

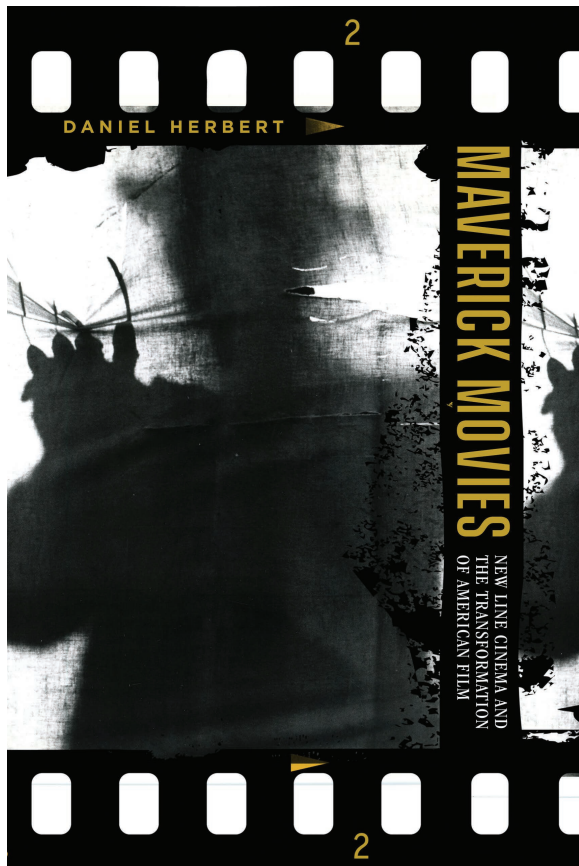
## Book Review:

### Herbert, Daniel. *Maverick Movies* (University of California Press, 2023)

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Daniel Herbert's new book, *Maverick Movies*, details the rise and fall of New Line Cinema, one of Hollywood's most successful independent distribution and production companies of the 1980s and 1990s, alongside the corporate consolidation and conglomeration of those same decades. The book charts the shifting identities, philosophies, and strategies of the company's leadership, as well as the broader circumstances of the media industries in which it found itself and had to remain flexible. Home to some of the most significant films and film franchises of the past 50 years, New Line had to constantly evolve in order to maintain not only profitability but also relevance, something that—as noted in the book—many, many other independents failed to hold on to. Herbert attributes its continued success to its “eclecticism” as a company, highlighting for readers “how, in some critical moments, New Line's films and business strategy accorded fortuitously and meaningfully with larger conditions of American cinema,” in terms of both the industry's economics and cultural interest and

taste.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, Herbert provides a comprehensive overview of New Line from its inception in the 1970s as a small distributor of arthouse and concert films through to its ultimate

achievement as an indie studio: the production and distribution of the massively successful *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in the early 2000s.

There are numerous scholarly studies of American independent cinema, but relatively few of them focus on the industrial elements of the studios and labels associated with niche products and genre cinema. Since the emergence of media industries studies as a subfield over a decade ago, only one monograph has attempted to grapple with the historical realities of the independent/indie companies in the 1980s and 1990s as Hollywood's major business practices shifted evermore toward the appeasement of corporate shareholders rather than the pure profit motives that defined the studio era. In fact, Alisa Perren's pathbreaking *Indie, Inc.*, which details the inner and outer workings of Miramax across roughly the same period of time as Herbert covers here, could be considered a major inspiration for and mirror of *Maverick Movies*, a connection that is occasionally played up in order to argue for New Line's distinctiveness in what became a crowded indie marketplace. But according to Herbert, even Perren's work "focuses on the upper end of the cultural echelon of 'indie' and the cinephile culture that sustains it," highlighting how Miramax was known for its cultivation of an awards-centric identity, with its genre label, Dimension Films, existing at the margins of its corporate structure.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, he argues, "New Line's history makes it clear that 'specialty' and 'niche' cinema has taken on a wide variety of appearances, had drastically variable levels of cultural respectability, and aimed for a more diverse range of distinct audience groups."<sup>4</sup> By focusing on different historical moments that defined New Line's eccentric nature and its positioning of several distinct genres as central to its business practices and corporate strategies, Herbert makes a convincing argument. The major story told by Herbert over the book's five body chapters is how New Line reflected the standard business practices of the Hollywood studios on a smaller scale, actively engaging with the home video market, experimenting with budget scales, and eventually developing its own franchises and financing ever-larger projects based on the success of the company-held intellectual property.

