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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GIRLY FILM

From the woman’s picture to the new woman’s film, the chick flick, and the smart-chick film

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Introduction

The “woman’s picture” of classical Hollywood made way in the 1960s and 1970s for the “new woman’s film” and its avatars, most notably the “chick flick.” The waning of the chick flick in the form of the “girly film,” following upon the 2007–11 global financial crisis, highlights how the new woman’s film, far from disappearing, has continued to develop in the independent sector, including re-workings of girly film formulas, producing what might be termed “smart-chick films.” These shifts in nomenclature underline a parallel transformation in the preoccupations of these films, which have in common that they primarily address a female audience and are concerned with guiding a woman towards a path of self-fulfillment. In its early phase, the woman’s picture upheld a fundamentally masochistic vision of feminine fulfillment (Doane 1987). It was succeeded by the “independent woman’s film”—a variation on the new woman’s film of the 1970s—which introduced uncertainties and experimentations that questioned this masochism. The independent woman’s film, in turn, was replaced by a frenzied fantasy of self-gratification in the form of the girly film during the 1990s, during the height of the popularity of the so-called “chick flick” (Radner 2011). Finally, the new woman’s film of the twenty-first century, including the smart-chick film, promoted an ironic vision of the woman’s fate, while sharing with its progenitors of the 1970s a sense of uncertainty about the possibilities for fulfillment that contemporary society offers to women.

The woman’s picture

During Hollywood’s classical era (1925–48, give or take a few years), the studios that dominated film production during the period considered women to be the most influential film viewers (Stokes 1999). Since the disintegration of the studio system beginning in 1948, as classical Hollywood transformed itself into Conglomerate Hollywood (Schatz 2013), movie moguls rarely took the mature woman’s views into account, resulting in a decline in films made specifically for that audience (Schaap 2011; Radner 2014). During this same
period, young male viewers achieved canonization as the primary cinematic tastemakers on a global scale (Krämer 1999). Notwithstanding these shifts, the rise of feminist film scholarship beginning in the 1970s has largely focused on popular films understood as directed at a female audience.

This interest in films for women has produced two bodies of scholarship. The first reassesses the films of the classical Hollywood era (grouped under the term the woman’s picture or the woman’s film), extending into the early 1950s, produced during the period in which female audiences and female stars were seen to dominate the cinematic landscape. The second focuses on the films, referred to as chick flicks by the industry and reviewers, released after 1990.

Initial feminist film scholarship emphasized the woman’s picture, which genre specialist Rick Altman describes as “a notion” that “was originally assembled out of female-oriented cycles within a variety of genres” (Altman 1999: 76). According to Altman, the woman’s picture as a generic category was primarily generated by feminist film scholars, rather than the industry itself, which tended to be much more informal in designations, using terms as varied as “hanky pics” and “femme fare.” The woman’s picture, as a recognized genre, emerges, in Raphaëlle Moine’s terms, “a posteriori,” as a consequence of the development and propagation of feminist criticism (Moine 2008: 145, 146). According to her, the woman’s picture came to function as an “interpretive category … when generic readings” of a set of films revolving around a central heroine and her concerns “became established as a fact of reception,” notably within academia (ibid. 143).

The debated status of the woman’s film, or woman’s picture, led some scholars to claim that the genre is not specific to classical Hollywood, and not properly a genre at all (Neale 2000: 188–96). Periodicity has proved to be a problem, with the genre in its existing definitions exhibiting an unevenness of development peppered with exceptions. One unresolved methodological problem revolves around definitions of gender itself, with Hollywood conventions predominating, in which notions of male and female (or the quadrants, males under 25, males over 25, females under 25, females over 25) function as coarse categories of analysis, leaving aside any potential challenges to their validity. Concomitantly, notions of feminine subjectivity, drawing upon psychoanalysis and its relations to the woman’s film, which animated discussions of the genre in the 1980s (Doane 1987), have enjoyed less importance in subsequent decades.

