy of the film from a private party and quickly placed the film in commercial theaters and college screenings across the country.⁷³ The company's first catalog paired the film with *Martian Space Party* (1972), by the Firesign Theater comedy troupe, as "a complete package."⁷⁴ *Reefer Madness* was a success for New Line, and in 1973 the company acquired additional exploitation films aimed at camp audiences with which it might be paired. New Line released the similar anti-drug film

The Cocaine Fiends (1935, originally titled *The Pace That Kills*) and the anti-VD film *Sex Madness* (1938).

Now boasting a slate of camp films and finding success with them in midnight movie theaters and college campuses alike, New Line forged an even clearer “renegade” industrial and cultural identity. On one hand, moving into exploitation cinema and the midnight movie scene put New Line into a fairly crowded market, with companies like Crown Pictures, New World Pictures, Dimension Pictures, and American International Pictures all finding success supplying low-budget films to drive-ins and midnight movie venues.⁷⁵ On the other hand, New Line proved successful amid this competition, helping to shape the landscape of exploitation cinema. John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* was crucial in this regard.

Indeed, it would be hard to disentangle New Line Cinema’s legend in the 1970s from that of director John Waters.⁷⁶ As is well established, Waters began his career making short absurdist films in Baltimore and worked diligently to publicize and screen them. Waters went on to produce two feature-length films of similar strangeness, *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Multiple Maniacs* (1970). At this point, Waters sought broader distribution for his films, but when he initially approached New Line cinema with his work, the company declined.⁷⁷ Fatefully, New Line did acquire *Pink Flamingos* after it had screened at several venues in Baltimore and elsewhere. Matt Connolly argues that New Line initially mishandled the distribution of the film, placing it in a gay porn theater; it took some time before the company booked it as a midnight movie at the Orpheum and then the Elgin Theater in February 1973.⁷⁸ The film was a success at the Elgin, and the theater programmed it for multiple midnight screenings per week during the spring of 1973.⁷⁹

Placing the film at the Elgin helped to give some cultural resonance and definition to *Pink Flamingos*. The Elgin had developed the practice of screening offbeat movies at midnight for audiences interested in nonmainstream, esoteric cinema. Before *Pink Flamingos*, the Elgin had screened the psychedelic Western *El Topo* (1970) continuously for over half a year in 1971.⁸⁰ This film’s extended run helped inaugurate “midnight movies” as a distinct element of alternative film culture. In the early 1970s, this practice entailed an alignment of certain kinds of offbeat films, specific theaters with reputations for programming such fare at midnight, and audiences that sought cultural distinction by demonstrating a taste for films that rejected Hollywood’s visual aesthetics and narrative standards. Midnight movies ranged greatly in technical skill and style, and their audiences treated them with a combination of aesthetic appreciation and ironic superiority. In many cases, the scene at midnight screenings was as much about participating in group intoxication as it was about watching a movie.

Pink Flamingos was poised well to succeed in this milieu. The film stars the drag queen Divine as Babs Johnson, who prides herself on being the “filthiest person alive.” The film follows Babs in her efforts to maintain her position when she is challenged by the Marbles, a couple that wishes to be known as the filthiest

people alive, who kidnap and impregnate women and sell the babies to lesbians. With this competition providing the plot, the film otherwise has a loose, somewhat picaresque structure, with numerous non sequitur vignettes that feature nonnormative sexual or social behavior. The film depicts incest, bestiality, public flashing, and perhaps most infamously, coprophagia. *Pink Flamingos* intends to challenge norms of social and sexual behavior, always coloring its scenes of deviance with a comic sensibility through exaggerated affect or goofy playfulness.

New Line broadened its identity when it acquired *Pink Flamingos*. In 1972, the company also made a deal to distribute a collection of films that had screened at the New York Erotic Film Festival.⁸¹ Around this same time, New Line created a new label: “Saliva Films.” This was precisely the same moment that *Deep Throat* brought sexually explicit films into the wider movie culture, having premiered in New York in the summer of 1972 and subsequently earning record revenues playing in conventional theaters. New Line’s Distribution of *The Best of the New York Erotic Film Fest* thus positioned the company as taking a small part in the temporary mainstreaming of pornography during the 1970s. And yet, through the Saliva label, New Line appeared somewhat ambivalent about this position.

New Line’s first catalog gives Saliva Films its own designated section. The films featured in this section include sexually oriented movies such as *Bizarre* (aka *Secrets of Sex*, 1970) by Anthony Balch and *Together* (1971). *Pink Flamingos* is the first film in this section, suggesting that New Line associated the film with sexploitation pictures. Indeed, this catalog section works to differentiate these films from the others. A page announces “Films of Terror and Delight” and then provides a long, convoluted description of the Saliva films and New Line’s approach to promoting them:

Films of Terror and Delight.

Sex! Sensation! Violence! Not all films are interesting or worthwhile only because of artistic merit or because of critical acclaim. New Line has established the Saliva Collection to be representative of films that reflect other factors in the society. In the last few years we have seen sensationalism increase not only in the content of films, but in the whole approach to marketing them as well. We feel that films that exploit these tastes and needs represent an important part of American culture today. We’re not making a value judgment on the merit of our Saliva Films, but we think that they’re part of the culture and can be a new concept in film programming.⁸²

The way the catalog emphasizes sex and violence clearly connects Saliva films to more conventional exploitation films. It also makes an appeal (likely disingenuous) to the *cultural* validity or “pedagogical appeal” of sexploitation films, another long-standing tactic of exploitation film marketing and promotion.⁸³

For all that *Pink Flamingos* depicts an array of nonnormative sexual identities and practices, John Waters did not intend the film as sexploitation, nor would the film get understood that way as it circulated through culture. New Line’s eventual

promotion of the film positioned it as an intentionally campy avant-garde film designed to appeal to cult film aficionados. Matt Connolly argues convincingly that the advertising and marketing materials put out by New Line for Waters's films of the 1970s represent, to varying degrees, a mixture of the impulses of the director and of the distributor. Connolly suggests that New Line intended to connect Waters with pornography or graphic salaciousness more directly, whereas Waters aimed to create simpler, more playful advertising materials, even if they still challenged conventional standards of good taste.

