# "It's Like Painting Toys Blue and Pink" (Martha Coolidge, 1996): Marketing and the Female-Directed Hollywood Film

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While it may remain a distasteful fact for those film critics and filmgoers who equate an ever more commercially motivated Hollywood with evidence of artistic bankruptcy, the reality is that in an industry where production costs are always on the increase and consequently higher returns must be guaranteed (see Appendix One), film marketing (whether it be merchandising, tie-ins, press ads, trailers, or anything else) is phenomenally important. However, the relationship between women directors and the marketing of their films has always been difficult. As women directors are still comparatively rare, their gender is frequently used as a marketing tool in the selling of their films. In this piece I intend to offer a preliminary examination of the way in which female-directed films are marketed. Section one will offer some brief observations on the subject, and section two will provide a case study of the way in which Mimi Leder's films have been marketed.

I would argue that women directors working in Hollywood have not traditionally received the same opportunities as their male counterparts when it comes to the marketing of their films. One reason for this stems from the fact that they have consistently been given smaller budgets to work with, which automatically means that the funds available for marketing their films are lower as well. For example, the *Premiere Women in Hollywood Special 1993* states that the average cost of a male-directed film in 1992 was 28 million dollars, whereas the average cost of a female-directed film was 18.5 million (Kirk Cordero,1993: 33). Nor do things seem to have improved greatly since then. Mimi Leder is the only woman to have worked with budgets of 50 million and above, and it is interesting to note that in 1997, the year that she directed The Peacemaker for 50 million dollars, the average cost of a studio film was still slightly higher at 53.4 million dollars (Stanley, 1998).

The kind of films most commonly made by women directors working in Hollywood (dramas, romances, and especially comedies) are also the kinds of films which usually have budgets at the lower end of the scale, rather than the kind of special-effects filled blockbusters which demand all the financial muscle that a studio can muster. Moreover, it is the latter of these two kinds of film which are more likely to secure the kind of promotional deals (both with other divisions within the studio's parent corporation and with outside corporations) that can augment a film's marketing budget, and improve its chances of turning a healthy profit.

As Janet Wasko has argued in *Hollywood In The Information Age* (1994), corporate America tends to be conservative in the kinds of films it chooses for cross-promotional deals, believing the safest financial bet to be the type of film which has already proven financially successful, and does not take unnecessary risks, such as a hard to sell ("feminine") genre or an untried (female) director. Consequently, we are unlikely to find a female-directed film which has lucrative deals with corporate giants, such as fast food companies or toy

manufacturers, attached. This is not to say that women directors' films never attract big name companies to promote their films. For example, American Online were linked with Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998), although the fact that this film starred Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan who had previously starred in Ephron's hugely successful film *Sleepless In Seattle* (1993), meant that it was risk-free for promoters in a way that an "unknown" romantic comedy could never be.

In relation to this, it should be noted that there is a tendency in some feminist film criticism (particularly that written more than a decade ago) to view women directors who embrace or merely accept the commercial practices of Hollywood filmmaking as less worthy in feminist terms than those who remain outside the mainstream. For instance, Barbara Koenig Quart writes that Susan Seidelman's

> *Desperately Seeking Susan* is in danger toward the end of turning into just the complacent kid movie for the teens in the malls that Seidelman scorned, as the two couples lean back cozily and laugh…Seidelman, having left Wren pitifully adrift at the end of *Smithereens*… chose with the ending for this…film to stay much closer to old patriarchal formulas, and to resolve everything through the couple. (Koenig Quart, 1988: 64-65)

By comparing Seidelman's first mainstream film with one of her earlier independent works, and finding the former lacking, Quart strongly implies that the director has sold out to Hollywood.

The problem with such thinking is it denies women directors the desire to participate fully in all aspects of commercial filmmaking, when in fact there are cases where women directors working in the mainstream have pushed for more marketing opportunities for their films. For example, Amy Heckerling has said that she tried to persuade Paramount to set up a deal with a toy manufacturer to make tie-in dolls for her film *Clueless* (1995), but was not successful until the film was made into a television series by ABC (Crisafulli, 1996).

In most cases the more marketing opportunities a film has, the greater its potential for commercial success. Promotional deals can and frequently do bring in immense financial rewards for the studios involved. For example, Chuck Crisafulli reports that Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) made more than a billion dollars from the sale of related merchandise (Crisafulli, 1996). This figure actually exceeds the film's worldwide box office gross which the *Internet Movie Database* gives as nearly 920 million dollars.