From classical Hollywood to new Hollywood

In defining the woman’s film as an interpretive category, the work of feminist critic Molly Haskell, originally published in 1973, proved formative and, indeed, she is largely credited with establishing the category “the woman’s film,” its attributes and its sub-genres, which would be taken up by feminist film scholars such as Mary Ann Doane, and Janine Basinger (Haskell 1975:153–88; Doane 1987; Basinger 1993). Haskell is responsible for introducing the view—which has been upheld by feminists such as New York Times reviewer Manohla Dargis in the twenty-first century—that, with the demise of the family melodrama at the end of the 1950s, film roles for women, beginning in the 1960s, took a turn for the worse. Haskell maintained: “With the substitution of violence and sexuality (a poor second) for romance, there was less need for exciting and interesting women; any bouncing nymphet whose curves looked good in catsup would do” (Haskell 1975: 323–4). Notwithstanding Haskell’s call to arms, the films appearing between 1960 and 1990 have been unevenly explored by feminist film scholarship.
Karen Hollinger’s study of what she calls the female friendship film constitutes one of the few sustained analyses of film from this period (Hollinger 1998), in which she identifies issues that predominate in what she calls the “new woman’s film of the 1970s,” which include “the independent woman” and “female friendship;” however, she maintains that “[f]ilms dealing with independent women actually began to die out in the 1980s, or they merged with preexisting film and television genres.” In her estimation, “[f]rom among these various categories of new woman’s films, the female friendship film found the widest audience and greatest mainstream popularity” (Hollinger 2012: 44).

This genre, or cycle, which included films such as *Turning Point* (Herbert Ross, 1977), *Beaches* (Garry Marshall, 1989), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), while initiated in the 1970s and prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, “ran out of energy in the late 1990s,” perhaps in response to “the increasingly conservative climate in the late 1990s and into the 2000s” (Hollinger 2012: 46); simultaneously, many attributes of the female friendship film were incorporated into what became known as the chick flick, which, because of its emphasis on fashion and consumer culture more generally and consequent potential synergies, in terms of product placement, or the creation of ancillary products, for example, proved more popular with Hollywood producers than the films discussed by Hollinger (Radner 2011:131).

The chick flick/girly film cycle (see below), such as *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion* (David Mirkin, 1997), arguably re-worked the terms of female friendship in the context of a changing society. As a narrative form, these films signaled the continuing importance of female friendship in the lives of women with a view to both feminism (in some mode or another) and consumerism. Fashion, in particular, provided a significant inter-text; many of these later films, such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) were dubbed “fashion films” and “female event films.” Fashion magazines, highlighting the designs featured in these films, for example, provided free publicity for the film, encouraging interest in its release while also inviting women to imitate the outfits of its stars (Radner 2011: 136, 153–70).

### The rise and fall of the chick flick

Hollinger posits that two strands, cycles, or genres (depending on a terminology that remains a topic of continued debated) emerged in the 1990s, overshadowing the female friendship film—adaptations of literary classics and the chick flick, or girly film. Embracing a wide range of material, from the British heritage film (Higson 2003) to the female biopic (Polaschek 2013), adaptations and costume dramas have occupied an important place among films that appeal to the female audience; however, they also probably deserve to be considered in their specificity as a distinct genre that exists alongside the woman’s picture as defined by feminist film theorists. Other genres, such as the softcore thriller (associated with the 1990s), which feminist scholar Linda Ruth Williams specifies as “not just for the boys,” or the female detective film as a post-Hollywood cycle that re-writes an essentially masculine genre, complicate definitions of the woman’s film without for that matter extending its life (Williams 2005: 420; Martin 2007; Gates 2011). In contrast, the romantic drama, continuing into the twenty-first century with films that are often based on popular novels—such as *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004)—has long been a narrative form associated with a predominantly female audience; however, unlike the woman’s film, the genre places a couple, rather than a single woman, at the apex of its story (Todd 2014).
In contrast, the chick flick—popular films successful with women—mirrored the woman's picture in many ways, in regard to its emphasis on a woman around whose concerns the narrative revolves, and its return to marriage and heterosexuality as offering the norms that govern all relationships (as opposed to friendship, for example). The term “chick flick” gained international currency in the 1990s following the success of Pretty Woman (Gary Marshall, 1990) (Ferriss and Young 2008: 2). Like the woman’s film, the chick flick as a category is nebulous with regard to the scope and range of films included. The term was often used to designate any successful popular film that appealed to women, including romances and adaptations. The chick flick was preceded by a similarly ill-defined literary genre known as chick lit (Ferriss and Young 2006).