I am less interested, however, in sorting out who had the agency in promoting Waters and his films than in assessing the tone the eventual marketing materials took, which served as the basis for the larger cultural impressions that both Waters and New Line Cinema made. In this respect, *Pink Flamingos* was strongly positioned as a deliberate assault on conventional norms and morality. Even if the film reveled in sensational depictions of nonnormative sexualities and behaviors, its advertising positioned it as a goofy but impressive piece of alternative cinema.

This strategy can be seen in advertising materials from its run at the Biograph Theater in Washington, DC, as the film expanded beyond New York to midnight screenings around the country through the early 1970s. One ad features the Saliva Films logo at the top and announces "Pink Flamingos" above a picture of Divine with a gun in her hand. A large text bubble emitting from her mouth contains quotes from reviews that attest to the film's depraved intensity. The bottom of the ad promises audience members will receive a "Free Pink Phlegm-ingo Barf Bag with each admission." Accompanying this advertisement is a "Poor Taste Quiz" that asks, "Do you know what the longest running midnite movie in the history of Washington, D.C. is? (*HINT*: Over 20 weeks)," as well as "Do you know what movie theater gives you a barf bag with each admission to its midnight show?"⁸⁴

With the now-classic image of Divine with the gun, this ad resembles many other advertisements and posters for the film, though it does not feature the tagline "an exercise in bad taste" that so many other posters had. A pull quote from one of the reviews lists many of the film's distinct attractions, including Divine, a "transvestite," and "bestiality." At the same time, the pull quote compares the film to *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) in an effort to signal the film's shock value and cultural legitimacy. This ad, then, and all the promotional materials like it created an identity for *Pink Flamingos* that rested on cultural value *through* the qualities that would otherwise mark the film as valueless, namely shock, violence, and anti-heteronormative sexualities. *Pink Flamingos* was not porn; it was counterculture art.

The film was successful as it played at theaters across the country on a rolling basis, and some of these runs were incredibly long. *Variety* noted that the film was booked to play at Walter Reade theaters in multiple cities around the country, including New York, New Orleans, Brookline (Massachusetts), and Portland (Oregon).⁸⁵ In addition to midnight movie theaters, New Line distributed *Pink*

Pink Flamingos

Directed by John Waters
Color, 95 minutes.

PINK FLAMINGOS stars Divine, Edy the Egg Lady, David Lochary and Mink Stole. Divine, living in a pink trailer outside Baltimore, holds the title of “The World’s Filthiest Person.” Connie and Raymond Marble are out to “outfilthy” Divine and take the title for themselves. The Marble’s main claim to fame is their business of kidnapping hippie girls, impregnating them, and selling the babies to lesbian couples. In a series of hilarious and disgusting adventures, Divine and her family finally capture the Marbles and execute them in front of the tabloid press.

THE CRITICS:

“Ten times more interesting than ‘Last Tango in Paris’.” —Village Voice

“Goes beyond pornography...The nearest American film to Bunuel’s ‘Andalusian Dog’.” —New York Magazine

“A cheap, bizarre comedy that represents a totally different response to an unsatisfactory world...PINK FLAMINGOS presents a bizarre but enjoyable world. It affirms the joy of living.” —The Pennsylvania Voice

FIGURE 4. The New Line Cinema catalog positioned *Pink Flamingos* as a shocking piece of art by highlighting film critics who compared it to established works of art cinema. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.

Flamingos to college campuses. Records show that the film screened, for instance, at the University of New Mexico for three nights in October 1974 and sold the two hundred-seat theater out for the first two of those screenings.⁸⁶ The film also played at Syracuse University in September 1974 to even larger crowds.⁸⁷

Although far eclipsed by Hollywood hits of the era, like *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Sting* (1973), *Pink Flamingos* did considerable business within the comparatively minor realm of midnight movies. New Line reported that *Pink Flamingos* had made \$500,000 by early 1974.⁸⁸ According to Waters’s own documents, however, the movie earned around \$50,000 in 1974, nearly \$38,000 in 1975, and over \$50,000 in 1976, which was split between Waters and New Line. Although these numbers come nowhere near the \$500,000 publicly reported by New Line, they are respectable revenues considering the film’s budget of \$10,000–\$12,000. Other documents indicate that the overall theatrical gross for *Pink Flamingos* stood at around \$1 million as of March 1976.⁸⁹ For New Line, *Flamingos* represented not merely an alignment with exploitation cinema but also a consistent source of revenue *through* its association with this genre.

