

“Evolutions of Identity”

New Line and the Transformative 1990s

The 1990s were a transformative era for the film business and media culture, as the industrial and technological innovations of New Hollywood crystalized into a new formation, Conglomerate Hollywood. Hollywood underwent a wave of corporate mergers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, propelled by “a logic of synergy and tight diversification,” as Thomas Schatz describes it. These mergers were intertwined with “the larger forces of globalization, digitization, and US media deregulation.”¹ At the same time, several smaller, independent distributors, including New Line Cinema and Miramax, thrived. The Conglomerate Era appeared paradoxical, as big business got bigger while specialized firms attracted sizable audiences for off-beat cinema.

The apparent schism between mainstream blockbusters and specialty cinema, including foreign art house movies and American indie films, occurred within a larger context in which the cultural industries grew and consolidated power through eclecticism and increasing personalization. The media business of the 1990s obeyed a logic of *incorporative heterogeneity*, as cultural producers in multiple arenas addressed, appealed to, and commercialized divergent tastes in entertainment. In television, cable channels proliferated and sought out distinct groups of viewers through narrowcasting and niche programming. The music scene was defined by the simultaneous popularity and commercial success of “alternative” music, hip-hop, and country. New forms of mediated leisure and entertainment also proliferated with the rapid increase in home computing, the increasing use of the Web in the latter half of the decade, as well as the continued growth in the video game market.

New Line also transformed in remarkable ways during the 1990s as the company embodied the paradox between conglomeration in Hollywood and the

rise of the independent film sector. In its effort to exploit markets not already dominated by Hollywood, New Line had a long-standing practice of seeking out separate audiences based on taste distinctions and social identities, comparable to narrowcasting in the realm of cable television. This strategy proved valuable in the larger media business, which increasingly aimed to attract audiences that wanted media texts and genres tailored to their individual tastes. What had once been an opportunistic form of eclecticism grew into a related but more robust strategy of incorporative heterogeneity, even more in line with the broader media industry.

New Line grew by leaps and bounds during this period, and its slate of films increased apace. Its industrial placement and public legend fluctuated dramatically as a consequence. This chapter focuses on several of the company's defining aspects during this period. Specifically, it examines how New Line participated in and contributed to a wave of Black films and filmmaking. Through movies like *House Party* (1990), *Friday* (1995), and *Set It Off* (1996), New Line expanded and added some complexity to Black cinema of the era. The chapter then details New Line's corporate transformation, first, when it was purchased by Ted Turner in 1993 and became a division within the Turner Broadcasting System (TBS); and, second, when TBS merged with Time Warner in 1996. Through these transactions, New Line was swept up in the era's "merger mania." In the process, the public discourse debated New Line's identity and fit within Hollywood, sometimes in negative ways. The chapter next examines New Line's efforts with broad-based, populist comedies during this period that reflected the company's continued movement toward films and marketing strategies that aimed at broader audiences. The chapter closes with an examination of how the company's established logic of eclecticism and incorporative heterogeneity transformed, and sometimes failed, as New Line increased production budgets on films with questionable appeal.

NEW LINE AND BLACK CINEMA OF THE 1990S

New Line was at a crossroads as it entered the 1990s, caught somewhere between the margins and the mainstream. Was it a small independent distributor that carved success from niche audiences or a minimajor that competed with Hollywood through franchises like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? This tension is evident in New Line's work in Black cinema, which became a consistent thread for the company and distinguished it from most other studios. Perceiving that African Americans made up a significant portion of the audience for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films, New Line executives "began to think about other movies that they—as well as others—might find appealing."² With the films *Above the Rim* (1994), *A Thin Line between Love and Hate* (1996), *B.A.P.S.* (1997), *Love Jones* (1997), *The Players Club* (1998), and *Love and Basketball* (2000), New Line helped reshape the range of Black cinema throughout the 1990s. Late in the decade, with films like *Spawn* (1997), *Blade* (1998), and *Rush Hour* (1998), New Line made a regular practice of

releasing big-budget action and spectacle films that starred Black actors, comparable to studio blockbusters like *Bad Boys* (1995) or *Independence Day* (1996). New Line was so consistent in releasing Black films that it became a discernable part of the company's identity; the *New York Times*, for instance, identified New Line with "an amalgam of teen-age and horror films as well as movies aimed at black audiences . . . over-the-top John Waters movies . . . and some serious dramas."³

Representations and conceptions of Blackness underwent important changes across multiple domains of media culture during the 1980s and 1990s, prompting novelist Trey Ellis to identify a "New Black Aesthetic."⁴ For Ellis, the New Black Aesthetic entailed new stylistic and generic eclecticism on the part of Black artists in various media and more consistently represented Black figures with middle-class concerns. Further, the music, television, and cinema of the New Black Aesthetic were characterized by their ability to appeal to white audiences. Black artists and performers appeared prominently across media, whether on television with programs like *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) and *In Living Color* (1990–1994), in sports with star athletes like Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan, or in music with hip-hop's rise to international popularity.⁵ In American cinema, Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989) made a new space for films made by Black directors and precipitated the "New Black Cinema" of the 1990s, in which films featuring Black performers, often made by Black directors, proliferated. Nineteen films directed by Black directors were released in 1991, more than had been released during the entirety of the 1980s.⁶

By making, marketing, and distributing many Black films, New Line Cinema participated in the construction of Blackness as a cultural category at the same time that it made Blackness a calculated part of its business strategy. Anamik Saha has argued that cultural critics should examine the way cultural industries produce the very category of race. He encourages scholars to look at symbolic goods, such as movies, as part of a larger system of cultural commodification that bears heavily on social identities and, in doing so, understand better how and why textual representations of race take the forms they do.⁷ With this in mind, it is crucial to consider how New Line produced and circulated ideas about race in general and Blackness in particular.

The television industry also changed in ways that allowed for the circulation of new forms of Blackness to appear on TV screens. As Herman Gray details, the networks increasingly produced and aired programs aimed at specific audiences, and in the 1980s, "the networks were forced to reckon more seriously with Black audiences and Black programming."⁸ Similarly, Craig Watkins connects the "black film boom" of the late 1980s and early 1990s to structural changes in the Hollywood system and finds that "the cultural industries have been forced to develop a more differentiated conception of their prospective audiences and the kinds of product offerings they make available to them."⁹ In just this manner, New Line Cinema filled one of the industry spaces that opened up for Black cinema in the 1980s and 1990s.

New Line had two parallel goals at this time: to release more films aimed at wide audiences and to continue releasing films that aligned with specific tastes and groups. These strategies impacted the company's handling of Black films and Black cinematic representation. The film *Heart Condition* (1990) epitomizes the first of these strategies. The film tells the story of a racist and bigoted police officer, played by Bob Hoskins, whose bad eating, smoking, and heavy drinking lead to a heart attack. Denzel Washington plays his rival, a lawyer who dies and whose heart is transplanted into the police officer. Soon thereafter, the lawyer begins appearing to the cop as a ghost.

The film resembles an interracial police drama like *48 Hours* (1982) or *Lethal Weapon* (1987) mashed up with a body-switch comedy like *Freaky Friday* (1976). *Heart Condition* fluctuates in tone from silly comedy to gritty crime drama and is littered with racist clichés. Indeed, for bell hooks, *Heart Condition* is a prime example of “eating the Other,” in the sense of a white man literally subsuming a Black man, who assists the white guy in becoming less racist and more “sensitive and loving.”¹⁰ As hooks writes, this film “addresses the fantasies of a white audience” and “leaves a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy intact.”¹¹

Heart Condition signaled New Line's effort at the time to reach broader audiences. Both Washington and Hoskins were notable stars when it was released. Some of the advance press about the film noted that it was part of a New Line entry into comedy.¹² The press also discussed the way the film dealt with issues of race, noting that Denzel Washington served as a mediating force in the film's representation of Blackness.¹³ One story revealed that Washington had helped revise the script to avoid stereotypical and negative depictions of Blackness.¹⁴ The film's engagement with race was timely, as it played in theaters alongside *Glory* (1989), which also starred Washington, and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). Yet New Line's marketing and advertising for the film largely avoided issues of Blackness or race relations, instead highlighting the stars and positioning it as a buddy comedy.

HOUSE PARTY, HIP-HOP, AND “CROSSOVER” AUDIENCES

Heart Condition was a commercial and critical failure and pushed New Line to adopt a narrower approach toward engaging with Black representations and audiences. Indeed, in a memo from 1988, company executives asserted that, in addition to comedies and horror films, the company should make “ETHNIC” films. They wrote, “These are target markets we can isolate very easily, why haven't we? KRUSH GROOVE & ACTION JACKSON were strong ethnic CONCEPTS with new ethnic TALENT.”¹⁵ New Line's work with *House Party* followed such a focused conception of distribution, marketing, and audiences, and the film's success help set a trajectory for the company's work with Black films and Black representation through the rest of the decade. Directed by Reginald Hudlin and produced by his brother

Warrington Hudlin, this lighthearted comedy tells the story of two high school friends, played by the members of the rap duo Kid 'n Play. As musical artists, Kid 'n Play had been successful with their 1988 gold album, *2 Hype*. The pair's popular music videos helped to construct the group's upbeat, semicomical personae, comparable to DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. *House Party* follows the duo as they try to throw a party while Play's parents are away and features several dance sequences and rap performances intermixed with the characters' frequent hijinks.

Focusing on rap music and featuring hip-hop artists, *House Party* continued New Line's attempts to attract younger viewers with films connected to popular music, including *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (1971), *Underground U.S.A.* (1980), and *Pump Up the Volume* (1990). In addition, as part of its attempts at transmedia franchising initiated with *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, New Line sought to generate additional revenues through the sale of soundtrack albums, which were a common tie-in with "high concept" films of the era. *Pump Up the Volume*, released later in the summer of 1990, is particularly notable in this respect. Although the film failed to gain the large youth audiences that New Line had hoped for, the soundtrack is a veritable showcase of "alternative music" and its subgenres, featuring tracks by Bad Brains, Concrete Blonde, Cowboy Junkies, the Pixies, Soundgarden, and Sonic Youth, among others. New Line demonstrated a strong commitment to further developing its soundtrack market when, in 1992, it hired Toby Emmerich as senior vice president of music. Emmerich had worked previously at Atlantic Recording Co., where he "oversaw soundtrack productions for film and television projects."¹⁶ Under Emmerich, New Line had hits with the soundtracks for *Menace II Society* in 1993 and *Set It Off* in 1996, among others through the decade.