Helen Fielding’s popular British novel Bridget Jones’s Diary (1996) is often credited with drawing public attention to the chick lit genre, which includes a range of variations, such as “mummy lit,” “black chick lit,” as well as national iterations, with countries such as Australia and New Zealand boasting their own chick lit authors and novels replete with local detail and locutions (Ferriss and Young 2006). “Chick flicks” were more explicitly identified with Hollywood cinema and American culture. American chick flicks, at least as these have been defined by feminist film scholars, featured more successful and conventional heroines, such as Kate Hudson in How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days (Donald Petrie, 2003), whose antics and persona were typically less farcical in tone (though still comedic and prone to self-deprecation) than those attributed to the eponymous Bridget (Radner 2011:123). In general, late-twentieth-century chick flicks avoided the high melodrama that characterized many women’s films of the classical period, as well as a significant number of female friendship films such as Beaches.

Chick flick handbooks (see for example Berry and Errigo 2004), of which there are many, define these films broadly with the intent of guiding women to movies that they might enjoy across the decades and across national cinemas, often including canonized feminist films such as Jane Campion’s The Piano (1993). Feminist scholars have focused more narrowly on a variation centered around a heroine whom Charlotte Brunsdon dubbed “the postfeminist girly” in 1997, looking back at Pretty Woman and Working Girl (Mike Nichols, 1987)—films that she claims are variously “girls’ films” or “shopping films” and “share an address to, and a representation of, a new kind of figure, the post-feminist girly.” Films in this cycle are often characterized by an “obsession with clothes,” and “an exaggerated performance of femininity” (Brunsdon 1997: 81, 4; Radner 2011: 2–4, 26–41). In particular, Brunsdon contrasts these films with what she calls “the independent woman film” of the 1970s (Brunsdon 1997: 83), which she sees as more clearly influenced by second wave feminism and standing in reaction to the woman’s film of classical Hollywood. Subsequent feminist scholarship has tended to associate the girly films with post-feminism, emphasizing their relationship with romance (Hollinger 2012: 57). Scholars such as Diane Negra associate them with a trend that she calls “retreatism,” in which women repudiate feminism and its gains within the workplace to return to some form of domesticity focused on the home (Negra 2009).

**Feminism and post-feminism**

Brunsdon herself advocates a more nuanced approach than that advanced by Negra and Hollinger in the twenty-first century. She expresses doubts about the a-historical implications of the term “post-feminism,” in particular the way in which it “installs 1970s feminism as the site of ‘true’ feminism, from which lipstick wearers and shoppers are excluded” (Brunsdon 1997: 102). She also questions the more commonly shared view that
post-feminism as a term implies that the work and time of feminism is over. Nonetheless, she finds the category useful in describing this new kind of “girly heroine … as it marks the considerable distance we find here, in popular representation, from popular representations of 1970s feminism” (ibid.).

Brunsdon’s uneasiness with the term post-feminist in 1997 highlights the difficulties feminist scholars such as Negra (cited above) have encountered in approaching feminine popular culture, which was frequently marked by a profound ambivalence towards the status quo, while instructing women to accept it to the degree possible in order to negotiate circumstances most favorable to their own individual fulfillment (Radner 1995). This focus on the individual has been variously highlighted by terms such as “commodity feminism” and “neo-feminism” as well as explicit references to neo-liberalism more generally (Radner 2011: 6).

The emphasis on self-gratification in the girly film, and the idea that a woman should and could “have it all,” clearly distinguishes these films from the woman’s picture. In Dark Victory (Edmund Goulding, 1939), for example, Judith (Bette Davis) suffers from a debilitating illness in silence until she dies, happy in the knowledge that, having given up her hedonistic ways, she has discovered love and marriage; in Fried Green Tomatoes, the “friends” literally get away with murder. Though the friends’ happiness is short-lived (one dies of cancer), it is unalloyed and occurs in this life, not the next; however, the female friendship film’s conclusion, frequently tragic (as in the case of Thelma and Louise), suggested that women had not as yet found their place in the world. Pretty Woman ends on a more triumphant note, with Vivian (Julia Roberts) anticipating love, marriage, wealth, and even children at the film’s conclusion. Sexual relations are depicted openly and chastity is no longer a virtue, which was not the case with the woman’s picture.

