

KEY TRENDS IN AMERICAN FILM

Session Five
Family Films

Department of Film and Audiovisual Culture
Dr. Richard Nowell

Agenda

14:20 – 15:55

Finding Nemo (2003)

15:55 – 16:10

Break

16:10 – 17:20

Family Films

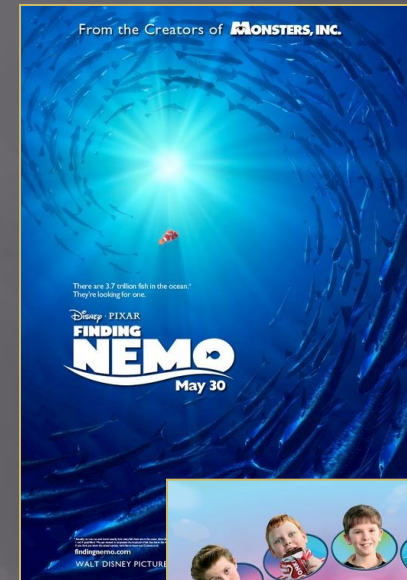


Focus

Defining the Family Film

The rise to prominence of the Family Film

A poetics of the family film: Modes of Address & Framing devices



Screening Questions

How does *Finding Nemo* address the interests and the concerns of children?

How does *Finding Nemo* address the interests and concerns of parents?

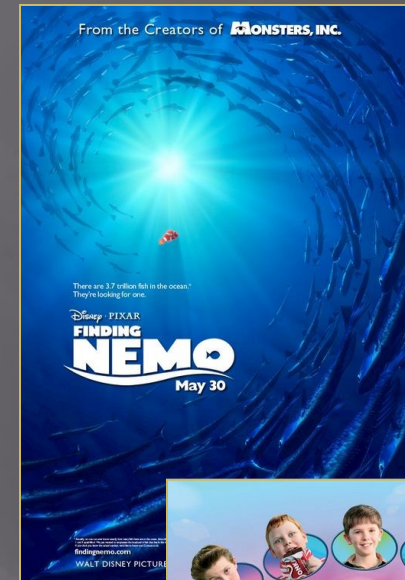
How does *Finding Nemo* function as a form of family therapy?

Focus

Defining the Family Film

The rise to prominence
of the Family Film

A poetics of the family film: Modes
of Address & Framing devices



Hollywood and Family

It is often assumed that almost without exception produces films which blindly promote the nuclear family

It is also usually suggested that this thematic constant is the product of an involuntary institutional conservatism

However, we can see Hollywood's family films as the product of savvy audience targeting and self-promotion

What is more, these films often approach the family as a site of turmoil that is itself in need of care and attention

A Surprisingly Slippery Category

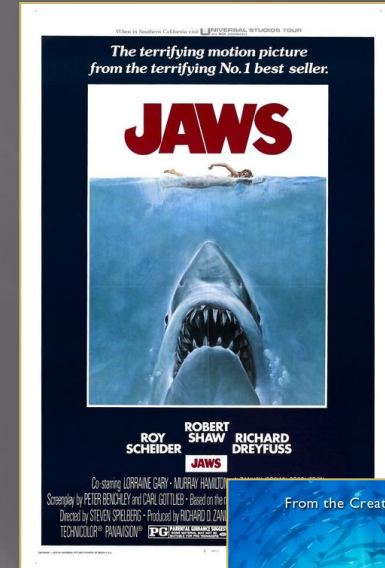
Film categories are often difficult to define

This is because they are a product of hybridity during assembly, promotion, and reception

Industry-pros and -watchers differ on what a family film is and has been

These films are sometimes conflated with mega-budget fare that must be child-friendly

Bur, this confuses mass-audience accessibility and the prioritization of key groups