House Party specifically demonstrates New Line's commitment to hip-hop music. This was the same general period when New Line worked with the Fat Boys on "Are You Ready for Freddy?" and featured MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice, among other hip-hop artists, on the soundtracks for *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and its sequel, respectively. Moreover, New Line distributed *Tougher than Leather* (1988), which starred the members of Run-DMC and featured appearances by Slick Rick, the Beastie Boys, and other hip-hop figures. Despite these performers, *Tougher than Leather* received largely negative reviews and did not do well at the box office.

On one hand, *Tougher than Leather* and *House Party* illustrate New Line's effort to use hip-hop and Black stars to attract Black audiences. But the company also endeavored to create "crossover" hits with Black cultural productions that could appeal to white audiences. Part of the calculus here was the significant revenue that rap and hip-hop were generating among white consumers. "Artists such as Ice-T, Ice Cube and L.L. Cool J.," *Newsday* observed, "generate more sales in America's suburban malls than in city shopping districts. 'Def Comedy Jam' has an audience that is 60 percent white."¹⁷ "Mainstream" and "crossover" were common phrases within film industry and popular discourses regarding the ability of some Black-produced media texts to find success with white audiences. Historically, the

term “crossover” was used more commonly in music industry trade discourses to describe an artist or song that charted well in multiple categories. Yet these categories themselves commonly had strong racial associations, such as with the R&B chart.¹⁸

Thus while “crossover” did not *always* connote the traversing of assumed racial boundaries, music discourses frequently used the term in exactly this way. Deployed with reference to *House Party*, a movie already strongly associated with hip-hop music as well as with other Black films and cinematic performers, “crossover” functioned in the press as an elusive but prized goal for Black media, as otherwise “Black” texts were treated as limited or risky because they would presumably appeal only to Black consumers.¹⁹ “Hollywood is still cautious and uncertain,” one reporter stated, “about how to position entertainment that is hot in part because it is Black. The marketers want so-called crossover viewership from white audiences, but they don’t see it as something they can buy or build in.”²⁰ In the context of these discussions, “mainstream” served as an unconcealed code word for “white.”

There was considerable discussion in the press at this time regarding Black audiences in terms of commercial potential and purchasing power, and multiple articles assessed the size of Black movie audiences. One story reported that Black people made up 25 percent of movie audiences and spent \$1.6 billion on movie tickets per year.²¹ Another quoted a survey which found that “close to 60% of blacks had attended a movie during one month, compared to only 51.2% of whites.”²² As Caetlin Benson-Allot has explained, public discourses of the era frequently associated Blackness with violence at movie theaters.²³ Yet Hollywood simultaneously endeavored to develop the market for Black media.

In this contradictory context, it is not surprising that New Line’s appeals to Black audiences demonstrated a lack of coordination. With *House Party*, the company’s marketing and publicity exhibit a complex ambivalence about race and Blackness, reflecting the media industry’s changing but still convoluted approach toward Black cultural production and representation. The promotional copy attending the film stressed its connections to Blackness and Black culture but also discussed ways that it might appeal to white consumers.

House Party figured prominently, in fact, in a widespread discussion about race and cinema. Amid this discourse, *House Party* director Reginald Hudlin said: “My generation is trying to reconcile rhythm and business, to balance the business side of the thing with the creative impulse. And at the same time, to avoid the obvious pitfalls, the self-destructive drug abuse and other forms of martyrdom. The challenge will be to institutionalize the change.”²⁴ Hudlin had wanted rappers to play the lead roles in *House Party*, because “he was having a difficult time finding African-American actors who could connect with a young black audience.”²⁵ With regard to Black cinema, white audiences, and *House Party* in particular, one New Line executive stated, “We know that ‘Yo! MTV Raps’ is the highest-rated segment on MTV, we know that Arsenio [Hall]’s ratings are fantastic.” But this executive



FIGURE 11. The lighthearted teen comedy *House Party* played an important role in discussions of Black cinematic representation and audiences in the early 1990s.

also cautioned: “Still, when the perception is that a black entertainer is doing a show or record or movie that’s mainly for black people, and a white person looks and says, ‘Oh, that’s not for me,’ that’s what we have to overcome.”²⁶ On this topic, Bob Shaye stated, “Crossover in our mind ultimately has to come from the film itself, rather than any marketing we have to pay for.”²⁷

New Line launched *House Party* at the 1990 Sundance Film Festival, and its promotion of the film at the festival indicates just such an attempt at crossover. As the press noted, Sundance was transforming into a commercial market for independent films to access theatrical distribution. Accordingly, New Line used the festival to generate early buzz for *House Party*, and press coverage tended to discuss the film in terms of race and its Black cast.²⁸ In fact, that year’s Sundance had a number of films directed by or featuring Black artists: *Chameleon Street* won the Grand Jury Prize, for instance, and Charles Burnett’s *To Sleep with Anger* received a Special Jury Prize. *House Party* won the Filmmakers Trophy and the cinematography prize. Nevertheless, director Reginald Hudlin said of the festival, “These were very white people.”²⁹

After Sundance, New Line continued to show uncertainty with the distribution and marketing of *House Party*. Some executives discussed the film in terms of “crossover” to white audiences, while others indicated that the company primarily sought to attract young, Black, male moviegoers.³⁰ New Line hired a Black-owned public relations company, the Terrie Williams Agency, to help plan the film’s promotion.³¹ As one article put it, the agency aimed “to make sure that New Line avoided stereotypes that would alienate blacks or frighten whites.” Terrie Williams enticed critics to review the movie and prompted New Line to use positive pull quotes from these reviews, including a “thumbs up” from Roger Ebert.³² Terrie

Williams had ideas for promoting the film that differed from New Line's original plans.³³ The agency evidently nixed plans for a giveaway promotion of gold chains and stopped New Line from using publicity materials that depicted "the young Black actors with their eyes popping and mouths wide open."³⁴

The marketing budget for *House Party* was around \$6 million, far above the film's production budget of \$2.5 million.³⁵ In the words of one journalist, New Line's advertising positioned *House Party* "as a comedy rather than as a Black movie" in order to draw white viewers. New Line initially gave the film a limited release in 540 theaters, "carefully selected for reaching a primary black teen audience as well as a secondary vanguard of young white crossovers."³⁶ The company hoped that this limited release would generate a buzz that would enable the company to distribute the film more broadly in cities like Denver, Boston, and Salt Lake City and attract more white viewers.³⁷ The film opened very well at the box office, outpacing *The Hunt for the Red October* (1990) on a per-screen basis, and New Line expanded to Seattle and other cities after a few weeks.³⁸ *House Party* earned more than \$26 million over the summer, a major success for a film of that budget and release pattern.³⁹

New Line coordinated *House Party*'s theatrical distribution with a soundtrack album, produced by Motown Records, that featured songs by Kid 'n Play and other hip-hop and R&B performers, including LL Cool J. Kid 'n Play also released their second record, *Kid 'n Play's Funhouse*, at nearly the same time, which shared the single "Funhouse" with the soundtrack. Both albums worked synergistically with the theatrical success of the film, and the soundtrack reached number 20 on *Billboard's* Top Black Albums Chart and number 104 on the Top Pop Albums Chart, while *Funhouse* reached number 11 among Top Black Albums and number 58 among Top Pop Albums.⁴⁰ The success of the film and the soundtrack was, *Billboard* thought, "a perfect example of the crossover exposure available to music in the new wave of black made films."⁴¹ Notably, in this instance "crossover" bore another conventional traditional meaning, referring to a figure moving from one creative industry to another.

Almost every review of *House Party* discussed issues of race and exhibited a spectrum of ideas regarding Blackness in American film. Some stressed ways the film was specific to Black youth culture and drew on discussions with the director and producer in support of these claims.⁴² As a way of establishing their cultural status, many reviews discussed the Hudlin brothers' Ivy League educations.⁴³ Press coverage also discussed the filmmakers' connection to Spike Lee, whom the brothers cited as an influence and source of support.⁴⁴ A piece titled "In Hollywood, Black Is In" discussed *House Party* as emblematic of new Black popular media, with other examples including *She's Gotta Have It* and *In Living Color*.⁴⁵

This same article contended with the issue of "crossover," observing that Hollywood "executives say they're color-blind," and it further suggested that releasing Black films served financial interests while simultaneously making studios look as

though “they are doing the right thing.”⁴⁶ The review of *House Party* in the *New York Times* also placed the film within a frame of color blindness in saying that it “looks to be taking place in a community as all-American as the small Midwestern city that is the locale of Booth Tarkington’s ‘Penrod’ stories. The only difference is that these kids are black and their manners and speech utterly idiomatic.”⁴⁷ Other reviews were more palpably problematic in their white supremacism. The review in the *San Diego Tribune* under the headline “Dumb Teen Movies Colorblind” asserted that “racism can go both ways” in its discussion of the film’s lack of white performers.⁴⁸ In an especially clumsy attempt to address the film’s connection to Black culture and possible white audiences, *USA Today* provided a glossary of slang terms used in the film, including translations for the phrases “gotta jet” and “peace out.”⁴⁹

Although *House Party* is a narratively simple and tonally silly film, it offers a playful engagement with Black popular culture that at once registers historical figures but also distinguishes itself from them along generational lines. Early in the film, for instance, Kid’s father invites him to join him in watching the Black action classic *Dolomite* (1975) instead of going out to the party, which Kid declines by rolling his eyes. “You like *Dolomite*, don’t you?” the father says. “You grew up on it.” In a comparable scene, Kid crashes a backyard party at a fancy house where the guests dance to music. Playing as the DJ at the party is George Clinton, whose music with Parliament-Funkadelic in the 1960s and 1970 was frequently sampled by rap artists. Fittingly, Kid confounds the middle-aged guests when he takes over the mic and raps while the DJ scratches records on the turntable.

As a teen comedy with a populist sensibility, *House Party* helped diversify and complicate Blackness in American cinema in the early 1990s. Raquel Gates provides a helpful conceptual frame for seeing this film’s importance. Gates’s work undermines simplistic understandings of “positive” and “negative” representations of Blackness across commercial media, arguing that so-called “negative” depictions of Black figures can serve as a “repository for those identities, experiences, and feelings that have been discarded by respectable media.”⁵⁰ In this manner, “negative” representations open a plurality of valuable Black identities and experiences. While *House Party* was not directly caught up in a discourse of “positive” and “negative” representations, the film’s silliness and playful youthfulness contrasted with the “significance” and “seriousness” attributed to other noted Black films at the time.

BUILDING BLACK CINEMA FRANCHISES

Despite its lightheartedness, in fact, *House Party* served as an emblem of Black cinema in the early 1990s. Critics regularly situated *House Party* alongside such films as *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), *She’s Gotta Have It*, and *Do the Right Thing*.⁵¹ As New Line began producing a sequel to *House Party* in 1991, the original film continued to figure prominently in a discourse around Black-produced films that grew apace

with the number of films by Black directors being released that year. In addition to *House Party 2: The Pajama Jam* (1991), commentators frequently held up Robert Townsend's *The Five Heartbeats* (1991), William Duke's *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), and Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991) as evidence of this new wave of Black cinema. New Line itself released several other films included in this wave, including Joseph Vázquez's *Hangin' with the Homeboys* (1991) and Topper Carew's *Talkin' Dirty after Dark* (1991).