One possible reason for the troubled relationship between women directors and the marketing of their films is the perception that, for women, artistic considerations are more important than commercial ones. The "woman's film" or "chick flick" has traditionally been viewed as less commercially viable than those genres which are judged to appeal to the entire audience (and especially men). Instead they are frequently tagged as what Elaine Dutka calls "class acts": little arty gems of movies which add a bit of variety and prestige to the studio's slate of bigger budget fare (Dutka, 1995).

While I am not suggesting that a "woman's film" has to be directed by a female director, I would argue that the female director and what is considered to be "female" or "feminine" subject matter can become blurred to the extent that they are conceptualised as having a symbiotic relationship. That is, the fact that a film is directed by a woman often results in its

being read as a "woman's film" as well as a film by a woman. Even when the female director in question is not working with stereotypically "feminine" material (as with Kathryn Bigelow for instance) there is often a temptation to search for female and/or "feminist" meanings within the text and ascribe them to the director's gender.

Although there is some evidence to suggest that industry perceptions about the "chick flick" are in the process of changing as studios realise the commercial benefits of targeting female audiences (see Appendix Two), there are still cases in which such tagging has proved unhelpful. For example, Gillian Armstrong has said that studio executives originally failed to see the commercial possibilities of her film *Little Women* (1994) since they considered it to be a film which would only appeal to little girls, but on seeing it tried to get it wider support (Cusolito, 1995). Yet the film's poster is quite obviously aimed at a female audience, depicting the March sisters side by side in front of their beloved home, and including a small photo of Marmee within the graphics of the title (which are in turn rendered in old fashioned script to give a period feel). The film's male characters are excluded from the picture. While it might have proved a difficult challenge to market the film to a mixed audience, it should also be noted, as marketing executive Paula Silver has said, if a film "looks really sappy, women go with their girlfriends" while the men usually stay at home (Dutka, 1995). Despite Armstrong's defence of the studio's selling of her film, the general perception remained that Little Women was an indisputable "chick flick". As David Hunter remarks, it is a film whose "market" is "seemingly limited to women big and little" (Hunter, 1994).

Ironically the idea that for women art and commerce are a poor mix finds a parallel in feminist thinking, with that which is popular and commercial being viewed as upholding rather than interrogating patriarchal ideology, and therefore treated with suspicion. Joanne Hollows writes, "it was common for feminists to claim that a whole range of popular forms and practices - from romance-reading to dressing up - locked women into feminine identities which made them blind to, and collude in, their own oppression." (Hollows, 2000: 20) A variation on this belief can also be found in some feminist film criticism which posits that the female filmmaker stay away from making big budget Hollywood films for the masses, since her more "natural" expression is the small-scale, low-budget but high-quality film in which her own distinctive "feminine" and/or "feminist" voice can be heard. Thus, independent cinema becomes the female filmmaker's only chance for positive feminist expression, since it is the only way she can be sure to avoid the replication of those cinematic codes, structures and practices which "dominant cinema" uses to oppress women. E. Ann Kaplan has written that "in Hollywood films…women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse." Whereas, "independent women's films," on the other hand, "attempt to discover for women a voice and a subjectivity." (Kaplan, 1983: 7) Even though Kaplan made this statement over a decade ago, I would argue that mainstream women directors are still being ignored by feminist film criticism, possibly because their work does not deliver a clear feminist message. While I am obviously aware that feminist dialogue can be used to discuss non-feminist texts and vice versa, I would also argue that many of these female directors are not being talked about in any terms by feminist film criticism. For instance, in her introduction to the 1993 book, *Women and Film*, Pam Cook acknowledges that "there is now a considerable female presence in and outside Hollywood." (Cook, 1993: xi) Yet you wouldn't know this from looking at the female directors that the book discusses: there is not one mainstream director amongst them. Similarly, in *Multiple Voices In Feminist Film Criticism* Diane Carson offers an outline for a course on "Women Filmmakers". Incredibly, the only Hollywood directors she proposes to study are Dorothy Arzner, Ida Lupino (both directing features pre 1970s) and Euzhan Palcy (who made *A Dry White Season* for MGM in 1989). Her reasoning becomes clearer when we

discover the basis on which she praises the numerous avant-garde, independent filmmakers she includes in the course. For example, she writes of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), "By refusing to sensationalize the subject matter or to titillate the viewer, Ackerman's understated approach reveals much about mainstream cinema's voyeuristic exploitation of women." (Carson, 1994: 456-467)

As Hollows use of the words "it was common" makes clear, such beliefs are no longer as widespread in feminist theory in general, and feminist film theory in particular, as they once were. Popular feminism has ceased to be a dirty word for many feminists, who have started to look non-judgementally at the forms and genres that many women have and do enjoy, either as consumers or producers. For instance, there is a great deal of work within the field of cultural studies which has set out to give so-called popular "feminine" genres, such as soap operas, women's magazines, and romance novels, serious feminist attention. Similarly, film theorists have turned their attention to other previously devalued and supposedly "feminine" genres like the "woman's film", "shopping films" (Brunsdon, 1997: 81-102), and female friendship movies (Tasker, 1998:139-160).