In fact, the success of *Flamingos* coincided with New Line’s internal growth and a more concerted effort to increase exhibition in commercial theaters for its films. An important part of this expansion involved hiring Stanley Dudleson, who had worked at such companies as Cannon, Screen Gems, and RKO.⁹⁰ Dudleson

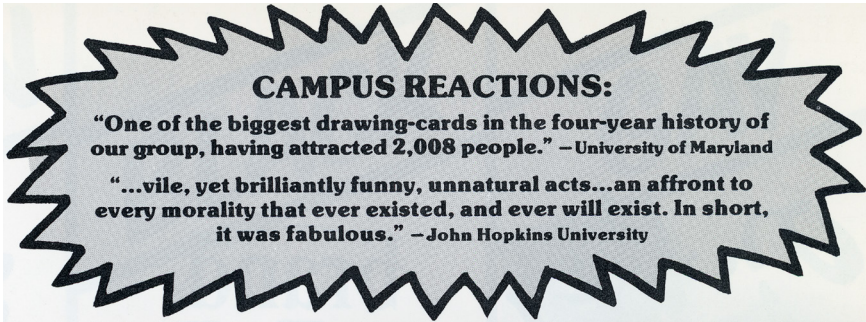


FIGURE 5. The catalog also showcased testimonials of *Pink Flamingos*' popularity on college campuses. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.

had also worked at American International Pictures (AIP) TV and credited AIP producer Sam Arkoff for training him in the independent film business.⁹¹ Soon after Dudleson's appointment, it was reported that the company would create a new subdivision to handle exploitation films, which would replace Saliva, called Gross National Pictures, or GNP.⁹² Here, the double meaning of “gross” is clear. New Line would continue to distribute movies with outlandish content and rely on the revenues garnered through supplying such movies.

Although the Saliva label would persist in New Line marketing materials for some time longer, and although the company refrained from greatly expanding its distribution of exploitation films during the mid-1970s, the company did maintain its relationship with Waters and distributed his subsequent films through the decade. The first of these was *Female Trouble* (1974), which Waters produced for \$25,000.⁹³ The film stars Divine as the protagonist Dawn Davenport and features many of the John Waters troupe, including Mink Stole, Cookie Mueller, and Edith Massey. The film tracks Davenport as she progresses through life, first quitting school and running away from home, then engaging in a life of depravity and crime, until she is executed in an electric chair after many misadventures.

As another film about outrageous characters who flaunt their social nonconformity and criminality, *Female Trouble* appeared to New Line like a natural follow-up to *Pink Flamingos*, and the company promoted and distributed it in a similar fashion. In addition to highlighting the film's shock value, advertisements for *Female Trouble* connected the film overtly to Waters and *Pink Flamingos*. For example, an advertisement from a screening at San Francisco's Presidio Theater in 1976 announced, “Divine Returns!” and pictured her along with Susan Walsh and Cookie Mueller.⁹⁴ The ad promised “the whole ‘Pink Flamingos’ gang, in JOHN WATERS’ *Female Trouble*.” By emphasizing Waters's name, the ad situated him as an auteur. For Connolly, this makes an important point regarding New Line's marketing tactics for Waters: “Ever conscious of film-marketing appeals, Waters likely did not object to this, but it underscores the extent to which New Line saw the film

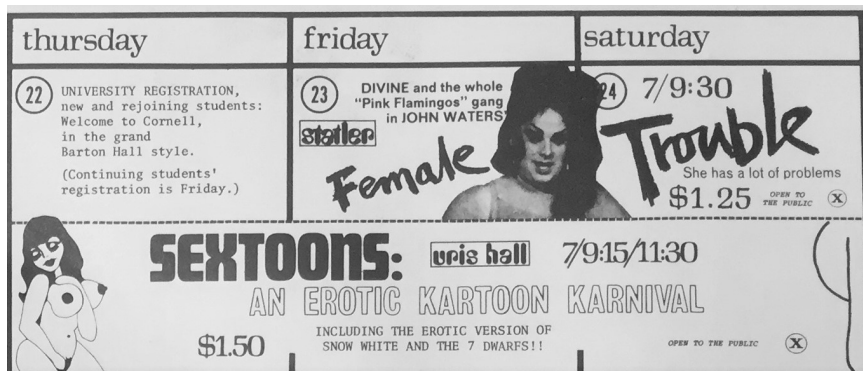


FIGURE 6. This snippet from the Cornell Cinema calendar from January 1975 shows how New Line connected *Female Trouble* to *Pink Flamingos*. It also shows that the college film society programmed the film in relation to other sexually charged movies. Cornell Cinema.

as an expansion of a pre-established directorial brand and not anything distinctly different.”⁹⁵

In addition to these attractions, the *Female Trouble* ad features a bold letter X, like a rating, and reads: “About this X. Preview audiences have indicated that ‘Female Trouble’ includes scenes of extraordinary perversity. The distributor therefore wishes to caution the potential viewer that ‘Female Trouble’ may be seen as sexually and morally offensive.”⁹⁶ Here, New Line uses the strategy common to exploitation movie advertising of appealing to viewers’ desire for salacious movie content through a disingenuous warning about such material. *Female Trouble* gets framed as a film of sexual and social deviance, and New Line presents itself as the winking purveyor of such deviancy. Further, the explanation about “this X” indicates that New Line wished to differentiate the film from other films with that rating, namely pornography and other conventional sexploitation movies.

Aside from midnight screenings, New Line attempted to book the film as a conventional theatrical release throughout 1975. Yet, as Connolly has detailed, *Female Trouble* did not have the staying power that *Pink Flamingos* did, and revenues dropped quickly after the film opened in cities across the country.⁹⁷ In fact, the midnight screening at the Presidio in 1976 paired the film with *Pink Flamingos*, demonstrating a kind of retreat to the release formula so successful for that earlier film.