Boyz n the Hood (1991) was a focal point of this discourse. As other scholars have discussed, this film and Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991) figured significantly in the creation of the "ghetto" drama cycle of films in the 1990s, which centered on the struggles of young Black men in urban settings.⁵² *Boyz n the Hood* director John Singleton represented the new potential for young Black filmmakers who could express distinctly Black cultural experiences and sensibilities while succeeding in Hollywood. The press noted that, before being hired to direct *Boyz n the Hood*, Singleton had graduated from the Filmic Writing program at the University of Southern California and attained a three-year contact with Columbia Pictures. The *New York Times* noted "Hollywood's sudden open door policy toward Black filmmakers, particularly those telling Black stories."⁵³

Some coverage of the "Black New Wave" contended with the way urban gang films obscured other types of Black films being made at the time.⁵⁴ In 1993, a number of leading figures, including Spike Lee and Warrington Hudlin, criticized Black urban dramas for dominating the representation of Black people in popular culture. Some of these figures raised the issue of "crossover," voicing concern that the dominant "gangsta" image in rap and movies had become a convenient way of reaching white consumers by commercializing problematic tropes of Black culture.⁵⁵ However, in contributing to this debate about Blackness in media culture, the press often treated *House Party* and *House Party 2* as noteworthy indications of Black cinema's diversity. The *Big Red News*, a Black newspaper in New York, singled out *House Party 2*, *Juice* (1992), *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), and New Line's *Talking Dirty after Dark* for being "entertaining black films."⁵⁶ Another journalist argued that the box office success of the two *House Party* films proved that nongang films could be successful.⁵⁷

New Line expected *House Party 2* to have an even greater appeal to white audiences. The press supported this idea, noting that the two performers had appeared in a cartoon as well as in a commercial for Sprite since the original film's release.⁵⁸ New Line again used the Terrie Williams Agency to help with *House Party 2* and was better able to market the film to Black audiences as a result. New Line advertised the film on television "to target adolescents and young adults on such channels as MTV and Black Entertainment Television" and also did spots on Black radio stations.⁵⁹ The company also partnered with AT&T and the Negro College Fund to provide advance screenings of the film on college campuses, recalling the company's days working with universities in the 1970s.⁶⁰

As reported in the industry press, *House Party 2* had “the biggest opening of any black film to date and has done much to dispel the Hollywood wisdom that says only violent black films work.”⁶¹ In such reportage, the film and the franchise continued to emblemize a new wave of Black cinema and, just as important, the diversity of representations of Blackness within this wave. Continuing with this franchise, New Line released *House Party 3* on 840 screens in January 1994, and the film earned over \$10 million within its first week in theaters.⁶²

With its connection to rap, its adolescent comic tone, and its successful franchising across multiple films and soundtracks, the *House Party* series set a model that New Line pursued with other Black films during the 1990s. The company released *Who’s the Man?* in 1993, a silly comedy with *Yo! MTV Raps* hosts Ed Lover and Dr. Dre, which did well at the box office. Many rap artists appear in the film, and the successful soundtrack features The Notorious B.I.G., Jodeci, Mary J. Blige, and Heavy D. Gesturing again to the way unassuming comedies contributed to the plurality of Black cinema, the *Los Angeles Times* compared *Who’s the Man?* to the films of Oscar Micheaux for mixing “entertainment and social consciousness.”⁶³

In addition to comedies like these, New Line occasionally released Black dramas, such as *Above the Rim*, which featured rapper Tupac Shakur. More notably, New Line distributed the Hughes Brothers’ crime drama *Menace II Society*, which followed in the wake of *Boyz n the Hood* and contributed to the cultural image of the “ghetto” and the “hood” as spaces of struggling Black men.⁶⁴ Although New Line took a more targeted approach to the release of the film than it had with the *House Party* films, *Menace II Society* proved highly profitable, and its hip-hop soundtrack went platinum.

New Line found a successor to the *House Party* films with *Friday* in 1995. The film tells the story of Craig and Smokey, two young men living in the hood in Los Angeles played by rapper Ice Cube and comedian Chris Tucker, respectively. Craig is unemployed and Smokey is a drug dealer. However, Smokey smoked all the pot that he was supposed to sell, and the boss dealer “Big Worm” threatens to kill both Craig and Smokey unless they pay him his due. The film’s loose plot follows these characters as they hang out, smoke pot, interact with eccentric personalities in the neighborhood, and fail in their schemes to get the money. They try begging, borrowing, stealing, and selling more pot. Nothing works, leading to a violent confrontation with a local tough guy at the film’s climax.

Until this dramatic scene, however, the movie conveys a carefree feeling typical of stoner comedies. But, like the *House Party* films, *Friday*’s seeming triviality is exactly what makes it notable amid the construction of Blackness in the commercial media of the 1990s. *Friday* locates a silly comedy within the context of the hood, a cinematic location more firmly attached to crime dramas at the time. It features irreverent cursing, pratfalls, drug-induced mishaps, and toilet jokes. At the same time, the film clearly situates itself in the hood, displaying many of the tropes found in dramas like *Boyz n the Hood*. Robberies and burglaries are

common and threats of violence erupt recurrently. At one point, the characters narrowly avoid getting gunned down in a drive-by shooting, but the entire scene is treated comically. In contrast, Craig gets into a brutal fistfight near the end, which the film depicts with some gravity before returning to silliness and potty jokes as it concludes.

Tonal shifts like these make *Friday* distinctive and illustrate the complexities of staging a comedy in the hood in the mid-1990s. Some stories about the film neglected to indicate that it was a comedy and focused instead on the film's setting in "the 'hood."⁶⁵ Much of New Line's publicity and advertising for the film emphasized its stars, and press coverage also centered on Ice Cube as a multimedia star consistently successful in both music and cinema.⁶⁶ New Line producer Mike De Luca connected the film to a longer tradition of stoner comedies featuring people of color, comparing *Friday* to Cheech and Chong movies.⁶⁷ New Line held some promotional events and screenings specifically oriented to Black audiences, as well.⁶⁸

New Line participated in *Friday*'s production and financing, which had a modest budget of \$2.3 million.⁶⁹ In keeping with its other smaller-budgeted films, the company gave the film a limited release, placing it in 865 theaters and then expanding to 881 in the second week.⁷⁰ *Friday* quickly proved successful, however, earning \$6.8 million, making it number 2 at the box office, after *While You Were Sleeping* (1995).⁷¹ *Bad Boys* was also in theaters at the time, a massively successful movie that also featured a rapper and a comedian, with Will Smith and Martin Lawrence appearing in the lead roles. *Friday* went on to earn \$14 million in its first twelve days of release.⁷² Capitalizing on Ice Cube's established stardom in music, the soundtrack was also a success, debuting at number 1 on *Billboard*'s Top R&B Albums chart.

As had been the case with *House Party*, critics discussed *Friday* in overtly racialized ways. *Variety*, for example, asserted that the film's "target audience of young blacks should respond favorably on sheer recognition factor of many of the film's conceits, although crossover and foreign potential appear limited."⁷³ The review in the *Los Angeles Times* connected the film to a host of other Black texts, including *Def Comedy Jam* (1992–1997) and *The Wayans Bros* (1995–1999).⁷⁴ A *New York Times* reviewer called the film a "ruder, cruder version of the hip-hop movie 'House Party.'" Also seeing the film as an important reflection of contemporary Black culture, however, the reviewer thought it "offers a fascinating glimpse at the way street life enters pop culture" and is "more intriguing as a social problem than as a movie."⁷⁵ In a related vein, the Black newspaper the *Michigan Chronicle* (Detroit) took issue with the way *Friday* portrayed the Black community and questioned whether it was a positive or authentic representation.⁷⁶

As with *House Party*, New Line franchised *Friday* across multiple films and other cultural commodities. Beyond the film's soundtrack, it spurred the production of two sequels, *Next Friday* (2000) and *Friday after Next* (2002), both of

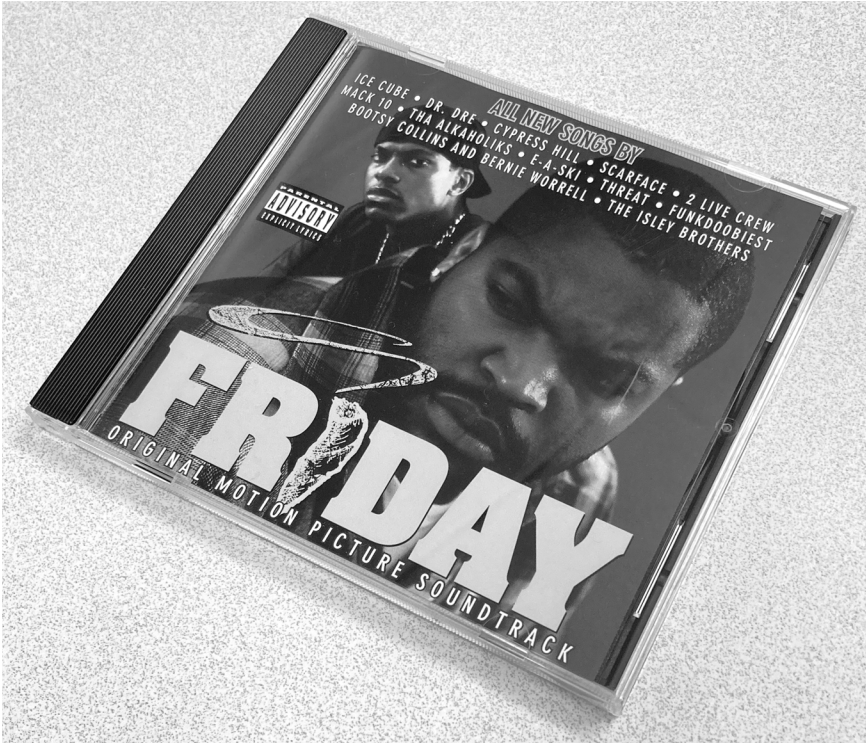


FIGURE 12. The soundtrack for *Friday* featured a large number of hip-hop artists and capitalized on the music stardom of Ice Cube. Soundtracks for Black films like this generated considerable revenue in the 1990s. Photo by author.

which were even more successful than the first film. New Line also partnered in the creation of a cartoon based on the film, but it aired only for a single season on MTV2. Thus, with both *Friday* and *House Party*, New Line applied the industrial and cultural logics of franchising to texts connected firmly with Blackness and Black popular culture. In this respect, New Line treated Blackness as a cinematic quality that could be serialized with the aim of creating cross-media synergies and gaining expanded audiences.