Despite this undeniable shift in feminist thinking, my own research on women directors working in the mainstream film industry reveals that there is still a dearth of attention paid to certain figures, such as Penny Marshall and Nora Ephron, whose films are often structured around the themes of love, romance, and relationships. That is, women whose work deals overtly in the currency of the so-called "feminine", in emotions rather than actions. If you consider which mainstream female directors are discussed by feminist film critics the same names crop up with a persistent regularity: Arzner, Lupino, and in contemporary Hollywood, Kathryn Bigelow, to give just three examples. Obviously I am aware that this is partially explained by the fact that the potential candidates for examination are limited since only a few women have directed films within Hollywood. Nevertheless a director like Bigelow may prove more attractive to feminist film criticism because she has her well-publicised roots in the field of avant-garde art/filmmaking, as well as being someone whose work (with its play on so-called "male" genres like the western, the horror movie and the crime movie) studiously rejects, or at least is seen to reject, any hint of the "feminine". While Pam Cook advocates in a recent essay that we move away from the old feminist thinking which concentrates on Hollywood's marginalisation and exclusion of women, and towards a recognition of the contribution of women to cinema in all its forms, this does not mean that we should continue to write about only those women whose careers make the most attractive "feminist" reading (Cook, 1998).

The belief that certain kinds of films are best suited to women directors helps to maintain the status quo in the male-dominated Hollywood film industry: it makes it harder for female directors to secure the same kind of big-budget projects and A-list stars as their male counterparts. For example, Martha Coolidge has complained that she has been denied the opportunity to direct action films:

> Martha Coolidge…has proved adept at comedy…and drama…but never been able to break into the action genre. 'About 90% of what comes my way are 10 different kinds of breast cancer stories, 10 different kinds of divorce stories…,' Coolidge said. 'I do those. I care about them deeply. But one does want to do more.' For years, Coolidge sought to do an action film based on Michael Crichton's…book… 'Eaters of the Dead'. The movie got made…[b]ut it was directed by John McTiernan of 'Die Hard' fame. (Wallace, 1997).

Women directors have been known to echo this perception themselves. For example, in the press kit for the film *Grace Of My Heart* Allison Anders is keen to stress that her film is first and foremost a "woman's film: 'It's a journey of a woman, literally and metaphorically, searching for her voice and finding it…In that sense the film resonates for me on a very personal level…" In fact, Anders has said elsewhere that she really only feels the need to consider her "chick audience" when making a film: "[A]fter a while I thought, But I have a female audience, and although I want men to come to the movies why do I need them?" (Anders, 1998: 90) It is interesting that the press kit seeks to downplay its mainstream cinematic connections (it was made by Universal Pictures) by emphasising aspects like the fact that it was produced by Martin Scorsese, who has a history of working with "independent filmmakers". It is as though by aligning itself with the independent sector the film's treatment of a woman's story will automatically be perceived of as more serious, more credible. This suspicion of the commercial is ironic, since the press kit actually emphasises that the film's main selling point is its music, which can be bought on the soundtrack.

The danger of viewing women's cinematic production as best suited to a separate, independent "female" sphere, whether it comes from studios, critics, or women directors themselves, is that it can result in marginalisation. In marketing terms, this leads to a situation where the female director's film is marketed as having exclusive appeal to women, often given a limited release, and consequently earns less than it could at the box office. For example, the film *How To Make An American Quilt* (1995) was sold in Britain as a woman's alternative to watching the Euro 96 football tournament (Errigo, 1996: 30).

The press kits issued by DreamWorks/Paramount for Mimi Leder's second feature film *Deep Impact* (1998) can be used to provide a case study of the strategies employed in the selling of a "mainstream" woman director's film. I will also make brief reference to the press kit for her first film, *The Peacemaker* (1997), in order to provide an earlier example of these marketing strategies at work.