For many feminist scholars, the development of the woman’s film in the form of the chick flick in the late twentieth century is best understood as the outgrowth of neo-liberalism more generally within feminine culture (Radner 2011; Kaklamanidou 2015; McHugh 2015). Sometimes termed neo-feminism, this position is associated initially with figures such as Helen Gurley Brown. Beginning in the 1960s with her bestseller Sex and the Single Girl, Brown advocated that women, even married women, maintain their economic independence by working outside the home, but also that they use sex to achieve what they wanted (or needed) from society (and men), exploiting consumerism to ensure their desirability while also pioneering a form of the sexual revolution that encouraged women to take their pleasure where they found it (Radner 2011: 6–25). Arguably, the girly film, as identified by Brunsdon, represented, almost thirty years later, the arrival of Brown’s principles to the big screen.

Importantly, women like Helen Gurley Brown were reacting not to feminism, but to the same conditions of inequity that feminism sought to remedy. Neo-feminism, as associated with figures such as Brown, does not follow on from second wave feminism; rather, it coincides with, or perhaps even pre-dates, it. Neo-feminism, however, had a firmer grasp not only of women’s needs, but also of their desires, often secretly shared by feminists themselves, as evidenced in the many confessions of guilty pleasure (such as those cited in Brunsdon 1997: 83) on the part of self-proclaimed feminists when consuming chick flics. Indeed, much of the history of feminist criticism, particularly with regard to popular cinema directed at female audiences in the post-classical period, is formed by a division between feminists such as Negra, and what might be called the new independent woman, as initially portrayed in the 1970s. Not coincidentally, in the “older-bird film” (a variation on the girly film) Something’s Gotta Give (Nancy Meyers, 2003), the film’s heroine Erica (Diane
Keaton), as a twenty-first century independent woman, is contrasted with her sister Zoe (Frances McDormand), a feisty faculty member in Woman’s Studies from Columbia University. Erica gets her man and her happy ending. Zoe, we assume, goes it alone; the film does not present her story worthy of the viewers’ attention.

Films such as *Something’s Gotta Give* posit ethics as a matter of individual choice deployed within the limited context of the individual’s immediate social group, usually some form of the traditional family grounded in heterosexual norms. From the perspective of many feminist scholars, popular culture itself—including chick lit and chick flics most pointedly—systematically distanced itself from second wave feminism (see Hollows 2000; Whelehan 2005), as illustrated by Zoe’s marginalization as a feminist in *Something’s Gotta Give* (notwithstanding the fact that the film’s depiction of her is affectionate rather than hostile). Simultaneously, these narratives incorporated ideas that seemed also to suggest a debt to this same movement, its ideals and its reforms in the figure of Erica as a twenty-first century embodiment of the independent woman. A deep sense of irony at life’s betrayals permeates what might otherwise appear to be a bitter condemnation of certain potentially feminist tendencies inherent in the chick flic, a trait shared by chick lit.

The girly film as the prototypical chick flic

The girly film offered a potent example of how popular culture played out these issues while attempting to offer a fantasy vision of the woman who had it all. While not a genre in the strict sense of the term, though many were romantic comedies or had a strong romantic theme, these films appear roughly from 1990 to 2010, beginning with the release and phenomenal success of *Pretty Woman* in 1990 and concluding with the failure of the television program “Sex and the City” (HBO, 1998–2004) to establish a successful movie franchise in 2010 with *Sex and the City 2* (Michael Patrick King), and with the declining success of films such as *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (P.J. Hogan, 2009) in comparison with earlier fashion films such as *The Devil Wears Prada* or *Sex and the City: The Movie* (Michael Patrick King, 2008) (Radner 2014).