The book is helpfully and thoughtfully broken down into these chapters by more-or-less distinct time periods in New Line Cinema's growth, with close attention paid to several key films and business strategies that defined the company in those eras. Using historical documents read in conjunction with extensive research into the discourse surrounding the company in the trade press, private correspondence, company memos, and direct access to the now-retired Bob Shaye himself, Herbert deftly and in great detail tells the story of one of the most significant American film companies of the past 50 years. And while I admittedly found the middle third of the book to be most compelling on a personal level, as it focuses on the company's meteoric rise in the 1980s and early 1990s vis-à-vis a number of classic franchises and the production of numerous horror, comedy, and Black cinema classics, there are gems of analytical insight to be found throughout. This is surprisingly true for even its final chapter, which details the production of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, arguably the company's greatest critical and commercial triumph and also arguably the most-written-about franchise in film and media studies of the past 20 years. Even here the reader is provided with new information and insight into the production of all three films that highlights the uniqueness of New Line's approach, which was more in line with the core identity of the company as an outsider than a major Hollywood studio.

The first chapter chronicles the company's journey from a small-scale specialty film distributor in the late 1960s to a successful player in the underground film circuit of the late 1970s. This period saw the company engaged primarily in the distribution of new work from luminaries of the international art cinema, and the development of long-lasting business relationships with American independent filmmakers with distinctive voices like John Waters, whose films were able to bridge the arthouse, exploitation, and college markets central to New Line's business model. Much of this chapter not only rehashes and, understandably, mirrors existing scholarship on the American indie film sector of the same period but also builds on it by creating two lines of differentiation that will continue throughout the book: an emphasis on New Line's nebulous corporate identity within the industry and trade discourse, and how founder Bob Shaye's leadership through his retirement in 2008 when the company was folded into Warner Bros. Pictures played an important role in its ability to shape shift and adapt during several decades of major shifts in the film industry and the indie sector in particular.

Chapters two and three are where the book's analysis hits a sustained momentum in this regard, deftly weaving together the narrative of New Line's growth as a company alongside case studies of some of its biggest hits and initial forays into franchise filmmaking in the 1980s. During this era, New Line was hyper-focused on differentiation through the distribution of many different types of genre films, including Hong Kong action films and, especially, the horror genre. While the Hollywood studios were turning toward the high concept blockbuster model and the establishment of ongoing, reliably profitable franchises, New Line took the opportunity to develop its own, first with the long-running *Nightmare on Elm Street* films and then again with the sci-fi horror film *Critters*, which produced three sequels over the next few years. In order to develop these films into franchises, New Line took advantage of their existing distribution paths in exploitation and video markets.

By the end of the decade, New Line had found continued success with its franchise development, culminating in the release of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Barron, 1990), and an ongoing partnership with Golden Harvest, which would reach successful fruition with the release of several Jackie Chan films in the US market in the 1990s. Going into the next decade, Herbert asserts that New Line had two parallel goals: "to release more films aimed at wide audiences," as they had done with *Ninja Turtles*, "and to continue releasing films aligned with specific tastes and groups."<sup>5</sup> It is with this assertion that the book takes a turn toward the company's expansion into films adjacent to and part of the New Black Cinema movement and the prestige independent market that developed among the Hollywood studios in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Chapter three chronicles the first of these shifts, with Bob Shaye incorporating an increased level of diversity into its film productions. The move toward the production and distribution of Black films in the late 1980s is described as a natural extension of the company's reliable strategy for expansion, capitalizing on some of the key factors that had provided New Line with some of its biggest hits. Herbert notes that film series like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*; the martial arts films produced and released in partnership with Golden Harvest, including *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*; and other similar genre fare had done exceptionally well in African American markets. Films released in this period like *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin,

1990) and *Friday* (F. Gary Gray, 1994) saw New Line successfully captured that audience with films made by and about them, as well as produced numerous “crossover” hits, industry terminology for films that attract a mainstream (i.e., white) audience beyond the smaller, niche audience they were developed with an eye toward and heavily marketed to. New Line’s movement into the African American film market also carried over its focus on genre cinema rather than more mainstream or dramatic films, and Herbert notes that comedies like those highlighted above not only delivered Black audiences but also generated reliable receipts from well beyond that demographic, especially on home video.