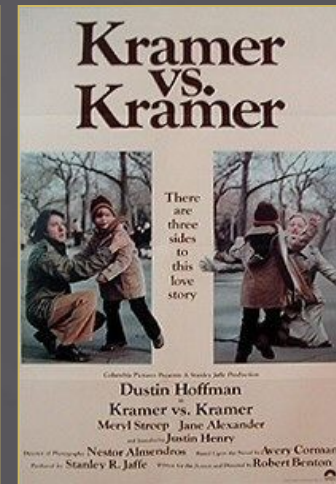
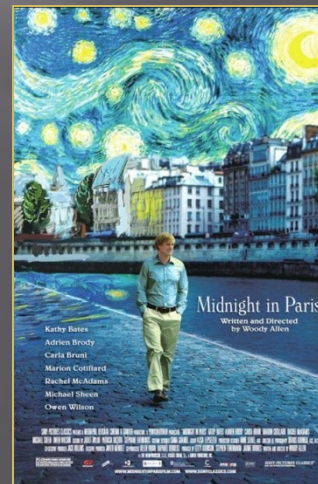
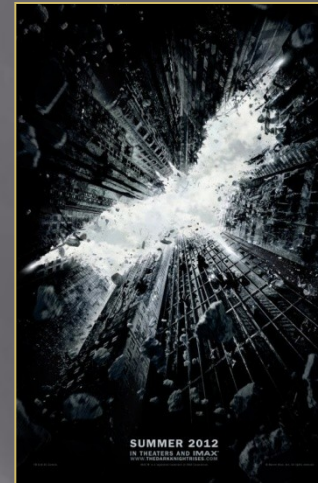


Family Films as primarily family-oriented films

1. Not all blockbusters are family films
2. Not all family-friendly films are family films
3. Not all family-centered films are family films

Family Films can be seen as:

- A. Films made for, and marketed to, families above and beyond other groups ... by
- B. addressing spectators as caregivers or as children (regardless of biological age)



The Rise (and rise) of the Family Film

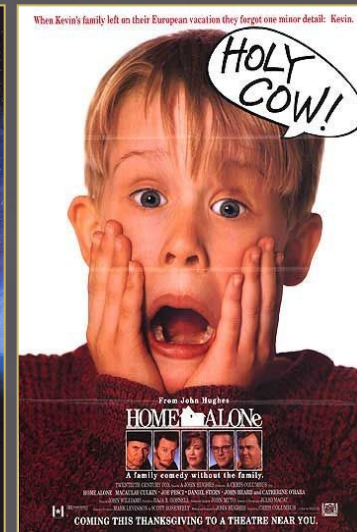
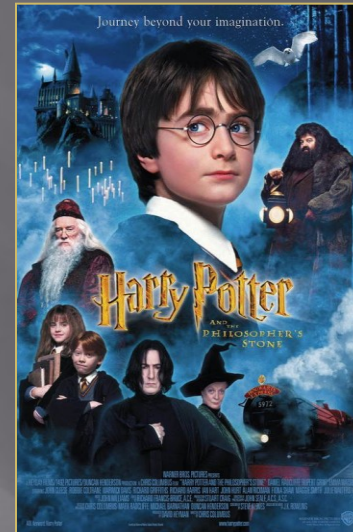
Allen argues that family films became more important in the late 1980s and early 1990s

However, Kramer rightly spotlights key examples from the 1970s and early 1980s

Noel Brown rightly argues that they are a foundation of 21st century Hollywood

We should note that varied rosters ensures family films were always released

Late 1980s/early 1990s saw Hollywood's institutionalization of these films



What conditions does Allen suggest led to the rise to prominence of the family film in the late 80s and early 90s?

The Rise of the Family Film

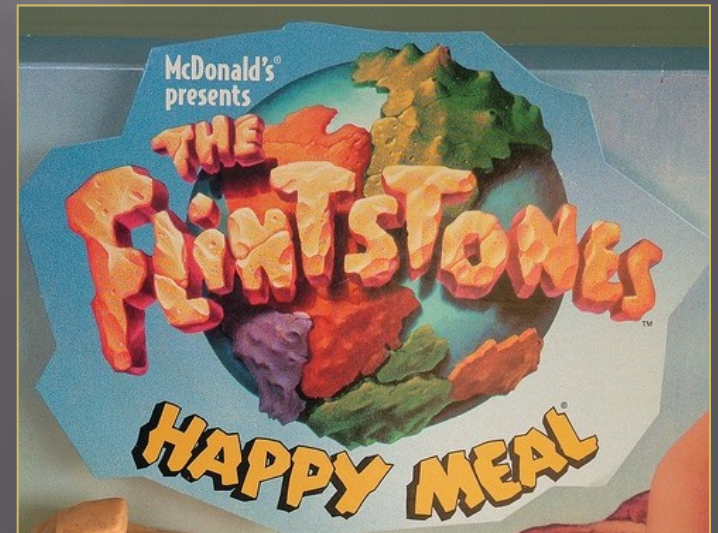
Demographic: Large target market – Baby-boomers spawn echo boom; youth declines

Technology: Increased Accessibility – VCR facilitates domestic consumption

Political: Positive image – Solution to right-wing charges of making immoral fare

Economic: Facilitates Synergy – Child consumption of media, toys, snacks

Market: Indicators of appeal in late 80s – e.g. *Three Men and a Baby* (1987)]



How does Kramer suggest Family Films address children?