I am not trying to argue that the way in which these films were marketed is somehow emblematic of the way all female-directed films are positioned in the marketplace, or indeed to suggest that every film made by a woman filmmaker is automatically sold to the public with reference to her gender. Having said that, this remains a strong tendency in the marketing of women director's films. For example, the press kit for Martha Coolidge's *Angie* (1994) quotes one of the actresses in the film as saying that with Coolidge "at the helm there is an automatic understanding of some of the intricate details that are unique to women." Similarly, in an interview with Empire designed to publicise the release of *Little Women* Winona Ryder remarks that there is "an unspoken understanding" when you are working with a female director rather than a man, and female directors, unlike men, are more able to "talk about sexuality and sensuality." (Dawson, 1995: 79) Tellingly, in another article about *Little Women* (where Ryder again talks about the film as a female-bonding experience) director Gillian Armstrong strongly denies that her gender had any bearing on the way the film was made, stating that she is merely a "film director and an artist", and stressing the film's entertainment factor rather than any "feminist" message (MacFarquhar, 1995: 76-77). This suggests that tensions can exist between the way a film is marketed and the way the film's director might wish it had been marketed.

In Leder's case I will illustrate the way in which she was used to provide meaning differentiation in what has typically been classified as a generically "male" commodity: the big-budget action movie. To this end, I will also be referring to equivalent publicity materials

for *Armageddon* (whose producer Jerry Bruckheimer's name has become a byword for this kind of commodity), since this and *Deep Impact* are similarly themed films which fought strongly to differentiate themselves in order to ensure success in the summer blockbuster market.

Before embarking on a discussion of this gender-based differentiation in the marketing of *Deep Impact*, it is necessary to demonstrate the ways in which the film simultaneously and paradoxically positions itself as conforming to the type of films from which it also seeks to distinguish itself. By this I mean it does not completely reject all recognisable aspects of a big budget action-disaster film, but rather seeks to demonstrate that it has used them in a different way.

To illustrate the ways in which the film demonstrates a conventional marketing strategy, it is useful to refer to Justin Wyatt's book *High Concept*. While Wyatt argues that high concept theory does not apply to all Hollywood films, only those which possess a very specific set of traits (for example, he says the true high concept film is separated from other Hollywood films because it demonstrates a stylistic excess, resulting in a situation where the viewer appreciates the surface of the film, its formal construction, over and above its depiction of character and narrative), much of what he says can be applied to post-classical film in general. In fact, this is one of the central weaknesses of his theory. However, since much of what he says does apply to *Deep Impact*, I am using it to give a sense of the typical marketing tactics employed by many big budget Hollywood films in order to illustrate how *Deep Impact* both uses and transcends them.

Wyatt argues that high concept is "perhaps the central development…within post-classical cinema, a style of filmmaking molded by economic and institutional forces." (Wyatt, 1994: 8) He defines the high concept film as one which has a very strong sense of style, which is generic and which relies on recognisable character types. Most importantly, it is also one which possesses strongly marketable elements or "marketing hooks" such as being based on a pre-sold property (such as a bestselling novel, or a previously successful film), having stars and an appealing soundtrack. In short, it is a film whose central narrative idea can be encapsulated in a "one-line concept", and a simple but striking visual image and/or logo which finds its way onto the film's posters and other publicity material. One very recent example of this strategy at work can be seen in the poster designed to advertise the film *Lake Placid* (2000). This poster deliberately references the poster design for Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), depicting the huge open jaw of a crocodile coming out of the water, and a woman floating just in front of it. It also has a tag line ("Part Mystery. Part Thriller. Parts Missing") which manages to sum up the film's generic content in a single line: that is, a Thriller-cum-Mystery-cum-Comedy Horror movie.

In several ways *Deep Impact* fits Wyatt's model of a high concept film. It is generically based, or more accurately it is a generic hybrid, incorporating elements of the disaster film, space film, love story, family melodrama, action film, and so on. It makes use of stock characters like the old hero (here an astronaut) brought back from retirement for one last battle, and the ambitious young reporter trying to make a name for herself. It can be seen to be based on some pre-sold elements by capitalising on a topical subject (pre-millennial angst), and on the reputation of Steven Spielberg as one of the three men behind the studio, DreamWorks, which put the film into production.