As with *Pink Flamingos*, New Line distributed *Female Trouble* on college campuses. When strategizing about how to market *Female Trouble* to universities, the nontheatrical division at New Line worked in tandem with New Line Presentations to have Waters appear at opening screenings of the film in various cities across the

country.⁹⁸ Having Waters, and occasionally the players from his films, appear on campuses had become a consistent promotional practice by this point. The revenue from these appearances significantly boosted those from programming the film. While the film rental was set at “\$200 or higher,” Waters’s rate was around \$500.⁹⁹ New Line planned to target universities in sixteen different cities, including large ones like Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Minneapolis as well as college towns like Ann Arbor, Boulder, and Iowa City.¹⁰⁰ Closer to home for Waters, it played at the University of Maryland in November 1978.¹⁰¹

New Line found even less success when it distributed Waters’s next film, *Desperate Living*. Once again, the company supplemented the film’s theatrical release with a nontheatrical run at universities. The film played on November 7, 1977, at the University of South Florida, for instance, which served as the film’s “South-eastern Premier,” and John Waters appeared at the event “in the flesh.”¹⁰² By this point, in fact, Waters appears to have generated an auteur cult of his own based on the cult audience attending his films. Further, his cultural position took on a new legitimacy during this period. In addition to his appearances and speaking engagements, respected film critics treated his movies as legitimate works of cinema, even if they were highly unconventional.

Perhaps the greatest sign of Waters’s elevation to the status of an auteur with a vision worth taking seriously was that the Museum of Modern Art booked *Pink Flamingos* as part of its “Bicentennial salute to American Film Comedy” in 1976. An announcement from New Line quoted MoMA as saying, “We feel this film is an important representation of modern-day comic attitudes.”¹⁰³ MoMA’s own publicity flier for *Pink Flamingos* celebrates the film as an intelligent and intentionally subversive “assault on the bastions of 1973 Propriety.”¹⁰⁴ Yet the announcement attempts to connect the film to the larger comedy film series in adding: “That this is an American film comedy there is no doubt.”

MoMA consecrated Waters’s film as legitimate art worthy of serious consideration. In this respect, the MoMA screening of *Pink Flamingos* resonated with an element of New Line’s industrial and cultural identity. Cultural elites at MoMA were taking Waters seriously at the same time that his films played to college audiences who had appetites for entertainment and edification alike, at the same time that New Line was seeking bigger commercial success by expanding its theatrical distribution efforts.

Despite these efforts, Waters’s films never gained traction in traditional theaters. Neither *Female Trouble* nor *Desperate Living* enjoyed the same financial success as *Pink Flamingos*, earning New Line \$104,000 and \$68,000, respectively, over the lifetime of their runs in both conventional and college campus theaters.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, *Pink Flamingos* and Waters’s subsequent films of the 1970s helped define New Line during this period, coloring the company’s legend as a renegade maverick that challenged both industrial norms and cultural standards.

EDUCATION AS ENTERTAINMENT: NEW LINE PRESENTATIONS

While New Line expanded into exploitation movies in the early 1970s, the company also entered an entirely new business endeavor, which seems, on first consideration, to contrast with its commodification of lowbrow culture. Specifically, New Line entered the “lecture bureau” business, representing public figures for paid speaking engagements, and the company eventually created a division called New Line Presentations. The company started booking personal appearances attached to campus film screenings in the early 1970s. As noted, John Waters would frequently appear at showings of *Pink Flamingos*. New Line may thus have first gotten the idea for programming speakers at universities from the success of Waters’s personal appearances. Slightly earlier, however, in 1971, New Line was already booking screenings of Norman Mailer’s film *Maidstone* (1970), and the company arranged speaking engagements for Mailer as early as the summer of 1972.¹⁰⁶ It does not appear that New Line Presentations at this point was a distinct division within the company. The first public mention of New Line’s lecture bureau occurred in an article in *Variety* from the summer of 1973, but the company did not distribute a New Line Presentations catalog until 1974 or early 1975.¹⁰⁷

As a cultural phenomenon and business, the lecture circuit got its start in the late 1800s at the Chautauqua Institute in western New York, where attendees and residents could hear intellectual but accessible lectures on a variety of topics. It subsequently became common for women’s clubs, fraternal organizations, and other civic groups to host speakers covering a range of popular but intellectual topics.¹⁰⁸ This form of public intellectual entertainment persisted into the 1960s and 1970s, with speakers appearing at “every town hall, every trade association, every chapter of Rotary, Kiwanis, Eagles and Elks” clubs.¹⁰⁹

By the mid-1960s, college campuses became a dominant site of the lecture circuit, and thousands of colleges around the country would each book ten to fifteen speakers a year.¹¹⁰ In the late 1960s, estimates of the size of the overall lecture business ranged from \$65 to \$100 million, and by the mid-1970s, according to one story, the lecture business was “enjoying its healthiest boom ever, with a gross annual take estimated at \$100 million.”¹¹¹ By then, the lecture business was dominated by a dozen companies, mainly operating out of New York, with dozens of smaller companies “scattered around the country.”¹¹²