The girly films distinguish themselves from earlier female-directed material such as the woman’s picture of classical Hollywood, the independent women films of the 1970s, and the female friendship films of the 1980s and 1990s, through their ironic and self-conscious tone, their emphasis on consumer culture, and their affirmation of a sexually active feminine subject. Imelda Whelehan’s comments about chick lit as addressing readers for whom “femininity” was “something essential to them under threat by feminism” hold equally true for the girly film (Whelehan 2005: 177).

The cycle’s coherency derives from its focus on a heroine at the center of her universe, usually employed and often living in an urban environment, motivated by individual fulfillment expressed through some form of consumerism (often manifest in a shopping sequence and a make-over for the heroine) as its defining trait. Similarly, this loose formula is associated with a set of stars best deemed to incarnate the girly heroine, such as Julia Roberts, Reese Witherspoon, Anne Hathaway, and Jennifer Lopez, as well as a number of directors, such as Gary Marshall and Donald Petrie, including a few women, such as Nancy Meyers. Indeed, girly films comprise many further variations such as the older-bird film or middle-aged chick flic, as in *It’s Complicated* (Nancy Meyers, 2009), and the black chick flic, as in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 1998), or the mother–daughter chick flic such as *Mamma Mia* (Phillida Lloyd, 2008), suggesting the flexibility of its formula to the degree that the heroine expressed a certain youthful “girlishness”
(irrespective of her actual age) externalized through her investment in consumer culture (she looks “good”) and her sexual availability.

The rise and fall of the girly film

The decline of the girly film and the return of the woman’s film: the smart-chick flick

With the onset of the 2008 recession, such films, with their emphasis on fashion and consumerism, became less common, with fewer and fewer films made for a female audience, in keeping with Conglomerate Hollywood’s focus on the more profitable young male demographic and the family film, associated with Disney. The nature of their audience has also been an issue. Girly films tend to be single quadrant films—appealing to women over 25, with men reluctant to attend. As Hollywood felt itself under increasing pressure, particularly when falling DVD sales accompanied diminished theatrical attendance, it was less willing to take risks on a film that, even if successful, would lack broad appeal. Contributing to this trend is the fact that women are willing to go along to movies directed at other quadrants: to those constituted by their partners, daughters, and sons (Radner 2014).

Hollywood sought to recuperate possible losses through cycles seeking to appeal to broader audiences, including: the proliferation of hybrid romantic comedies, often with a raunch factor and featuring a high-profile male star, such as *Friends with Benefits* (Will Gluck, 2011) with Ashton Kutcher; the gross-out, usually bromantic, romantic comedies associated with Judd Apatow; and a short-lived cycle of what were known as the romaction film, such as *Knight and Day* (James Mangold, 2010), and *Killers* (Robert Luketic, 2010) (Radner 2014). A recent cycle of comedies generated by female stand-up comics, such as Kristin Wiig, Melissa McCarthy, and Amy Schumer (a cycle initiated by the tamer and more sentimental Nia Vardalos in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Joel Zwick, 2002), who seek to shock with their transgressive, scatological, and sexually explicit humor, offer a variation on the narrative device that places a woman at the center of her universe with a relatively broad appeal.

The decline of the girly film coincided with the development of the Young Adult (YA) genre directed at women under twenty-five, including the tween/teen franchises adapted from previously successful book series, such as the Twilight series, the Mortal Instruments series, the Hunger Games trilogy, and the Divergent trilogy, as well as films based on a single best-selling YA novel, such as *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013), and *The Fault in Our Stars* (Josh Boone, 2014), which appeal to older women as well as young adults. The teen franchises performed well at the box office, though far from outstripping the action adventure franchises geared towards young males. These productions proved more reliable at the box office than the hybrid romantic comedies, including bromances, which nonetheless gained increasing purchase on the multiplex audience. The success of the franchises was due, at least in part, to the built-in pre-established awareness created by the successful novels, heightened in the case of a series. Indeed, several films from these franchises aimed at women under 25 ranked among the top ten releases for their year. For example, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013) ranked number five in 2013 worldwide grosses (Radner 2014).

These films distinguish themselves from the chick flicks of the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century by offering heroines, who, with rare exceptions, are oblivious to the world of fashion and feminine culture broadly defined, at least within the fantasy universe of the films. The actresses and actors who play the central characters in these films, however, have very visible lives on the red carpet, in the tabloids and through various forms of social
media, in which they both actively and passively support the fashion system, in keeping with the increasing influence of celebrity in all areas of consumerism, especially those pertaining to style, including homewares, cars, art, and architecture (Church Gibson 2012).