In terms of the film's marketing campaign, the various press ads used to sell *Deep Impact* also fit Wyatt's argument. The name of the film is written in a bold, graphic type which serves as an "identifiable logo" that acts to "identify the film visually". (Wyatt, 1994: 4) In fact, two of these ads merely consist of the film's logo, and the logos of the three studios involved in its production, on a dark background, effectively cutting out any unnecessary and distracting visual clutter, and turning the film's title into a kind of brand name. Similarly, the image chosen to represent the film is visually striking, "instantly recognizable" and able to "define the film's theme" (Wyatt, 1994: 122) in a way that might identify it as high concept in nature. It superimposes a shot of a couple embracing over a scene of a huge comet-induced tidal wave about to engulf New York. This image, along with a tag line which sums up the narrative in six words ("Oceans Rise. Cities Fall. Hope Survives") works to distil the film's contents into a neatly packaged cinematic commodity which provides the audience with knowledge of what to expect before they even enter the cinema: disaster movie, human drama, special effects, action and excitement, and so on.

Regarding the image used for *Deep Impact*'s poster, it is also interesting to note just how reminiscent it is of the one used to sell the film *Titanic* (1997). Both images depict a young couple embracing in the top half of the frame, while below them a disastrous scene (in the case of *Deep Impact*'s tidal wave) or the signifier of an impending disaster (in the case of *Titanic*'s illustration of the bow of the ship) is depicted. This is not surprising when we consider that Paramount was involved in the making of both films, and obviously saw the phenomenal success of *Titanic* as a means of improving *Deep Impact*'s chances at the box office. In order to achieve this the studio have chosen an aspect of Deep Impact (the love between a teenage couple set against a background of impending disaster) which is only part of the narrative as the film's key selling point in order to forge a connection with another film, Titanic, in which the love affair between two teenagers is at the centre of the narrative. The studio also tied the films together by using the same musician (James Horner) to write both soundtracks, and including a trailer for *Deep Impact* in screenings of *Titanic* (Dreher, 1998). In addition, the man who presided over Paramount's marketing campaign for *Titanic*, Arthur Cohen, was, according to Peter Bart, Paramount's advertising chief during the marketing of *Deep Impact* (Bart, 2000: 171). As T.L. Stanley reveals, Cohen used to work for the cosmetics company Revlon, which suggests that he came to the film industry with extensive experience of marketing to women which could then be exploited in the campaigns for films like *Titanic* and *Deep Impact* (Stanley, 1998).

Writing on *Titanic*, Peter Kramer has argued that the film was sold primarily as a "woman's film", emphasising as it did a strong female protagonist, as well as the tragic love story at its centre (Kramer, 1998). He goes on to argue that it was by appealing to this female audience, which Hollywood is usually guilty of neglecting, that the makers of the film ensured its financial success. While I would argue that Kramer's assumption that women have "preferred genres" (such as the Love Story) is potentially dangerous in its essentialism (not every woman who saw the film necessarily saw it because the romance of the story appealed to her), it is fair to assume that elements such as romance, emotion, human relationships and so on are *perceived* as being attractive to woman by those in Hollywood (usually men) who set out to establish a female audience for their films.

As I have mentioned above, one way in which this is achieved is by using a semi-romantic image on the film's poster in order to create certain audience expectations. Another way is also similar to a strategy used by the makers of *Titanic* whereby they ensured that the advertising for the film "clearly indicated that there would be more to Titanic than the

spectacle of disaster", (Kramer, 1998: 606) that it was a "different kind of blockbuster": one which would appeal to women (Kramer, 1998: 610). With *Deep Impact* this occurs in the way that all the publicity material surrounding the film is intent on stressing that this is not just another action/disaster film, but one which cares about the characters it depicts, and wants the audience to care about them too. For example, the press kit for the film tells us that, "[A]n audience will be very surprised by this picture…They may go in thinking it's a big spectacular kind of picture. And while it's epic in size, they'll be surprised to find themselves carried away by the personal stories." In addition there was also a lobby card for the film which depicted the female journalist played by Téa Leoni superimposed over a picture of the comet hitting earth. In this way the marketing indicated that a woman was central to the film's narrative: something which Lizzie Francke has identified as a key feature of the "woman's film" (Francke, 1995: 33).

The selling of *Deep Impact* as, in part at least, a "woman's picture" in the mould of *Titanic* is not the only way in which gender crept into its marketing. The film's publicity also creates a situation where a woman director becomes a useful tool in selling the film as something different (and implicitly more "feminine") than it's generic markers might lead audiences to expect. In fact, it could be said that Mimi Leder as female director becomes a new concept in the high concept film. Moreover, by examining the press kit for *The Peacemaker* we can see that this began with the first feature film she directed.