In addition to detailing New Line’s production of Black films in this period, Chapter three also details the company’s acquisition by Ted Turner and its eventual merger with Time Warner in 1996. This deal signaled major shifts facing the company as it approached the twenty-first century, many of which were driven as much by the external pressures on the film business of the conglomerate era as by Shane’s seemingly preternatural ability to remain successful even as other major independents and Hollywood indies such as Cannon had long since been shuttered or, like Miramax at Disney, became increasingly integrated into the vertical structures of their parent companies to the point of virtual nonexistence. Herbert lays out how, due to Shaye’s business savviness and the terms of his contract with Turner and then Time Warner, New Line was able to maintain its independent identity while continuing to operate without major corporate overview and micromanagement.

Herbert’s analysis of New Line’s arthouse/indie imprint, Fine Line Features, functions as a balance to the history of indie distribution deals of the 1990s and 2000s. While readers will likely be familiar with some of the material covered in previous chapters, the history of how Fine Line functioned as an indie wing of what by the 1990s had become a major-minor studio will be less familiar. He frames Fine Line as keeping with New Line’s strategy for growth, allowing for the company’s continued “expansion through its dedication to new, distinct film types in its repertoire.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of Fine Line, those new, distinct film types were indie prestige dramas like *The Player* (Altman, 1992) and *Light Sleeper* (Schrader, 1992), and several major films of the new queer cinema like *My Own Private Idaho* (Van Sant, 1991). While at a cursory glance this maneuver brought the company into line with the major developments in the film business of the 1990s, Herbert points out that it was ultimately a failure, with Shaye and Ira Deutchmann largely ignoring the turn toward “cool” indie projects after 1994, when indie truly went mainstream, and the prevalence of neo-noir films in the late 1990s.

In its final chapter, *Maverick Movies* takes on the production and distribution of what might be the most-written-about film series of the past two decades, *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001–2003). Herbert points out that both critics and audiences have largely considered Jackson’s films as “a defining component of Hollywood at the dawn of the twenty-first century,” but that this gets some key elements of its production wrong, especially in terms of their place in New Line’s history.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Herbert argues that while “the *Lord of the Rings* films reflected an unusual leap in scale” for the company, they “came about through industrial practices and cultural logics that the company had developed over decades.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, by the time Hollywood began to shift toward an overt emphasis on franchise filmmaking in the late 1990s, New Line had been emphasizing them as a central part of its business strategy since the mid-1980s. Herbert helpfully points out that *Lord of the Rings* was passed



over by major studios who found the endeavor too risky before New Line finally put together a unique financing structure to produce all three films at once. The book ends by making a case that it was the company's familiarity with franchise films that aimed for both diversification of its catalog of titles and mainstream success that ultimately won the day, and which laid the path for the company to become fully folded into Warner by 2008, a victim of its own success as its parent conglomerate began a period of prolonged consolidation.

Overall, *Maverick Movies* serves as a much-needed contribution to scholarship on the independent distribution and production sector in the late twentieth century. It engages readers with a familiar subject and familiar examples but unearths some previously hidden nuggets of historical interest that help illustrate some of the heretofore gray areas in the shifting industrial business strategies and political economy that have defined much of Hollywood's last three decades. Additionally, and most helpfully, the book is structured in such a way that it could be partitioned out and assigned in a variety of different courses and contexts, including classes on film history, media industries, and a number of special topics. It contains a variety of material analysis that will be of interest to students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, while also providing new and exciting context to the study of media industries and the film industry for seasoned scholars.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Herbert, *Maverick Movies: New Line Cinema and the Transformation of American Film* (University of California Press, 2024), 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert, *Maverick Movies*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert, *Maverick Movies*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert, *Maverick Movies*, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert, *Maverick Movies*, 114.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert, *Maverick Movies*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert, *Maverick Movies*, 147.