An exception to this trend is the continued output of what might be called smart-chick films by independent directors, a recent iteration of the new woman’s film, such as Rachel Getting Married (Jonathan Demme, 2008), The Bling Ring (Sofia Coppola, 2013), Blue Jasmine (Woody Allen, 2013), and Enough Said (Nicole Holofcener, 2013) (Radner 2015, 2016). These films enjoy a modest success at the box office, depend upon an international as well as a domestic market, and are frequently viewed through small screen outlets (Radner 2014, 2015). Thus, despite the decline in theatrically released films directed at female audiences, bemoaned by critics such as Manohla Dargis, increasing numbers of female directors, such as Lisa Cholodenko, Kat Coiro, Nicole Holofcener, Courtney Hunt, Kelly Reichardt, and Lynn Shelton, have emerged in this sector in recent years, making films that in many ways continue the tradition (with important variations) of the woman’s film of classical Hollywood, as a genre that addresses the mature female audience, and which, in American film scholar Jeanine Basinger’s words, “accomplishes one important thing for its viewers: It puts the woman at the center of the universe” (Basinger 1993: 15). Importantly, these women directors are very often white and middle-class, addressing issues and milieux identified with that same class, with a very few exceptions, such as Gina Prince-Bythewood, and Jennifer Phang.

The twenty-first century variations of the new woman’s film, including the smart-chick film, in terms of outlook and topic are more closely related to the woman’s film of classical Hollywood and the independent woman film of the 1970s than the girly film, clearly meriting, in terms of structure, and address, to be considered a continuation of the new woman’s film of the 1970s. Arguably, they continue to explore formulas established by the girly film—for example, the wedding film as in Rachel Getting Married, or the marriage plot as in Holofcener’s Friends with Money (2006)—while borrowing some of their characters from the independent woman’s film. This latest version of the new woman’s film distinguishes itself from the woman’s picture, however, through its reliance on irony and its sense of a woman’s right to self-fulfillment (even if rarely achieved). Unlike the typical indie film, the irony of which derives largely from the viewer’s pre-supposed knowledge of cinematic conventions, smart-chick irony tends to revolve around the feminine condition, women’s culture, especially consumer culture, as well as the nature of male/female relations, family relations, and social relations, often affirming the characters’ distance as well as sympathy for the perspectives of second wave feminism as a form of naïve, if sincere, idealism. In this sense, the new woman’s film in the twenty-first century represents a return to the uncertainties of the 1970s, but tempered by a sentiment of resignation in the face of a fragmented contemporary culture.

If the new woman’s film and the chick flick have in common their reliance on irony, both forms also depend heavily on an international audience (the chick flick to a lesser degree). Similarly, particularly with the advent of film festivals, dedicated movie channels, and VoD, films are produced internationally with a view to a female audience—films such as the Chilean Gloria (Sebastián Lelio, 2013), which details the dilemmas of a divorced woman, underlining her national specificity, while addressing a global female viewer, whose empathy is implicit in the film’s rhetoric. In this sense, the new woman’s film testifies to the continuing influence, if modified, of some version of what might be termed a transnational feminism, as does the idea that women function as an international audience, with gender extending beyond nationality to create a global female audience.
As moviegoers and feminist film scholars, we may bemoan the decline of theatrical releases for female audiences and mature audiences, but, for all that, we should not ignore the new possibilities that cinema and its various avatars afford us in the twenty-first century. The new woman’s film has continued to transform itself in response to changing social mores and to broad economic and technological developments, testifying to the resiliency and will-to-life of its audiences. Whether on Netflix or at our local multiplex, whether we are transfixed by Gina Prince-Bythewood’s Beyond the Lights (2014) or the Chinese-American director Wayne Wang’s sensitive female friendship film Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (2011), we are still watching, and will continue to do so.

Related topics

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Note

1 An earlier version of some of this material appeared in Radner (2014); all references to box office figures, receipts, and rankings taken from boxofficemojo.com, unless otherwise specified.

References