The creators of *The Peacemaker* are eager to point out that their film is not just another "traditional action movie", but one which approaches its material "in a fresh way that…set[s] it apart from the genre." This, they explain, is partly due to a plot which provides a complex motivation for its terrorist villain rather than relying on racial/national stereotyping, and which takes into account the human events which drive the larger narrative. As Leder herself is quoted as saying: "I didn't approach this as an action movie, but instead as a dramatic human story. It does encompass a vast, large scope, but at the core is one man's personal tragedy which drives the action." The implication that such a novel approach comes courtesy of a woman director is more clearly spelled out when we are told that, "[a]lso setting 'The Peacemaker' apart was the choice of a woman to direct the film. Making her feature film directorial debut, Mimi Leder became one of only a handful of woman directors to break into the action arena." With this statement the women director becomes the one who can breathe new life into an old genre, who can utilise her supposed "femininity" (as indicated by the fact that her gender is deliberately drawn attention to) in order to cut through the traditionally "masculine" stereotypes of the action film. In short, her gender and the different slant on things that this is seen to give her are used to differentiate the film in the marketplace.

When it comes to the press kit for *Deep Impact*, we do not find any statements which are quite as obvious in their intent as the one above. Direct references to the director's gender are bypassed in favour of a more subtle approach which draws attention to the content and feel of the film as a marker of gendered difference. The press kit concentrates on the humanity of the situation over and above its potential for extravagant special effects (unlike *Armageddon*). Thus we get statements such as, "For all its epic sweep and stunning images, it is above all a human story, as each individual struggles in the face of extinction to find what matters most to him or her." As well as, "Inevitably special effects are going to come into play, because you can't tell a story of this scope without them. Here they'll enhance the human drama and provide a background for the whole story to come alive."

The film pitches itself as one which is character-driven, emotional, and concerned with the philosophical questions raised by confrontation with an apocalyptic event, such as "How would you live today, tomorrow, next week, if you knew the world might end in a year?" In fact it could be argued that *Deep Impact* is on one level being marketed as an issue-based drama, and as such is lent extra weight by Leder's association with the television series ER, which might be described in this way. As is indicated in the press kit for *The Peacemaker*, it was Leder's work on that programme which led DreamWorks to approach her to direct the film:

> She had originally come to the attention of the producers for her award-winning work on the series *ER*…The producers recognized that her ability to blend fast-paced action and human emotion- which are the hallmarks of the series- made her the perfect choice to direct this film.

*Deep Impact*'s press kit is similarly keen to inform us that Leder is best-known for her work on *ER* when they write that the "threads of this immense human drama are brought together by director Mimi Leder. A two-time Emmy winner for her work on television's *ER*." In this way *ER* becomes a point of reference so that to some degree the audience knows what to expect: character-driven yet action-packed drama, which treats the issues it raises in a serious, intelligent way. These expectations are further underlined by the way we are reassured that this film is not just there to entertain, but also to get audiences thinking and asking themselves questions. As Leder herself is quoted as saying:

> This movie is not just about special effects and disasters…It is about the people- about us - about what we would do were a comet to hit the earth. There's a multitude of choices in the character's lives…and hopefully one will walk out of this movie re-evaluating their lives and the choices they've made.

Leder's description of her intent here comes close to implying that she is offering a message with her film: that we should think about what we have done with our lives, and what we still have left to do, before it's too late. This is interesting because, as Linda Seger has argued, many women filmmakers are careful to avoid espousing anything close to a message in their work for fear of being typecast as "feminine" or "feminist", and thus being marginalised. Seger writes:

> Issues make good drama… [But] these topics are not easily sold. Putting the positive into one's work is not always seen as dramatic, high concept, or commercial…Most mainstream women filmmakers shy away from any desire to do message drama…In fact, most understand the dangers of dealing with issue-oriented material. (Seger, 1996: 240-242)

If we want to see evidence of such marginalisation at work in terms of *Deep Impact* we could point to a review of the film on video in Empire magazine. Ian Nathan comments that with this film "Mimi Leder elects to play soap with a bunch of really dumb characters" and that it is "so laughably a TV movie, it makes Armageddon look like rocket science." (Nathan, 1998: 138) By comparing *Deep Impact* with both a TV movie and a soap opera, Nathan picks out two genres which are frequently associated with both issue-based drama and a "feminine" sensibility. By calling the film a TV movie he refers to an area of filmmaking where many women directors have had considerable success, often using it as a career stepping stone to greater things (see Appendix Three) but uses it in this case as a derogatory term. Such a

comment could also be seen as a veiled criticism of Leder since, as I have previously remarked, she began her directing career in television with series like *LA Law*, *China Beach* and *ER*, as well as directing several TV films.