House Party and *Friday*, as well as the franchises that followed, are notable also for contributing a comic element to the construction of Blackness within the cultural industries in the 1990s. These movies blended comedy in a cinematic mix that otherwise could have been dominated by, on one hand, an indie auteur aesthetic represented by figures like Spike Lee or Julie Dash or by, on the other hand, hood dramas like *Boyz n the Hood* or *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991). Certainly, New Line was not alone in making Black comedies; one can look to contemporaneous television programs like *Family Matters* (1989–98), *In Living Color*, and *Martin*

(1992–97). And studios other than New Line released a number of popular, silly comedies featuring Black stars throughout the decade, including *The Nutty Professor* (Universal Pictures, 1996), *Major Payne* (Universal Pictures, 1995), and *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Miramax, 1996). But New Line was remarkable and distinctive for specializing so consistently in Black films in general and lighthearted Black comedies in particular. The seeming inconsequence and lack of pretention of films such as *House Party*, *Who's the Man?*, and *Friday* were actually quite consequential, as they offered alternatives to other Black representations at the time and, at the same time, successfully commercialized a comic form of Blackness.

THE BIG PICTURE AND THE BIG DEAL

Along with these Black films and franchises, the continued success of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* films contributed much to New Line's growth in the early 1990s. Amid the rapidly changing technological and economic conditions in the media industry at the time, it was precisely New Line's recurrent success with comparatively "marginal," "niche," or specialized content that made it susceptible to becoming more firmly enmeshed in the mainstream of the film business. Simply put, Hollywood sought to incorporate the heterogeneity characteristic of independent film distribution companies. In her analysis of Miramax, Alisa Perren connects the wave of conglomeration among media companies in the 1990s with the simultaneous growth of specialty distributors like New Line and Miramax: "Though on the surface it might seem paradoxical, the rise of Miramax and other indie subsidiaries can be seen as intersecting with the global media conglomerates' increasing focus on producing and distributing niche products to specific demographic groups."⁷⁷

Hollywood studios did not stop producing blockbuster films aimed at global audiences; rather, they embraced *both* strategies simultaneously and under one corporate umbrella. They internalized difference within their corporate structures, rationalizing heterogeneity. The studios adopted this two-pronged approach in tandem with the proliferation of cable television, which targeted select audience profiles while the major networks continued to address a national mass viewership.⁷⁸ Home video also contributed to a more fragmented and personalized movie culture.⁷⁹

At the same time, the media business underwent massive conglomeration.⁸⁰ Sony bought Columbia Pictures in 1989; Viacom took over Paramount Pictures and Blockbuster Video in 1994; Disney and the ABC television network merged in 1996; Matsushita acquired MCA (Universal Pictures) in 1990 and then sold the movie studio to Seagram in 1995, which then sold Universal to Vivendi in 2000; Time Inc. merged with Warner Bros. in 1990; and as the millennium came to a close, Time Warner merged with America Online in 2000 in a deal finalized in

2001. These moves were prompted and enabled by significant deregulatory measures on the part of the US government, most particularly the repeal of the fin-syn (financial interest and syndication) regulations in 1995, followed by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Consequently, by the end of the decade, the Hollywood studios were multinational businesses centrally devoted to the ownership of intellectual properties and the exploitation of those assets in any number of media and outlets and as myriad cultural commodities. Movies were but one manifestation of these conglomerates' power over cultural production and circulation.

It was amid these large mergers and acquisitions that the studios either purchased specialty distributors or created their own specialty labels. "By 2000," Perren writes, "News Corp. had Fox Searchlight, Vivendi Universal had Universal Focus, Time Warner had New Line and Fine Line, Viacom had Paramount Vantage, and Sony had Sony Pictures Classics and Screen Gems."⁸¹ These endeavors followed in the wake of Disney's purchase of Miramax in 1993. And while Miramax may have been the first company to get caught up in this restructuring of the specialty film business, New Line's role in this story is significant. Shortly after Turner bought New Line, in fact, *Variety* dubbed the company "a crown jewel of '90s-style merger and acquisitions mania."⁸²

As the 1980s came to a close, the independent film sector was in a bit of a crisis. Although some independent production companies were succeeding, most needed to partner with Hollywood studios to distribute their films.⁸³ Part of the trouble was that the Hollywood majors were releasing specialty films normally handled by independent companies. For its part, New Line made efforts to expand the number, range, and in some cases the budgets of its films as it entered the 1990s. It still made and distributed films aimed at targeted audiences but increasingly reached for large-scale successes as well. It largely succeeded in these endeavors, and in 1992 it had grossed more than \$100 million for three years in a row.⁸⁴ In this context, New Line actively sought to forge new industry partnerships.⁸⁵ Shaye was publicly guarded about the company's plans, stating that he was "not talking about a merger or acquisition with anyone" but that New Line had "very selective discussions about strategy alliances."⁸⁶

It does not appear that New Line engaged in any discussions with Ted Turner until a few years later. Turner launched Turner Broadcasting in 1976 and in that same year took the television station WTCG, which broadcast from Atlanta, and placed it on the Satcom I satellite for retransmission via cable in other areas around the country. This "hybrid broadcast/cable property [that used] satellite distribution" became SuperStation TBS in 1979 and was available nationally.⁸⁷ The company continued to expand in cable television with the creation of CNN in 1980. Following the acquisition of the library of films held by MGM in 1986, Turner Broadcasting launched TNT in 1988. Finally, for the moment, the company launched the Cartoon Network on cable in 1992. Thus, by the early 1990s the Turner empire encompassed multiple cable channels that specialized in different

media genres and held an immense library of film properties to exploit on these stations and home video.

Predictions that Turner would add New Line to his company's many assets began appearing in early August 1993; these reports also discussed Castle Rock as part of a possible deal, a company owned by Sony with which New Line had a video distribution agreement.⁸⁸ New Line planned to begin distributing Castle Rock's films after 1997, when Castle Rock's output deal with Sony Pictures was set to expire.⁸⁹ Some of the reporting indicated that Time Warner, which held 20 percent of Turner Broadcasting stock, opposed the acquisition out of fear that it would make New Line a competitor with Warner Bros.⁹⁰ Time Warner later clarified that it would not block the purchase.⁹¹ Yet concerns about the relationship between the studios would persist for years, ultimately contributing to New Line's undoing in 2008.

Turner made the deal to acquire New Line in mid-August 1993, with the plan to close the purchase "no later than Feb. 28, 1994."⁹² As planned, Turner purchased Castle Rock in tandem, paying over \$650 million for the two companies. Whereas Turner paid \$100 million in cash for Castle Rock, including paying off that company's existing debt, he purchased New Line through an exchange of Turner stock, the value of which totaled around \$506 million at the time. In addition, Turner took on New Line's outstanding debt of around \$70 million.⁹³ As the press noted at the time, Turner's acquisition of New Line and Castle Rock symbolized the changing industrial relationship between film, television, and cable during the 1990s.⁹⁴ Contemplating the ongoing media business consolidation, the *New York Times* stated, "The deals reflect the increasing vertical integration of the entertainment business as companies seek to control both production and distribution of entertainment programming." More particularly, Turner's purchase of New Line and Castle Rock "would give Turner a long-sought stake in the film production business, providing it with programming for its entertainment channels, Turner Network Television and the WTBS superstation."⁹⁵

Once a tiny nontheatrical distributor, New Line Cinema had now become one element of a multimedia conglomerate. The company was at the center of the subtle but impactful industrial reconfiguration that turned New Hollywood into Conglomerate Hollywood. Vertical and horizontal integration became the new norm as media conglomerates had multiple holdings in the production, distribution, and exhibition of texts in different media and outlets. New Line held a distinct value in this world, where cable and home video gained importance as sources of revenue alongside movie theaters and national television networks.

Television entered a "postnetwork" era in the 1990s in which it relied increasingly on narrowcasting rather than broadcasting.⁹⁶ New Line's long-standing practice of addressing, cultivating, and commercializing smaller but identifiable audience communities aligned well with this industrial and cultural schema. But now this logic was augmented, set within a new financial context and institutional

configuration. New Line remained in the theatrical film distribution business, first and foremost. But in a world where niches proved to have increased financial importance *and* where media companies had interests in film, television, cable, and home video, a “film” company like New Line had just the sort of qualities that served an industrial environment in which medium specificity began to erode. This is not to say that New Line had operated like a cable channel, or that the niche logic of cable in the 1990s and afterward was the same as that of earlier independent film distributors. Rather, the Turner–New Line deal, as with Disney and Miramax and other mergers and acquisitions during this time, shows just how interrelated the logics of these two supposedly distinct media and industries were.

Bob Shaye remained with New Line as CEO, but he no longer had final decision-making power over it. The deal greatly impacted Shaye financially, as he owned 27.2 percent of New Line stock at the time of the sale.⁹⁷ Thanks to his stock holdings and the way he was compensated in Turner stock, Shaye made an estimated \$100 million, personally, from the sale.⁹⁸ *Variety* quipped, though, that while Turner “has been a rich man for many years, Shaye, by contrast, until recently ran a very frugal operation from rather shabby offices and, by Hollywood standards, lived a rather middle-class existence based in New York.”⁹⁹ The big deal was a big deal.

“FREED TO COMPETE WITH THE MAJORS”?

Turner’s acquisition of New Line, in fact, raised many question about New Line’s identity in terms of its business activities and strategies, its internal work culture, and its overall profile; its legend was in flux once again. An October 1994 article assessed New Line: “The company has undergone numerous evolutions of identity since 1967 and distinguished itself by having a thoughtful business plan and sticking to it.”¹⁰⁰ And there were many similarly positive, even obsequious articles about New Line in the industry and popular press. But the company’s transformation into a corporate division was not entirely smooth. Stories both positive and negative proliferated through 1994 and 1995 that questioned New Line’s “fit” in Hollywood. Various statements and actions on the part of the company and some New Line executives occasionally contributed to a troubled cultural and industrial identity.

Despite how frequently the company had promoted itself as “independent” and proudly outside Hollywood, Shaye sometimes disavowed the company’s former strategies, saying that previously “we were restricted [on the kinds of films we made] by loan covenants . . . we accepted it because that was our persona.”¹⁰¹ New Line did, in fact, alter its production tactics, taking on even more bigger-budget films aimed at large audiences, as it had begun trying to do toward the end of the 1980s. In some cases, the press celebrated New Line’s aggressive financial activities as signs of the company’s growth and ability to compete with Hollywood. Stories highlighted the fact that, following the Turner deal, New Line was increasing its production budgets and annual slate.¹⁰² One article commented that when Turner

purchased New Line, “the company was freed to compete with the majors.”¹⁰³ In such characterizations, New Line appeared to be a valiant, maverick studio that had finally realized its potential.