The lecture circuit covered a remarkably wide range of speakers and topics. As one story put it, “The lecture business provides a clue as to what’s on America’s mind at any given time.”¹¹³ Audiences of the 1970s appeared especially interested in speakers that addressed topics like the Watergate and CIA scandals. Other popular speakers included humorists like Art Buchwald and advice gurus like Ann Landers.¹¹⁴ As the lecture circuit intertwined with college campus culture,

it opened up a new spectrum of speakers and issues. In addition to conventional speakers such as politicians, military figures, and authors of respected literature, a report asserted, the college audience “openly admires kooks, cuckoos and controversy in equal portions.”¹¹⁵ The president of the Keedick Lecture Bureau noted that controversial speakers were particularly appealing: “If you’re anti-Establishment, it usually makes you more controversial than the pro-Establishment type.”¹¹⁶ The field included “spicy figures” like Andy Warhol and Timothy Leary, as well as spiritualists, yoga enthusiasts, and figures discussing birth control and abortion.¹¹⁷

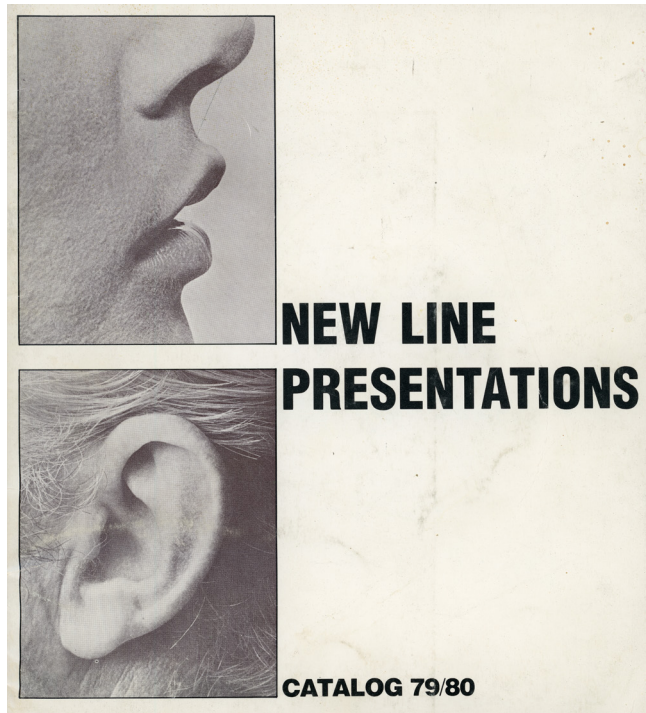
Thus, New Line was fairly well poised to enter this odd corner of the “media business” when it did. The field was already defined by a mixture of intellectualism, controversial politics, and sensationalism. These qualities were packaged as a kind of educational entertainment experience that resonated strongly with the college campus culture already in existence. That is to say, if New Line was already in the business of mixing “education” and “entertainment” by bringing diverse, niche films to college campuses, the lecture circuit offered similar appeals and aligned well with the company’s profile. It seemed especially fitting for New Line to enter this business given the company’s established relationships with student groups at colleges across the country.

Records indicate that working with Norman Mailer, in particular, created new and significant revenues for New Line. New Line organized a tour for Mailer to travel with his film *Maidstone* in February 1972. Mailer’s fee was to be at least \$2,000 per appearance and New Line was contracted to take 25 percent of the revenues.¹¹⁸ Throughout 1972, New Line booked Mailer at over thirty universities, taking in over \$70,000 in revenue.¹¹⁹

The first New Line Presentations catalog (1974–75) indicates that the company had already been booking speaking engagements for Mailer, as well as R. D. Laing and Terry Southern, for “five years.”¹²⁰ The opening page of the catalog states, “We’ve begun with what we know best—the motion picture industry.” Accordingly, the catalog features directors like Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, and John Waters. It also features film critics Arthur Knight, Andrew Sarris, and Leonard Maltin.

The first catalog also shows that a number of presentations about film and media took a critical, political angle. For instance, New Line represented such early and foundational voices in feminist film criticism as Molly Haskell, author of *From Reverence to Rape*, and Joan Mellen, author of *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*. By the time the company released its second annual catalog, for 1975–76, it also represented Marjorie Rosen, author of *Popcorn Venus*, making feminist film criticism a distinct element of New Line Presentations’ profile. New Line also represented James Murray, author of *To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Superfly*, who gave lectures on representations of Blackness in

FIGURE 7. New Line sold education as a form of entertainment with a lecture bureau division formed in the 1970s that programmed speakers on a wide array of subjects, including cinema, drug decriminalization, civil rights, and UFOs. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Robert Shaye–New Line Cinema Papers.



cinema. As of the company's second catalog, it added Donald Bogle, a former writer for *Ebony* and the author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*; like Murray, Bogle lectured on the history of Black representation in the movies.¹²¹

New Line also featured speakers who addressed sexuality and the media. New Line's first catalog featured Vitto Russo giving talks on the topic of homosexuality in the movies. Although Russo's talk "The Celluloid Closet: A History of Homosexuality in the Movies" would not be published as a book until 1981, the first catalog notes that he was working on a book with the same title. The catalog attempts to create a sense of drama around Russo's talks: "His presentation has stirred both anger and adoration in his audiences. The reactions are violently pro or con, but never neutral."¹²² Here we can see New Line attempting to sensationalize a discussion of nonheteronormative sexuality. The company's second catalog builds on this interest in sexuality by featuring author Donald Fass giving a talk on "the bisexual experience" that included film clips.