The words used in the publicity for *Deep Impact* like "personal", "poetic", "emotions", "emotional", and "intimate" could be said to have "feminine" connotations: all are words which evoke a sense of that which is passive and interior (popularly stereotyped as feminine) rather than active and exterior (popularly stereotyped as masculine). By the constant repetition of such words the makers of the film seem to want to make the epic into the everyday, and by doing so to catch an audience who might be put off by a more typical action-disaster film (and in the minds of Hollywood executives such people are usually thought to be women). Such an approach is especially interesting when compared with the approach taken by the almost identically themed film *Armageddon* which was released a few months later.

As it was produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, who is well-known for massively successful action blockbusters like *The Rock* (1996) and *Con Air* (1997), it is not surprising that Armageddon opted for a route more traditional for the blockbuster, selling itself primarily on the sheer size of the spectacle it has to offer the audience. On the official Armageddon web site Bruckheimer is quoted as saying "I love stories that are bigger than life". The director Michael Bay says that they "wanted to make an epic film", and a special effects man comments that it was "the biggest film I've done". Unlike *Deep Impact* the makers of *Armageddon* do not attempt to downplay the role of the special effects in their film: the web site devotes a great deal of time to explaining how the effects were achieved, to the extent of telling us the quantities of materials used to construct the film's asteroid.

While *Deep Impact* depicts itself as a gentler, more woman-friendly blockbuster, *Armageddon* revels in the macho nature of its narrative and protagonists. The web site tells us that the film is about the "simplicity of real flesh-and-blood men up against the chaos of this asteroid…"; that the main character (played by Bruce Willis) is "a hard-nosed guy…[who] comes from a long line of independent men"; and, just in case we've missed the point, Bruckheimer throws in a handy comparison by telling us the film is like "the Dirty Dozen in outer space." Yet, it should also be noted that despite their eagerness to emphasise the film's testosterone level, the makers of *Armageddon* apparently also wanted to make sure there was something for the women in the audience. Presumably influenced by the great success of *Deep Impact*, they sought to make themselves known to this "female audience" with tactics such as running trailers which emphasised the romance between one of the characters (played by Ben Affleck) and his girlfriend (played by Liv Tyler) on *Ally McBeal* ( Corliss,1998).

Some of the marketing techniques used to sell Armageddon differ vastly from those used to sell *Deep Impact*. While both films have the kind of high concept advertising discussed earlier in this paper, only *Armageddon* had product tie-ins such as a deal with Nestlé, who made chocolate asteroids and "Nuclear chocolate" for the occasion, and a book about the making of the film. This is not surprising since *Armageddon* was made by Touchstone who are owned by Disney (a corporation who capitalise on related merchandise with every film they release). What is surprising is that *Deep Impact*, which was made by a studio jointly owned by one of the moguls of merchandising, Steven Spielberg, did not have any such tie-ins or promotions. One explanation for this could be that the film was rushed into production so that it could be released prior to *Armageddon*, leaving an insufficient time to organise such deals. However, it might also be that *Deep Impact* chose to stay away from such activities as

another way of marking its difference from previous summer blockbusters: to show that it was more serious and more worthy because it was not as blatantly commercial as the others.

While *Armageddon*'s marketing strategy can be seen to trade purely on its adherence to the norms of the big-budget action film, *Deep Impact* sells itself as a film which uses these norms as a framework yet seeks to go beyond them. This is something which I have argued occurs primarily through its positioning of the film as both a female (in terms of its director) and a "feminine" (in terms of narrative content) text.

In saying this, however, I am aware that I could be accused of implying that *Deep Impact*'s marketing strategy was narrower than it actually was. As Peter Bart reveals in *The Gross*, Paramount felt that it could not afford to be too subtle in its marketing campaign for the film and, despite the objections of some of its creative team, they ran television ads and trailers which concentrated on the destructive power of the comet. It is not my intention to imply that the positioning of *Deep Impact* as female and "feminine" was the only strategy used to sell the film, but that it was certainly one of the key strategies. In the wake of *Titanic*'s success with female moviegoers - a *Newsweek* article states that the films' audience was sixty per cent female (Ansen,1998) - the makers of *Deep Impact* obviously felt that they too could capitalise on the industry's latest rediscovery of the female audience, and included elements in the marketing of their film (romance, relationships, emotions) which they perceived would appeal to that demographic. Yet, as with the marketing of *Titanic* which also played on its status as the latest film from the acclaimed action director James Cameron, this did not preclude *Deep Impact* from also reaching out to a wider demographic.