Some news coverage sought to affirm New Line’s new legitimacy by noting that it was working with top talent like Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan in a planned remake of *The Women* (1939).¹⁰⁴ Others celebrated the amount that New Line was spending on the films it developed, equating budget size with legitimacy. In this vein, the *New York Times* reported, in positive terms, that New Line planned to pay Julia Roberts \$12 million and Meg Ryan \$8 million for *The Women*, and paid Jim Carrey \$7 million for appearing in *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) after having paid him \$450,000 for *The Mask* (1994). The same article discussed how New Line had won a bidding war with Hollywood studios for the screenplay to *Long Kiss Goodnight*, for which the company paid a “record \$4 million,” and noted that the company had beaten other studios in acquiring the rights to *Lost in Space*.¹⁰⁵

But other coverage of the company was more disparaging and deemed it deficient in relation to Hollywood, financially and culturally. Despite its attachment to the Turner empire, the press noted that New Line still did not have the relationships with national theater chains that the major Hollywood studios had, relationships that provided the studios with “financial advantages” unavailable to smaller companies. Some stars declined to work with New Line, even for more advantageous financial deals, because they had more faith in the marketing and distribution capabilities of the major studios.¹⁰⁶ Some executives working in other Hollywood studios still rejected the thought that New Line had officially entered the mainstream movie business.¹⁰⁷ 20th Century Fox had refused to allow New Line to develop an unproduced Fox film for free through a courtesy “reciprocal agreement,” and Fox chairman Peter Chernin commented that such deals are “a long-standing business agreement among studios . . . and New Line is not part of it.”¹⁰⁸

Still other press coverage made the issue more directly about cultural status. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, opined, “Since most Hollywood producers still associate New Line with dead teenager movies and little else, the company must continue to show the industry that it is worthy of respect.”¹⁰⁹ For his part, Shaye equivocated about New Line’s relation to Hollywood: “I think the industry takes a little umbrage at us. They even think of us as uppity. . . . There’s no question that we are viewed in L.A. with a combination of uncertainty and a little disdain and maybe even fear. . . . It’s an arcane society here. Like a club. Well, we’ve paid our dues. We’ve followed the regulations. We’ve joined the club.”¹¹⁰

The public discourse around New Line Cinema also evaluated its fit in Hollywood in terms of its internal work culture. Celebrating the company’s successes and expansion into bigger films, one story said New Line was “still Hollywood’s most informal company.” The story quoted screenwriter Shane Black as saying, “You can tell walking into New Line that you’re not in a place of suits. . . . It’s a truly creative environment.”¹¹¹ In a similar vein, director Renny Harlin observed

that the people at New Line “listen to the latest music, play video games, read short stories by underground writers and comic books.”¹¹² A 1995 story described New Line’s Los Angeles offices as having “unpretentious, white-washed suites, cases of tapes and posters spilling over into the hallways” and its staff as “hard-working . . . with an informal, affectionate esprit de corps.”¹¹³

Much of this public discourse fixated on Shaye as a force that shaped New Line’s work culture. One story called Shaye “an improbable movie mogul” and went on to note that “his long hair seems a relic of the 1960’s. . . . His casual clothes are not the de rigueur Armani worn by Hollywood hot-shots. Instead of driving the standard Mercedes or Jeep, Mr. Shaye pulls into restaurant lots in his 1972 Oldsmobile convertible.”¹¹⁴ A long piece in *Variety* stated that Shaye “has demonstrated a combination of frugality, business acumen and the creative eye of an artist,” an executive who displayed “the inherent spirit of an iconoclast.” Shaye reminded this writer of the “early Hollywood execs like Irving Thalberg” in that Shaye had built New Line up as a company from nothing.¹¹⁵ Although this comparison might make it appear that Shaye fit in Hollywood, the article actually used the comparison to distinguish Shaye from current Hollywood executives, who “may have little hands-on experience with either production or distribution.”¹¹⁶

New Line workers actively participated in this discourse themselves. New Line executive Mitchell Goldman explained the company’s financial dealings as entwining with its internal culture: “The key is the family atmosphere that Bob Shaye creates. We really are fighting for something and care how money is spent. It goes far beyond an employer-employee relationship; it’s almost like we have a mission.”¹¹⁷ Goldman continued this line of thought in a story in *Variety*: “Bob Shaye has established an organization that is very much a family . . . he creates an environment to work in where you’re working for something other than money. He engenders a feeling that we’re working for the common good.”¹¹⁸ This same piece quoted Michael Lynne recalling that Shaye had been an unusual law student in that he didn’t wear a tie, and the story closed by saying that Shaye “still doesn’t wear a tie.”¹¹⁹

Shaye was not the only executive to garner attention in the press or to be discussed as an outsider to Hollywood. A 1993 story characterized Michael Lynne as a savvy businessperson who oversaw much of New Line’s expansion in the early 1990s. The writer assessed Lynne as “uncharacteristically low-profile” among Hollywood executives and quoted one at Carolco Pictures as saying that Lynne “is no big wheel around town; a lot of people don’t even know who he is.”¹²⁰ Alternatively, Michael De Luca was frequently cited as a highly visible and unusual executive. One story asserted that De Luca embodied the “rebel spirit Shaye has fostered” at the company.¹²¹ Another wrote that his “unconventional style and his taste in material cut against the grain. His office doesn’t have a desk; his computer is crammed into a corner.” De Luca and another executive held meetings in offices littered with toys “while playing catch with an oversize baseball.”¹²²

These news stories and promotional articles illustrate how, during its industrial transformation through the mid-1990s, New Line Cinema was defined by *stories about* New Line and that the company actively participated in this discursive construction. As a movie distributor, New Line was always in the business of building hype to bolster the economic potential of its films. The company had a history of releasing advertising and marketing materials that constructed a legend about itself as a means of industry turf marking. But the flurry of press about the company following the Turner acquisition was especially noteworthy for two reasons. First, the sheer volume of this discourse speaks to the company's elevated stature during this period. Second, it illustrates how the company's nebulous identity, especially vis-à-vis Hollywood, was characterized *as* nebulous at the time. New Line was defined by a lack of definition.

The company's position changed dramatically once again in 1996 when Turner Broadcasting merged with Time Warner. Turner and Time Warner announced that the companies planned to merge in September 1995.¹²³ Such a merger posed potential regulatory pitfalls, as Jennifer Holt discusses. The new, combined company would be vertically integrated, have significant power in cable programming and distribution, and would also have holdings across multiple media industries, including film production and distribution, broadcast television, music, and publishing. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) originally opposed the merger, but after months of negotiation and slight alterations to the terms of the deal, the FTC approved the merger in August 1996. "The result," Holt writes, "was an unprecedented merging of media . . . [that] brought a much larger magnitude and range of assets under the same corporate insignia and far greater potential for strategic use of vertically and horizontally integrated media properties."¹²⁴

On one hand, New Line was just one, comparatively small element of this merger, and it does not appear that the conjoining of two film distributors, Warner Bros. and New Line, posed any problems from the government's perspective.¹²⁵ On the other hand, New Line and Warner Bros. were in the same business, even if the two companies operated at different scales, and different figures *within* the merging companies took issue with the pairing of these studios.¹²⁶ Some stakeholders, for instance, wanted to create new and advantageous connections between New Line and different cable networks within the corporation, while others expressed concern that New Line would be given unfair preferential treatment due to the terms of its new ownership.¹²⁷ As negotiations between Turner and Time Warner proceeded in August 1996, New Line presented a sticking point between the parties. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Mr. Turner is said to be annoyed that Time Warner openly floated a plan to sell the motion-picture studio after the merger closes. People who have talked to Mr. Turner about New Line say he believes Time Warner should keep New Line and is expected to press the issue."¹²⁸ Subsequent reports stated that Time Warner "informally indicated" that it intended to sell both New Line and Castle Rock Entertainment.¹²⁹ But Turner

continued to oppose selling New Line, and as of September 1996, no final plans had been made to spin it off.¹³⁰

One may presume that Time Warner wished to discard New Line because it viewed the company as redundant with Warner Bros. In addition, selling New Line would help ameliorate the significant debt incurred as part of the overall merger.¹³¹ As Turner continued to oppose the sale, Time Warner first devised a “partial spin-off” of New Line.¹³² Subsequently, the conglomerate proposed separating New Line but retaining a “controlling interest.”¹³³ Turner advocated for a plan whereby he could “keep a partial interest in New Line and let it proceed as a quasi-independent production company.”¹³⁴ This issue of New Line’s independence or overall relationship to Time Warner was, unsurprisingly, a concern for Shaye as well. One story reported that he “wanted his studio to be sold. He feared it would become lost within the much larger Warner Bros.” The article quoted Shaye as saying, “It’s best for all if New Line is semi-independent,” and summarized his thinking about the spinoff: “[it] will give him the independence New Line has earned.”¹³⁵

Thus, the Time Warner deal presented a new question regarding New Line’s status and identity, putting into stark relief the degree to which the company would retain any of its independence. This issue of identity was, as always, as much a question of cultural association and meaning as it was one of business arrangements and activities. Even as it had joined with the Turner empire, and even as it had increasingly made bigger-budgeted films aimed at wider audiences, the discourse about and issuing from New Line executives themselves strained to establish a concrete legend for the company. Certainly, New Line was not an “indie” in the context of the 1990s boom of “indie” cinema as an industry and set of cultural meanings; that would be the province of New Line’s specialty division Fine Line Features (discussed in the following chapter). Yet New Line was not Hollywood, either. It seemed that those at New Line hoped to keep it that way, even while Shaye and others may have had ambitions for bigger films that could attract larger audiences.

Ultimately, Time Warner did not sell New Line, a decision announced in April 1997, and questions remained at the time about how “independent” New Line would be as it continued within Time Warner.¹³⁶ The *New York Times* cast the decision to retain New Line in a negative light: “There were no buyers: the asking price of \$1 billion was viewed on Wall Street as far too high,” particularly as several New Line films failed at the box office during this period.¹³⁷ The story also perpetuated the discourse questioning the company’s independence and lack of “fit” in Hollywood. It referred to Shaye as “something of a 1960’s rebel” who “took pride in being an outsider who made low-budget films for ‘niche’ audiences.” It described New Line as having been “a feisty—and formidable—distribution and production company for mostly low-budget horror and comedy films” that had “ventured away from its roots in search of the super-riches of mainstream, major studio Hollywood.”¹³⁸ While New Line did expand the scope and scale of the films

it produced and distributed following both the Turner acquisition and the merger with Time Warner, the company also found some amazing successes and incurred some much-publicized failures.