Aside from film and media, New Line Presentations offered a range of speakers. The company's catalogs promised "a broad cross-section of what is intellectually current in the arts, politics, business, journalism, science, and human rights." The second catalog notes that the Presentations division had grown substantially, with more than eighty individual speakers. Although the company's first and second

catalogs feature speakers simply according to their name and the title of their presentation, the indexes clump the speakers into a number of categories, including "Artists," "Critics," and "Journalists" but also "Minorities," Feminism," "Sexuality," and the catchall "Politics." This approach suggests that New Line Presentations envisioned an audience for its speakers that was strongly related to the audience it served with its films. New Line Presentations aimed to entice university community members, as well as an adjacent public, who were interested in edification as a form of entertainment, and that a blend of culture and politics—cultural politics, in fact—defined this educational entertainment. As a group, this college community audience entailed multiple, overlapping groups defined, by the company's catalogs at least, by their affiliation with distinct tastes in cultural forms and products that spoke to their social identities.

New Line strengthened this conceptual framing of its speakers in its third catalog (1976). Now featuring over 150 presentations, the third catalog organizes speakers by concept, ranging from the cultural, to the political, to the esoteric. Many filmmakers and actors appear, as do film critics. The catalog features a number of authors: in addition to Mailer, it offers talks by William S. Burroughs, whom New Line represented from 1975 through early 1978.¹²³ In addition to a "Politics," the catalog has sections for "Prisons," "Energy," "Economics," and "Law."¹²⁴ Reflecting the company's continued focus on issues of identity, beyond the realm of media, the third catalog included a section "Women on Women," as well as offering talks by Dave Kopay about being gay in professional sports. The company also retained its association with the counterculture by featuring Timothy Leary and speakers from NORML.

All told, the New Line Presentations division encompassed an eclectic range of speakers and topics, all of which point to a cultural appetite for intellectual engagement outside the classroom. This kind of informal educational discussion appended well to the college culture of the time, which was already invested in a sustained engagement with new ideas. At the same time, as *entertainment*, these lectures appealed to audiences with material that was, in many cases, not dealt with in the classroom or that was treated with a sensationalism that similarly marked it as distinct from classroom instruction.

Within the context of the 1970s, New Line Presentations seems especially noteworthy for the way the division blended culture, politics, and issues of identity. If, as a film company, New Line was defined in the mid-1970s by its opportunistic eclecticism, the Presentations division reflected this in two ways: first, the division reveals an eclecticism that extended beyond the catalog of *films* the company distributed; and, second, opening the division represents an opportunistic branching out into a new business sector on the part of New Line itself. The company's very identity multiplied in this endeavor. Indeed, the Presentations division makes especially clear New Line's interest in identity as a force that shaped audience tastes, values, and choices.

CORNERING THE NICHE MARKET(S): DIVERSITY AND DIVERSIFICATION

From the mid-1970s onward, New Line augmented its library in ways that solidified its specialties in foreign art cinema, American underground films, and exploitation cinema. As already described, the company released a number of older anti-drug and anti-VD films for camp audiences and released all of John Waters's films through the decade. As with *Sympathy for the Devil*, the company released films with a connection to rock 'n' roll, including the Hendrix concert film *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (1971) and the experimental rock documentary *Journey through the Past* (1973), featuring and directed by Neil Young.¹²⁵ At the same time, New Line self-consciously tried to sell prestige by augmenting its selection of art films; it released several films by Pier Paolo Pasolini, including *Porcile* (1969); two films by Kenji Mizoguchi; and *The Seduction of Mimi* (1972), by Italian director Lina Wertmüller.¹²⁶ Perhaps most notably, New Line offered a number of films by French New Wave auteur Claude Chabrol beginning in 1974, including *Ophelia* (1963), *La Rupture* (1970), *Wedding in Blood* (1973), and *Nada* (1974).¹²⁷ The company maintained its association with Chabrol by releasing *La Femme Infidèle* (1969) and *Dirty Hands* (1975, originally titled *Innocents with Dirty Hands*), later in the decade.¹²⁸

In this way, New Line maintained a consistent strategy through the remainder of the decade of specializing in distinct genres of different cultural registers that all fell outside mainstream Hollywood cinema. Scholars such as Eric Schaefer have described how, following World War II, foreign art films and American exploitation films occupied an overlapping social and cultural space as independent distributors and exhibitors traded in both types of film.¹²⁹ New Line was not alone in distributing a mixed slate of nonmainstream films in the 1970s. Roger Corman's New World Pictures, to take just one example, released a range of exploitation films, including the "Nurse" film *The Student Nurses* (1970), the female prisoner movie *The Big Doll House* (1971), cheap monster movies like *Piranha* (1978), and the low-budget sci-fi film *Death Race 2000* (1975); all of this while the company distributed foreign art films such as *Amarcord* (1974), *Autumn Sonata* (1978), and *Dersu Uzala* (1975).¹³⁰

In many ways New Line Cinema thus typified marginal, independent film distribution in the 1970s. By the same token, New Line was unusual for finding such consistent success in this marginal and volatile industry arena. To mitigate the vagaries of this market, the company generated film series or even protofranchises whereby a single film served as an industrial and intertextual engine for continued commercial releases. Releasing *Cocaine Fiends* on the heels of *Reefer Madness* made the latter film appear to be a pseudo-sequel. And, although John Waters's films featured different characters and settings, they also used many of the same performers, and New Line was strategic about advertising these films' relation with the others, positioning them as near sequels to *Pink Flamingos*.