How does he suggest they address adults?

Promoting Intergenerational empathy, nostalgia, understanding

Child:

A) consider their current emotional, social, and psychological lives, and B) challenges of parenting



Adult:

A) consider what it must be like a child, and B) what it was like to be a child



Thus ... Family:

Consider multi-generation coexistence, by fostering understanding across generational lines



What does Allen suggest are the general ways Family Films tend to take positions on their family-related themes?

Cautious Position-taking in Family Films

Allen suggests Family Film makers tend to be careful about how they deal with family life

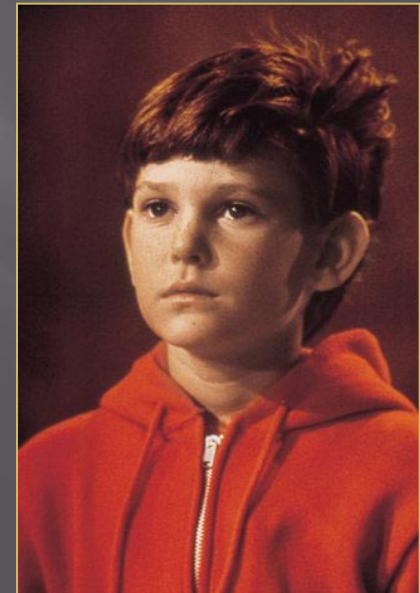
Indeterminacy: Avoid taking overly strident positions on issues relating to the family

Ambivalence: Leave issues unresolved to enable avoid being overly dogmatic

Why?

This is an emotionally sensitive topic – a source of comfort **and** heartbreak to many

But, these “approaches” can be unavoidable



The Case of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

How does *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* address the interests and concerns of children?

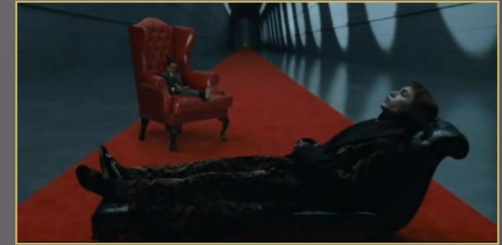
How does *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* address the interests and concerns of parents?

How does *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* function as a form of family therapy?

Chocolate Factory & Charlie: Lessons in sacrifice, discipline, and togetherness

Understanding Childhood

Vulnerability, impressionability, wonder, potential dis-likability; pressures;



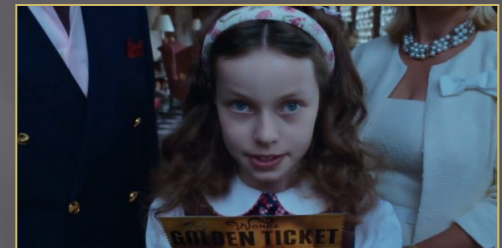
Understanding Adult Strains

Poverty; unemployment; stress; repression/trauma



Understanding Parenting

Laxity begets: self-indulgent; entitled; delinquent; hyper-competitive children



Self-reflexivity

Bonding through storytelling; Factory (Hollywood) facilitates intergenerational understanding



The Case of *Finding Nemo*

How does *Finding Nemo* address the interests and concerns of children?

How does *Finding Nemo* address the interests and concerns of parents?

How does *Finding Nemo* function as a form of family therapy?

Finding Nemo: Reconstructing the broken family

Behind veneer: drama of loss, fear, and coping

Bereavement

Violence and loss begets trauma

Control and independence

Understanding, and resisting strict parenting

Rebuilding and relearning

Challenges of remarriage and step-parenting

Real-life Social Functions

Thematizes therapeutic potential of storytelling, posing itself as glue binding families together



Framing Nemo: Family, Self-reflexivity, and Therapy

Finding Nemo Trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZdpNglLbt8>

In Sum

Demographic, technological, and corporate developments led Family Films to become industrially important in late 1980s and early 1990s

Ongoing blockbuster success have ensured they remain a cornerstone of Hollywood output ever since

These films thematize the child-centered family as a way of capturing and being important to a multi-generational cohabiting audience

To avoid alienating dysfunctional or broken families, the films tend to avoid taking too strident positions on the topic

Trade in nostalgia, and encourage empathy and intergenerational understanding: the act of consuming the films is central to this process