Over the last half of the 1990s and through the 2000s, Warner Bros. and New Line operated simultaneously within the same corporation. As Michael Lynne detailed, New Line did not coordinate with Warner Bros. regarding talent or release dates; he went so far as to say, "If we compete with each other, it's not the worst thing in the world . . . [our] films need to stand on their own."¹³⁹ Time Warner appeared more accepting of the situation after New Line found a way to finance its operations independently of the conglomerate. In early 1998, New Line secured credit lines from two banks in the amounts of \$400 million and \$350 million, thus endowing the company with \$750 million to finance both its operations and film productions through the year 2000.¹⁴⁰ Crucially, these credit lines were "nonrecourse" to Time Warner, making New Line solely responsible for repayment.¹⁴¹ At once, then, this deal gave New Line financial independence from Time Warner and vice versa. Paradoxically as usual, New Line was independent, operating within a Hollywood conglomerate.

Amid these industrial events, New Line's identity was further marked in public discourse as renegade and even unacceptable because of scandals related to certain executives and the company's internal culture in general. The press especially cited Michael De Luca as a problematic figure. De Luca had originally joined New Line as an intern in the 1980s and worked under the supervision of production executives Janet Grillo and Sara Risher. He took over the position as New Line's head of production in 1995, while Risher stayed on with New Line for a number of years as production chair. For a long stretch, the press treated De Luca as a cinematic wunderkind whom Shaye mentored and developed a special affinity for. Further, and particularly important when considering the company's continued interest in attracting youth audiences, De Luca was viewed as having an instinct for unconventional material that would appeal to younger moviegoers. He was credited with bringing a youthful sensibility to New Line especially during the 1990s, and he was associated with the success of such films as *The Mask*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *Boogie Nights* (1997), and *The Wedding Singer* (1998). He was also credited with pushing New Line into making films related to other popular media: the movie *Mortal Kombat* (1995), for example, was adapted from the violent video game of the same name, and *Spawn* (1997) was adapted from a comic book.

But news coverage about De Luca's unruly private life was much more critical and tarnished the way New Line's identity as a maverick company was publicly understood. A journalist for GQ, for instance, reported witnessing an incident in which De Luca got into a fight at a restaurant.¹⁴² Most notoriously, De Luca caused a scandal following the 1998 Academy Awards. At this point, the executive was already known for being unconventional "with a history that includes public fistfights and drunken driving," and "a penchant for partying, chasing women and

outrageous personal conduct.”¹⁴³ De Luca and his date apparently engaged in a sex act that was viewable by other guests at an Oscars preparty held at the home of Arnold Rifkin, then president of the William Morris talent agency. This “elicited tittering as well as outrage from some guests and the host, who had security guards escort De Luca from the property.” The *Los Angeles Times* characterized De Luca as out of control but also as worthy of redemption and in need a “wake-up call.”¹⁴⁴

The *LA Times* situated this scandal and De Luca’s history of unacceptable behavior in relation to New Line’s profile and status in the movie business: “New Line tends to have a nonconformist working environment, where executives are given a lot of latitude and quirky behavior is often accepted.” But, the article continued, the Oscar party scandal “adds up to a public embarrassment for New Line. The former independent is now owned by publicly traded media giant Time Warner Inc.”¹⁴⁵ The article also assessed the work culture throughout Hollywood: “In the past, Hollywood generally has tolerated unconventional behavior, particularly if the perpetrator is successful. . . . Many of those in the industry believe Hollywood has changed dramatically”; that is, toward a professional culture typical of other industries.¹⁴⁶

Crucially, the story asserted that “the incident raises the question of when an executive’s antics in private life become a business issue.”¹⁴⁷ New Line functioned as a film business, but it was also a cultural entity with specific characteristics. Further, the coverage of this scandal shows how industrial and cultural identities were entangled. New Line’s legend mattered most to the people who worked for, competed with, and partnered with the company. As seen in these instances, some of the legend-building news stories about New Line did not confine themselves to the company’s business activities but also attended to the way New Line’s employees operated in a social, cultural realm, behavior that reflected on the institution and affected its business. New Line was an oddity in Hollywood, but this status was sometimes less about innovation and unconventionality than about disrepute.

Shortly after the Oscar party episode, a lengthy and damning story about New Line appeared in the July 1998 issue of *Premiere*.¹⁴⁸ Its title, “Flirting with Disaster,” made winking reference to an indie film distributed by Miramax a few years earlier. Passages in the article resemble many of the company overviews published in the press previously, highlighting various definitive and successful moments from New Line’s history to that point. Yet the *Premiere* article sets itself apart in the public discourse about New Line by providing a scathing account of a toxic work environment in the company’s offices and “widespread examples of questionable behavior” among the company’s top leadership.¹⁴⁹ The article draws from interviews with “dozens of industry professionals and former and current New Line employees” who detail unprofessional behavior related to abundant use of alcohol and illicit drugs.¹⁵⁰ Even more condemning, it cites multiple anonymous sources that describe pervasive sexual harassment and assault committed by New Line

executives, specifically at least two instances when company CEO Michael Lynne engaged in aggressive and predatory sexual behavior with female employees.

The article contrasts such behavior and workplace culture with the business needs and typical decorum found within other Hollywood companies. “The clean living, Pellegrino-sipping corporate ethos espoused by much of the movie industry in the early 90s wasn’t for New Line,” the article states.¹⁵¹ This story both provides a critique of unprofessional and unacceptable behavior in a contemporary workplace and, by means of this critique, evaluates New Line Cinema’s place within contemporary Hollywood. It presents a hedonistic and misogynistic climate at New Line as developing in tandem with the company’s “scrappy” industrial innovations and maverick position in the business. But this same culture now seemed especially objectionable due to the company’s position as a bigger, more conventional movie studio. The article suggests that booze, drugs, and poisonous sexism are somehow more naturally aligned with nonconventional media companies and are not necessarily systemic to Hollywood.

The behaviors described in the *Premiere* article are without doubt unacceptable in any professional workplace, and acts of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are inexcusable. Such a work environment is damaging for anyone and poses grave risks for women and LGBTQ+ people in particular. The flagrant irony of this episode is that sexual misconduct has long been rampant in Hollywood. The revelations of Harvey Weinstein’s lengthy history of sexual harassment and assault, first detailed in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* in October 2017, provide an egregious and highly publicized case.¹⁵² Indeed, these articles helped propel the contemporary #MeToo movement to new levels, inspiring many more people to come forward with stories of harassment and abuse in the film and other industries.

Among these contemporary accounts, former Fine Line Features executive Liz Manne published an article in *IndieWire* that supported and expanded on the 1998 story in *Premiere* by recounting her own harassment and assault by a senior executive at New Line in the 1990s.¹⁵³ Naming herself as one of the sources for the *Premiere* article, Manne’s 2017 *IndieWire* piece illustrates well how shifting social, political, and cultural conditions can shape the discourse—and silences—about and within the film industry. #MeToo has shed new light on the many instances of sexual misconduct and predation in the media business and brought renewed significance to the 1998 *Premiere* article.¹⁵⁴

These more recent events and discussions make it all the more historically significant that New Line rebounded from such damning press in the late 1990s. Indeed, as another sign of the company’s contradictory position both within and independent of Hollywood, multiple voices defended New Line and its executives in trade publications and other public venues, while others, including Peter Bart at *Variety*, dismissed the *Premiere* article for its reliance on anonymous sources.¹⁵⁵ In this manner, the ensuing public discourse of that time helped shore up New Line’s public image in the face of controversy, demonstrating how pervasive and

apparently acceptable sexism, misogyny, harassment, and even assault were within the media industry *generally* in the late 1990s. New Line and Hollywood moved on from this moment to continue business as usual.

MEN BEHAVING BADLY: NEW LINE'S COMEDIES

Following New Line Cinema's merger with Turner and subsequently with Time Warner, and as the press assessed the company's reputation and scrutinized its "fit" in Hollywood, New Line continued to produce and release a varied slate of films. It made a range of movies with larger budgets, including the neonoir *Seven* (1995); fantasy action films *Mortal Kombat*, *Spawn*, and *Blade*; and dramas with ambitions of prestige, including *Don Juan de Marco* (1995) and *Boogie Nights*. In this respect, the heterogeneity of the company's roster of films was paired with financial power fueled by the company's corporate situation. While New Line suffered some major setbacks in some of its efforts to diversify its slate (discussed further at the end of this chapter), these films helped the company address new, larger, and wider audiences and bolstered its standing in the industry as a result. Notably, it was in this period that Miramax created the Dimension Films division to handle the company's nonprestigious genre pictures, especially horror films. In this way, Miramax encroached on territory that New Line had long worked in, at the same that New Line sought bigger audiences with a greater range of genres and films.¹⁵⁶

Yet New Line showed consistency during this period in producing and distributing silly, lowbrow, often crude comedies with recognizable performers, particularly following the back-to-back success of *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* in 1994. Of course, New Line had a history with comedy, extending from *Pink Flamingos* to *House Party 2*, and it is worth remembering that the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise distinguished itself from other slasher films with Freddy Krueger's coarsely comic banter and conduct. But, considering the company's history and continuing significance, several aspects of New Line's comedies from the 1990s onward are especially notable. First, the comedies upheld the company's long-standing practice of keeping budgets contained; while the budgets were bigger than for previous films, the highest costs for these comedies were incurred for the talent, which served as a crucial marketing hook. Second, New Line focused particularly on lowbrow, populist, sometimes gross-out comedies, with some exceptions like the political satire *Wag the Dog* (1996). Whereas other Hollywood studios released child-friendly comedies, such as *Home Alone* (20th Century Fox, 1991) and *The Nutty Professor* (Universal, 1996), and others did star-driven romantic comedies like *Sleepless in Seattle* (Tri-Star, 1993) and *Notting Hill* (Universal, 1999), New Line's comedies were more consistently puerile and crude.

Third and finally, these comedies represented New Line's deliberate effort to attract broad, mainstream audiences. The comedies thus reflect the company's new

industry status and position, as it had the increased financing and infrastructural support that came with being part of a multimedia conglomerate. Comedies can be inexpensive to make, but now New Line could afford bigger stars. It is crucial to note also that many of these “mainstream” comedies were similar in their juvenile sensibility to many of New Line’s Black comedies from the same period. But, whereas New Line treated films like *House Party* and *Friday* as *marginal* works that *might* “cross over” to white audiences, following its bolstered corporate status in 1994, New Line aimed directly for big, general audiences with comedies having white casts. As the company envisioned which comedies might consistently attract the broadest audiences, it imagined those films as white. With films like *Austin Powers* (1997), *Dumb and Dumber*, and *The Wedding Singer*, New Line’s comedies often centered on outrageous, immature, white male figures.