Perhaps the strongest example of New Line's attempts to create film series during this period is its release of several *Street Fighter* films. The market for East

Asian martial arts action films was considerable in the early to mid-1970s, built significantly on the success of films starring Bruce Lee. As David Cook has written, "By early 1974, every major distributor but Fox and United Artists had picked up one or more 'chop socky' films, as *Variety* called them."¹³¹ New Line exploited the success of this cycle of films when it released the Japanese karate film *Street Fighter*, starring Sonny Chiba, in 1974, which the company promoted with television advertising.¹³² The MPAA gave the film an unusual X rating for violence, which Shaye unsuccessfully appealed.¹³³ Despite fears that the rating would limit the film's advertising reach and commercial potential, *Street Fighter* did considerable business.¹³⁴ Although the market for East Asian action films began to wane in the mid-1970s, New Line released *Return of the Street Fighter* in the fall of 1975. The sequel performed more modestly than the original, but was still successful.¹³⁵ New Line was innovative enough to license *Return of the Street Fighter* for broadcast on the fledgling HBO channel in 1975, mere weeks after releasing the film in theaters.¹³⁶ The company followed these two films with yet another in the series, *Sister Street Fighter*, in 1976.

By the time New Line released *The Street Fighter's Last Revenge* in 1979, the company showed that it was dedicated to cultivating film sequels and series as a means of generating consistent revenues. New Line was not unique in this regard, either, as many cult action films were similarly franchised in this manner during the 1970s, such as with the *Shaft* series (1971, 1972, 1973). New Line developed and used the strategy of re-exploiting existing intellectual properties precisely because the company operated at the margins of the movie business. The company would make this practice an explicit part of its business strategy from the 1980s onward.

New Line demonstrated a *cultural* strategy of addressing social diversity through the spectrum of the genres it specialized in, and this practice was paired with a number of attempts to diversify the company's business activities in the mid-1970s. The first of these, as mentioned above, was to enter more concertedly into theatrical distribution in 1973–74. The company partnered with Mark Fleischman as a "full-time financial consultant" in 1976.¹³⁷ Fleischman worked in the restaurant and hotel businesses and was one of the original stockholders in New Line Cinema when the company first sought outside investors. *Variety* reported that, with the addition of Fleischman and his economic resources, New Line "now sees itself as a real competitor to such U.S. indies as Roger Corman's New World, Don Rugoff's Cinema 5, and American International [Pictures]."¹³⁸ New Line, it seemed, was poised to leave one marginal sphere of the movie business for another, slightly less marginal realm.

As part of this effort to expand and diversify, New Line began to engage in producing films, not just distributing films made by others. In 1977, ten years after its founding, New Line finally released its first in-house production. The film, *Stunts*, was made in Southern California and Shaye served as one of the executive producers.¹³⁹ At the 1976 Cannes Film Festival, Shaye acquired a significant portion of the film's estimated budget, which reached around \$1 million.¹⁴⁰ New Line partnered

with Spiegel-Bergman Productions on *Stunts*, a small production company that went on to make low- and mid-budget films through the mid-1980s.¹⁴¹

New Line premiered *Stunts* at Cannes and then released it in about a hundred theaters in June 1977.¹⁴² The film tells the story of a Hollywood stunt man named Glen, played by Robert Forster, who investigates the death of his brother who died while making a movie. The film features many film-within-a-film sequences that depict both impressive stunt work and the preparation for these stunts. In this respect, *Stunts* took part in a larger cycle of stunts-oriented films in the 1970s that included *Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry* (1974), *Gone in 60 Seconds* (1974), and *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977). *Stunts* was followed by *Hooper* (1978), in which Burt Reynolds likewise played a stunt man and which offered similar film-within-a-film scenes of impressive stunt work.

Thus, *Stunts* latched on to a small but identifiable trend within exploitation cinema at the time and sought to innovate within that arena. Although the film is not part of a series, it aligns with New Line's established practice of releasing films that closely resemble existing, successful exploitation films. That is, New Line deliberately used *film cycles* as a cultural and industrial strategy during the 1970s, anticipating in some ways the company's efforts in film franchising from the 1980s onward. As Amanda Ann Klein explains:

Like film genres, film cycles are a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes. However, while film genres are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax) . . . the formation and longevity of film cycles are a direct result of their immediate financial viability as well as the public discourses circulating around them. . . . Because they are so dependent on audience desires, film cycles are also subject to defined time constraints: most film cycles are only financially viable for five to ten years.¹⁴³

This characterization accords very well with the films and series of various stripes that New Line released in the 1970s, including the anti-drug camp films, the Waters films, the rock documentaries, the *Street Fighter* films within the cycle of East Asian martial arts films, and now *Stunts* in the stuntsploitation cycle. However contradictory it may seem, New Line sought stability through timely responsiveness.

Although other independent film companies appeared to be restricting themselves to distribution in 1978, New Line continued to make a concerted push into producing original films following *Stunts*. Part of the impetus for this move was a changing marketplace for pickups of foreign films, with "major companies" entering the market and thereby inflating acquisition prices.¹⁴⁴ New Line's entry was enabled by an infusion of nearly \$5 million in capital that year from both private investors and a loan from Chemical Bank. The company planned to make a slate of films that ranged in budget from \$500,000 to \$2 million. It announced in 1978 that it planned to make films in a range of genres, including comedies and

thrillers.¹⁴⁵ From the summer of 1978 through early 1979, the company publicly indicated that it planned to produce two new films, a thriller titled *Power Play* and a rock music drama featuring Debbie Harry.¹⁴⁶ These films appear not to have been made, however, indicating that New Line's ambitions for rapid growth were stymied.