The Mask was the first major comedy hit for the company. The film was based on a comic book character from Dark Horse Entertainment. New Line and Dark Horse had begun work on an adaptation in 1989, when New Line was still independent and before it had released *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.¹⁵⁷ Early ideas for *The Mask* included a version of the character more violent than the one in the eventual film, a plan aligned with New Line’s specialization in horror films in the 1980s.¹⁵⁸ But the script developed into more of a lighthearted comedy. Production began in the fall of 1993, and the film was released in theaters in July 1994.¹⁵⁹

The film tells the story of a timid, nerdy, ridiculed bank clerk who randomly discovers an ancient wooden mask. When worn, this relic turns him into “The Mask,” a green-faced, dynamically energetic, wisecracking figure who transforms his body and the physical world around him. The clerk uses these powers to humorously get back at his harassers, causing havoc and comic mayhem along the way. The character gets entangled in a scheme with some gangsters who run a nightclub and becomes romantically attached to a singer who works there. After defeating the gangsters, the clerk discards the mask, and he and the singer kiss happily to end the film. Aesthetically, *The Mask* is notable for Jim Carrey’s spirited and wildly hyperbolic performance, both physical and verbal, and the film features several set pieces that showcase the comedian’s antics. It also makes prominent use of digital effects and animation to render The Mask’s science-defying movement and manipulation of the physical world.

These two elements were the focus of the film’s press and promotion. Carrey had gained recognition for his work on *In Living Color*, where he appeared as a regular cast member from 1990 through 1994. More important, however, was his appearance in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, released in the February preceding *The Mask*. Although it received negative reviews, *Ace Ventura* did well at the box office and established Carrey as someone who successfully transitioned from television to movies.¹⁶⁰ The press and promotion for *The Mask* paired Carrey’s energetic and outlandish performance style with the film’s plot and use of special effects. “The Mask was made for Carrey’s unique rubber-band man brand of



FIGURE 13. The eye-popping computer-generated imagery and effects, combined with Jim Carrey's exuberant performance, helped make *The Mask* a major comedy hit for New Line.

loose-limbed, flexi-faced comedy," one profile of the actor claimed. "His amazing contortionist-like body 'saved us a lot of money on special effects,' says Michael De Luca, president of production for New Line Cinema."¹⁶¹ Reviews of the film fell in line with the marketing and focused on Carrey and the film's special effects. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, was quite negative but conceded that "Mr. Carrey works very hard here, as do the ingenious special-effects pioneers at Industrial Light and Magic, who exaggerate the star's manic gestures until they take on frenetic intensity."¹⁶²

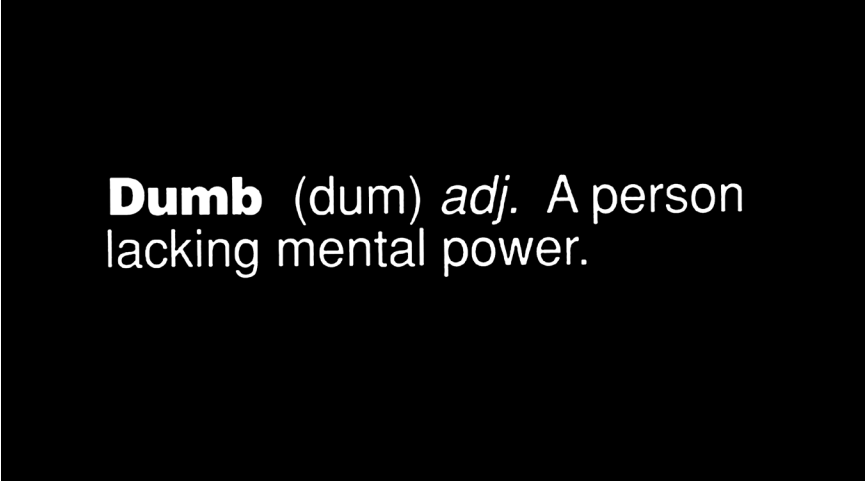
The Mask proved successful at the box office, earning over \$100 million by mid-September.¹⁶³ New Line was aggressive with the movie's home video release. It priced the VHS at \$20, aiming for the sell-through market, and spent \$10 million in advertising the video.¹⁶⁴ This effort worked, and *The Mask* remained a top-selling video for more than half a year.¹⁶⁵ The hope from the start was for *The Mask* to generate a large, transmedia franchise aimed at wide audiences and especially kids. Dark Horse had been developing a television program, toys and action figures, a children's book, and possibly a live stage show in the vein of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' *Coming Out of Their Shells*.¹⁶⁶ Seventy-five Mask-related consumer goods were licensed before the film came out, and New Line strategized to create products and cross-promotions "to appeal to all demographics," with toys and games aimed at kids and video games aimed at teens.¹⁶⁷ New Line worked with Kenner to produce Mask toys, and with General Mills to make Pop Secret "the official popcorn of 'The Mask.'"¹⁶⁸ New Line also released a behind-the-scenes interactive CD-ROM for the film, foreshadowing the kind of bonus features that would appear on DVDs in the coming years.¹⁶⁹

In the months following the film's theatrical release, New Line developed a *Mask* cartoon in earnest and secured a deal with Dark Horse and CBS to produce it.¹⁷⁰ *The Mask: The Animated Series* aired on CBS on Saturday mornings in fall 1995 and continued for three seasons through 1997. This child-friendlier version of the property was regularly punctuated by catchphrases coined in the movie. New Line Home Video also did very well with the VHS release of the cartoon series, which the company promoted heavily leading up to the 1995 holiday season.¹⁷¹ At least one newspaper recommended the series as a holiday gift for children.¹⁷²

More extensive franchising of *The Mask* was hindered, it seems, by contract negotiations between Carrey and New Line. The company had neglected to secure a contract with Carrey for a sequel to the film. The same momentum around Carrey's stardom that bolstered *The Mask* and later *Dumb and Dumber* made securing a contract with the actor prohibitively expensive. New Line paid Carrey \$7 million for *Dumb and Dumber* after paying him \$450,000 for *The Mask*, and reports indicated that it might have to pay him as much as \$10 million for a sequel.¹⁷³ Thus, despite its best effort to transform *The Mask* into another long-running franchise, New Line was not able to produce a sequel to the film until 2005, which did not feature Carrey and performed badly at the box office.

But New Line rapidly achieved another major success with the gross-out comedy *Dumb and Dumber*. Although the film features none of the special effects of *The Mask*, press and promotion for the film were similarly energetic. Anticipation for *Dumb and Dumber* was high thanks to Carrey's success in *Ace Ventura* and *The Mask*, and the title signaled that it would maintain the silly, puerile humor that the actor was now associated with. Carrey's costar Jeff Daniels was known as a serious character actor. Bobby and Peter Farrelly wrote and directed *Dumb and Dumber*, and subsequently made other juvenile, crude comedy films. Indeed, *Dumb and Dumber* revels in the idiocy of its two main characters, a pair of men who have naïve, childlike sensibilities. The plot involves a criminal scheme with gangsters, a road trip, and an attempted romance. Through this plot, the film strings together a series of gags that includes an extended toilet humor scene, suggested bestiality, and the mocking of a blind child.

New Line spent nearly \$10 million on ads and marketing for the film—nearly half of its production budget.¹⁷⁴ On one hand, New Line's promotion of this film to a wide audience aligned with the company's new ambitions for mainstream successes. On the other hand, one can see the exceptional effort to make this film broadly appealing as harkening back to the company's earlier days of selling exploitation films through intelligent and ironic ads. The *Washington Post* linked this merging of big-budget Hollywood and exploitation advertising practices to the importance of opening-weekend box office figures in determining a film's overall success. The *Post* situated *Dumb and Dumber* at the very heart of contemporary marketing practices: "Dumb and Dumber' is a model of how the pieces of a successful marketing campaign come together."¹⁷⁵



Dumb (dum) *adj.* A person lacking mental power.

FIGURE 14. The trailer for *Dumb and Dumber* ironically provides definitions for words related to stupidity, interspersed with comic clips from the film that illustrate the characters' dim-wittedness.

Much of the promotion aimed to create a sense of ironic hipness around the film's claims to portraying stupidity. After looking at market research surveys, New Line determined that the primary groups for the film were "young boys and urban [i.e., Black] audiences who knew Carrey from his work on 'In Living Color.'" ¹⁷⁶ Based on these data, New Line placed ads targeted to those viewers on MTV, the Comedy Channel, and ESPN2. New Line simultaneously endeavored to appeal to audiences outside these demographics, specifically, "adult moviegoers who might have felt self-conscious about seeing a movie that relied heavily on bathroom jokes." ¹⁷⁷

One of New Line's television trailers for *Dumb and Dumber* aimed for an ironic disjuncture from the film's ridiculousness. It intersperses moments from the film in which the characters say or do exceptionally unintelligent or annoying things with intertitles providing dictionary definitions of words like "dumb" and "idiot," as though such words need clarification for especially obtuse viewers. Along similar lines, another television trailer shows a rapid selection of silly moments from the film while a narrator reads quotes from fictional reviews of the movie, such as:

"I laughed till I stopped."—Nick Quality Garden and Tree Service

"Provocative, compelling, and other big words."—Bob Dullard, *Underachievers Monthly*

Advertisements like these highlighted the silly antics of Carrey and Daniels while also placing audiences in a position of knowing superiority to the film.

In what proved a savvy move, New Line released *Dumb and Dumber* on December 16, 1994. As an immature, even crass comedy, the film stood out among

the more conventional, family-friendly films of that season, including Disney's *The Santa Clause*, which had been in release for several weeks. Counterprogrammed in this way, and supported by substantial promotion, *Dumb and Dumber* earned over \$120 million within weeks of its release.¹⁷⁸ This was New Line's second film within an eight-month span to surpass \$100 million at the box office.

The company also tried to franchise *Dumb and Dumber*. Hanna-Barbera, also owned by Turner Broadcasting, produced an animated series that premiered on ABC in October 1995, during the same period when the first season of *The Mask* cartoon aired. An album released to promote the cartoon included a collection of oddball rock tracks like "Kung Foo Fighting" and the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Yertle the Turtle." But the cartoon played for a single season, and the *Dumb and Dumber* franchise never proliferated.

Nevertheless, the one-two success of *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* helped establish New Line as a significant studio in the mid-1990s and widened the space for broad comedy in the company's repertoire. Although New Line had some comedy failures during this time, including *The Stupids* (1996), it achieved another significant victory in 1997 with *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, starring comedian Mike Myers. New Line was in negotiations with Myers to produce the film in February 1996, while Turner was negotiating with Time Warner. By this point, New Line's association with comedy was so well established that it played a role in *Austin Powers's* development. "We chose New Line," Myers said at the time, "because they understand fun movies, and this is going to be a fun movie to develop, produce, and market."¹⁷⁹

The press discussed the movie in high-concept terms, conveying its spy film parody premise simply and efficiently.¹⁸⁰ The production also got attention for including numerous cameos.¹⁸¹ But most of the promotional discourse focused on Myers, who was known for creating zany characters on *Saturday Night Live* (1975–), such as the doofus Wayne of the fictional *Wayne's World* cable access program; Dieter, a severe German television host; and Linda Richman, the host of the fictional show *Coffee Talk*. Myers segued into movies with *Wayne's World* in 1992. This film and its sequel (1993) did well financially, earning \$121 million and \$47 million respectively, helping establish Myers as a comic star in advance of *Austin Powers*.¹⁸²

Austin Powers capitalizes on 1990s-era nostalgia for the 1960s by parodying the excesses of the James Bond film franchise, the Harry Palmer spy films starring Michael Caine, and tropes and clichés associated with the "Swinging London" scene of the 1960s. Austin Powers is a superspy who gets cryogenically frozen and then reanimated in the present day to thwart the supervillain Dr. Evil, who has also been frozen for the past thirty years and is also played by Myers. Many of the film's jokes play on incongruities between these characters' understanding of the world and the cultural norms of the 1990s, as when Dr. Evil holds the world ransom for a mere \$1 million and when Austin Powers tries to play a CD on a record player. Powers recurrently displays inappropriate attitudes regarding gender norms, sex,



FIGURE 15. *Austin Powers* mocks flower power and other cultural and cinematic clichés from the 1960s, the era when New Line Cinema began operation.

and sexuality, and casually makes numerous misogynistic comments as well as self-assured sexual advances meant to represent a 1960s-era “liberated” sexuality.

Sexual innuendos abound, too, amid comic dialogue punctuated by one-liners, puns, and catchphrases. In fact, *Austin Powers* thrust a number of catchphrases into pop culture at the time, including “Do I make you horny?” “Yeah, baby, yeah!” “Shagadelic,” and “Oh, behave!” all intoned with a thick British accent. The film also features visual gags, including Powers’s clownishly loud outfits, his crooked and yellowed teeth, and his car, which is painted with the Union Jack. The film had several comic set pieces, including an opening sequence that spoofs the opening of *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and an extended sequence in which Myers and his colead, Elizabeth Hurley, appear naked but with genitals, buttocks, and breasts strategically blocked from the camera’s view by random objects in the room.

New Line treated *Austin Powers* as a big, conventional, Hollywood-style release in its intensive promotional efforts and distribution pattern. The company made multiple cross-promotional deals for the movie, including “TV specials on MTV and Comedy Central, sweepstake promos with *Seventeen* and *Premiere*, [and] a joint promotion with Live! and Ticketmaster.”¹⁸³ In addition, New Line worked with America Online to publicize the film over the internet.¹⁸⁴ The company was consistent in branding the film from the beginning, highlighting the stars and the madcap main character. Myers appeared in character at the ShoWest industry convention.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, the theatrical trailer showcased the movie’s premise and the antics of the Powers character and stressed his anachronistic, fish-out-of-water situation. Print advertising featured Myers in costume striking a quirky pose, with

the film's title set in a wavy, flourished font that recalled the late sixties. Other ads played up the film's romantic angle by featuring Myers and Hurley embracing.

Austin Powers received positive reviews in trade publications, but those from major newspapers were more mixed.¹⁸⁶ A positive review in the *Washington Post* made a point of distinguishing Myers' comic style from the "broad and elastic" mode of Jim Carrey.¹⁸⁷ The *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin noted the film's somewhat divergent form, content, and audience appeals, writing that, "The film . . . aims for a teenage audience—a group that may be entirely oblivious to its jokey references—with bathroom jokes and frat house humor."¹⁸⁸ Market research conducted upon the film's release indicated that *Austin Powers* did, in fact, play especially well with young males.¹⁸⁹

New Line gave the film a wide release in more than 2,100 theaters, and it debuted at number 2 at the box office, earning \$10 million in its opening weekend, which exceeded expectations based on prerelease market research.¹⁹⁰ The film eventually earned a total of \$53.8 million.¹⁹¹ The film did exceptionally well on home video, as New Line sold more than 3.5 million copies on VHS and 750,000 DVDs of the movie.¹⁹² In addition to these direct financial successes, *Austin Powers* inaugurated a transmedia franchise that included two additional films, each of which earned around \$300 million—far exceeding the original film. *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, in other words, fulfilled the ambitions New Line had held previously for *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber*. It not only attracted large audiences but leveraged the first film's success into a consistent blockbuster comedy franchise.

Like the character Austin Powers, New Line originated in 1967, and the movie's narrative leap from 1967 to 1997 casts a light on New Line's own thirty-year history and its changing identity, sensibility, and industrial practices. New Line promoted multiple films in the sixties and seventies for their countercultural values, often related to politics and sexuality, such as *Sympathy for the Devil*, *Pink Flamingos*, and *Reefer Madness*. *Austin Powers*, by contrast, pokes fun at these very values. In a manner, *Austin Powers* disavowed New Line's very history and created a big, popular hit by ridiculing the revolutionary, exploratory, and liberated values the company had promoted previously.

New Line followed *Austin Powers* with *The Wedding Singer* in 1998, which ultimately earned the company nearly \$80 million in North American theaters.¹⁹³ Not nearly as exuberant as *The Mask* or as intentionally obtuse as *Dumb and Dumber*, *The Wedding Singer* resembles *Austin Powers* to the extent that it draws on nostalgic clichés, in this case from the 1980s. Like the previous films, *The Wedding Singer* centers on an unimpressive male, a down-on-his-luck wedding singer played by Adam Sandler. The film spun off not one but two soundtrack albums, featuring a huge number of new wave and pop hits from the 1980s, including "Blue Monday" by New Order and "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" by Culture Club, and the first of these albums went double platinum. *The Wedding Singer*

followed Sandler's previous oddball comedies *Billy Madison* (1995) and *Happy Gilmore* (1996). Thus, as with Jim Carrey in *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber* and Mike Myers in *Austin Powers*, *The Wedding Singer* featured a comic who had already effectively transitioned from television sketch comedy to Hollywood. More generally, *The Wedding Singer* showed that by 1998 New Line could consistently reach large audiences with star-powered, populist comedies featuring ineffectual, buffoonish white men.

NOT ALL FUN AND GAMES

By focusing on New Line's work in Black cinema, its corporate transformations, and success with lowbrow comedies, this chapter presents a mostly positive and somewhat streamlined picture of the company's movement through the 1990s. During this same time, however, New Line experimented with a number of other genres, sometimes successfully and other times disastrously. It released a number of darker dramas, for example, that did well at the box office, earned critical prestige, and in some cases both. Though not a financial success, *Glen-garry Glen Ross* gained positive critical attention for the performances of its cast in 1992, while Louis Malle's drama *Damage* earned much praise and surprisingly impressive returns in 1993. New Line achieved a major, breakout hit with the grim neonoir *Seven* in 1995, which earned more than \$100 million in North America and over \$200 million more internationally. With both *Boogie Nights* in 1997 and *Magnolia* in 1999, New Line continued to release prestige pictures with ensemble casts by emerging auteur Paul Thomas Anderson, and both films performed reasonably well financially and received numerous critical responses, awards, and award nominations.

In addition to star-filled dramas like these, New Line released several action, fantasy, and sci-fi films following its purchase by Turner and the Time Warner merger. New Line had a blockbuster with *Mortal Kombat* in 1995, based on the violent video game, which the company subsequently franchised into an animated cartoon in 1996, a less successful sequel in 1997, and a live-action television program in 1998. It released several action films in the 1990s starring Jackie Chan and centered on his martial arts skills and stunt work, including *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and *Jackie Chan's First Strike* (1997). Blending these martial arts films with its focus on Black comedies like *Friday*, New Line achieved global, blockbuster success with *Rush Hour* in 1998, which costarred Chan and Chris Tucker. It also had successes with the comic book adaptations *Spawn* and *Blade* (discussed further in chapter 5), which are notable for featuring Black characters and Black actors in the lead roles.

However, a sizable number of New Line's star-driven, high-concept action films failed at the box office. The fall of 1996 was unusually bad for the company, when it released *The Island of Dr. Moreau* in August, *Last Man Standing* in September, and

The Long Kiss Goodnight in October. Each of these films was expensive, boasted big-name stars like Marlon Brando and Bruce Willis, and featured set pieces full of violence and special effects. Yet each earned less than half of its overall cost: *The Island of Dr. Moreau* cost \$65 million to produce and market and earned \$28 million; *The Long Kiss Goodnight* cost about \$85 million to produce and promote and earned \$34 million; *Last Man Standing* cost \$67 million to produce and market and earned less than \$20 million.¹⁹⁴ New Line bombed again in 1998 with the sci-fi movies *Dark City* and *Lost in Space*, the latter of which earned \$67.5 million in North American theaters against a \$90 million budget, the most the company had spent on any film to that point.¹⁹⁵

These failures gained considerable attention in the press and were regularly cited in the ongoing discourse about New Line's identity and the company's "fit" in Time Warner and Hollywood more generally.¹⁹⁶ Many articles found New Line lacking by multiple measures, as it was neither fully mainstream nor completely marginal. But an article in *Variety* from 1998, leading up to *Lost in Space*, offered many insights about New Line's cultural and industrial transformation. Noting that New Line was "allowed" to operate independently *within* Time Warner because it had secured separate lines of credit with major banks, the article asserted that workers at the company now adopted a "corporate look" to match their mainstream status: "Shaye now sports an uncharacteristic suit and tie, while president and chief operating officer Michael Lynne shows off New Line cufflinks."¹⁹⁷

The article unknowingly foreshadowed the company's upcoming success with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy when it characterized New Line's evolving business strategies: "Just like the big boys, New Line is looking for 'event' projects that have multi-dimensional potential."¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the story noted New Line's increasing revenues from international markets, which rose from \$15.8 million in 1990 to \$286 million in 1997, as well as the company's many dealings with international distributors and television networks. As chapter 5 details, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy brought together all of New Line's efforts to create global blockbusters and transmedia franchises. However much New Line might still operate "independently" and take on projects that other studios might not, the article suggested that, as of 1998, "New Line has become a microcosm of the synergy that [Time Warner] has attempted through its merger with Turner."¹⁹⁹ New Line was a neither-nor entity: neither Hollywood nor indie; neither inside nor outside; neither mainstream nor marginal. It was an embodiment of Conglomerate Hollywood in the 1990s, with its parallel business strategies and often troubling cultural politics.