In fact, during the late 1970s, New Line branched out into a number of business activities that proved to be dead ends. In 1976, for instance, New Line announced plans to begin investing in other companies' film productions through negative pickup deals. This endeavor, the company asserted, would give it better access to better films in the market for independent and exploitation cinema.¹⁴⁷ In 1978, New Line announced its intention to become a financial arranger for independent film production, and it created subdivisions "designed to bankroll indie films and get them to the international market."¹⁴⁸

At this point, the company reoriented somewhat and moved into selling foreign distribution rights to New Line films and acting as a broker for selling these rights for other films as well.¹⁴⁹ In 1978, for example, the company attempted to sell the foreign distribution rights to two low-budget horror films that had been made for TV, *Ants* (1977) and *Tarantulas: The Deadly Cargo* (1977).¹⁵⁰ Other deals functioned as "foreign pre-sales" to support the production of a yet-to-be-made film.¹⁵¹ New Line apparently facilitated the financing of at least one film in this way, *Steel* (1980), which was later picked up for North American distribution by World-Northal Films.¹⁵² In addition to this trade in international distribution rights, New Line's financial arm offered bonds to independent film producers.¹⁵³

On one hand, these financial activities appear a bit erratic and seem to stray from New Line's "core" business of film distribution. On the other hand, they positioned New Line to better access both films to distribute and funds for its own productions through international sales. Although none of these activities seems to have been especially successful for the company during the late 1970s, they would become more standardized and profitable as the company *did* manage to find more financial success through its distribution business in the 1980s and beyond.

A LAST HURRAH AT THE END OF THE 1970S

In August 1978, Shaye explained the company's efforts to diversify its business practices by claiming that the "core" business simply wasn't working. He said New Line did not have the financial strength to release films in the North American theatrical market.¹⁵⁴ Yet the company's *cultural* strategy of specializing in a mix of art and exploitation films does seem to have worked well at the end of the decade. In an ad from 1977, New Line offered a slate of films that included John Waters's *Desperate Living*, the original production of *Stunts*, *Revenge of the Street Fighter*, and the French art film *Voyage to Grande Tartarie* (1974).¹⁵⁵ Again, there

was a mix of art and exploitation and of the upper and lower strata of cinematic taste. In one instance the company conflated the two, as it distributed a film called *Cars That Eat People* (1977), which was actually a version of Peter Weir's film *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), recut by the distributor.¹⁵⁶

The shining star in New Line's catalog at the time was *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*. Directed by Bertrand Blier, the film is a romantic melodrama with a love triangle that recalls Francois Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1963). Following its North American premier at the 1978 New York Film Festival, New Line acquired the film and released it in December. At the time, the film had already been submitted as the French entry for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.¹⁵⁷ The National Society of Film Critics named it "Best Film of the Year," and the film earned many positive reviews, which New Line quoted heavily in its extensive advertising of the film.

Get Out Your Handkerchiefs thus offered New Line an opportunity to attach itself to a prestigious foreign film with trappings of artistic quality and cultural distinction. The film differed considerably from the rougher, politically oriented films the company had released in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it maintained the company's specialization in foreign cinema. Further, it continued New Line's association with a more conventional French art cinema represented by the many Chabrol films it had distributed.

Get Out Your Handkerchiefs became both a commercial and critical success. In a full-page ad in *Variety* from January 1979, New Line highlighted the revenues the film earned during its run at the Paris Theatre in New York, which totaled more than \$160,000 in four weeks.¹⁵⁸ New Line rolled the film out in theaters across the country through the winter of 1979 and took out a full-page ad in *Variety* boasting the film's winning of the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.¹⁵⁹ By May, the film had earned over half a million dollars.¹⁶⁰ Robert Shaye was quoted at the time as saying, "Art movies seem to be doing moderately well in the last couple of years as opposed to doing terribly in the previous five."¹⁶¹

Indeed, this moment seemed far away from the end of the 1960s, when New Line had worked with college film groups to screen a handful of lesser-known Czech New Wave films. It seems equally distant from 1973, when New Line programmed *Pink Flamingos* at the Elgin Theater. Yet the company continued to release Waters's films while it reaped the financial and cultural rewards from *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*. New Line's moment of success cannot be taken as a singular representation of the company, as it continued to engage with an eclectic variety of films and genres, opportunistically working for one of these nonmainstream films to become an unlikely hit. *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* just happened to be that hit in 1978 and 1979. In their own ways, *Sympathy for the Devil*, *Reefer Madness*, and *Pink Flamingos* were hits as well. All of these disparate films represented New Line in the 1960s and 1970s in that they demonstrated the disparity of the company itself. Each of the films reflects the eclectic and shifting movie

culture of this period: nonmainstream, youth-oriented, operating alongside Hollywood, overlapping with it and yet dissimilar all the same. New Line, in this way, represents something of the substantial alternative film culture of the 1960s and 1970s, a diverse and eclectic group of multiple audiences defined by their interest in nonconventional entertainment—entertainment mixed with edification and politics, sleaze and refinement.

New Line's moment of success with *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* truly cannot define the company, because it would change again, dramatically, in the following decade. While New Line had been capitalizing on the college market, the midnight movie circuit, and refined art cinema, Hollywood and movie culture had undergone major shifts. The old studios were now all parts of larger conglomerates. Young Hollywood auteurs like Francis Ford Coppola and William Friedkin were changing Hollywood's expressive norms while winning awards and financial success. Films like *Jaws* and *Star Wars* ushered in a wave of action blockbusters—and sequels—that became the gold standard for Hollywood's success from that point forward. The margins of the film industry also shifted, as home video offered new distribution opportunities to small-scale independent film producers. In the midst of this changing industry and culture, New Line's cultivation of art and cult no longer held the promise it once had. During the 1980s, however, the company would show how the margins could become mainstream.