To conclude, it is not surprising that the makers of *Deep Impact* used Leder as one way of differentiating their film in the marketplace, since choosing a woman to direct such a film was the kind of unique event that helps to create interest and publicity. In fact, it would have been more unusual if they had not done so. With a woman director at the helm of a different kind of action film, *Deep Impact* had something to make it stand out and be noticed, and judging by the frequency with which Mimi Leder's name was mentioned in reviews and articles surrounding the film's release (both in the United States and in Britain), it was a tactic which served the film well. To take just one example, Leila Segal wrote a piece on Leder in *The Guardian* prior to *Deep Impact*'s British release, in which she argued that the director had managed to breathe new life into a traditionally masculine genre (Segal, 1998: 7). By stressing the "femininity" of *Deep Impact* (and Leder's role in that) its makers intention was to detract from the more conventional elements of that film in order to make it appear more novel, and as a result more attractive, to audiences.

It is vital to point out, however, that using a woman director to sell a film in this way is problematic in that it equates a director's gender (female) with certain thematic concerns (feminine), and consequently reinforces rather than overturns traditional stereotypes. While a female director's gender might serve as an interesting topic for discussion in the media, bringing her recognition, it can also quickly result in a situation where that is all that is discussed. As a result many women directors (especially those working in Hollywood) demand to be referred to simply as directors since, as they point out, male directors are never gendered. In terms of the way *Deep Impact* was perceived by critics it is interesting that many of them made a link between the fact that the film chose to concentrate on people rather than explosions and the fact that it was directed by a woman. For example, Janet Maslin writes that Leder "directs with a distinct womanly touch. Within the end-of-the-world action

genre, it's rare to find attention paid to rescuing art, antiques, elephants and flamingos." (Maslin, 1998) Similarly, in a *People Online* review of the film we are told that,

> director Mimi Leder brings--how to say this without sounding patronising?--a woman's touch to the disaster genre. Although she includes several obligatory, let's blow stuff-up special effects sequences, *Impact*'s midsection is devoted to touchy-feely scenes of characters who…strive to get their relationships in order before the comet hits. (Rozen, 1998)

Like *Titanic* before it, *Deep Impact* is a film which can be viewed as turning many of the traditional ideas about blockbusters and their audiences on their head. Warren Buckland has stated that the blockbuster is "aimed at an undifferentiated popular audience rather than at any particular sector of the viewing population." (Buckland, 1998: 166-167) Yet, both *Deep Impact* and *Titanic* clearly sought to target a female audience within the structure of a much wider campaign addressed to a mass audience. That is, the female demographic were viewed as a niche market who could be lured into the cinema on the promise of seeing a new, more female-friendly blockbuster (one with less emphasis on special effects and more on characters).

The danger of such a strategy is that it is still predicated on the assumption that there are "men's" and "women's" movies which have almost exclusive appeal to the corresponding gender. To argue, as Peter Kramer has done, that *Titanic* was able to secure a mixed audience because it had enough action to interest "Hollywood's main target audience of young males" is an inadequate explanation for either that film or *Deep Impact* since it makes stereotypical assumptions about what attracts women or men to see a film (love and romance for the women, and high-tech action for the men), without taking into account that the many different women who saw these films would not all have had the same reasons for seeing them (Kramer, 1998: 600). In addition, when a female director is factored into the equation (as Leder was in the marketing of *The Peacemaker* and *Deep Impact*) the temptation is to suggest that her gender is inextricably tied up with the elements of the film which are gendered as female in a cause and effect model. As a result of this her contribution to the action side of the equation is downplayed, and the possibility of naturalising a woman in the role of action director is only partially fulfilled.

On a more positive note *Deep Impact*'s success could be seen to have a potentially beneficial effect for other women directors. Unlike some female-directed, female-themed films, *Deep Impact* managed to create a situation where the mention of those things which society typically deems womanly (relationships, emotions) did not minimise the potential audience. Moreover, although the makers of the film actively sought to appeal to a female audience they did not assume that it would *only* appeal to a female audience, thus ensuring that the film had a high-budget marketing campaign, and a high-profile summer release, opening in over three thousand locations.

## Appendices

Appendix One: Stanley states that filmmaking costs have risen by 166 percent in the last decade. In T.L Stanley (1998) On The Grill, *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 26, taken from the archives of *The Hollywood Reporter Online*, http://ww.hollywoodreporter.com, January 3 1999.

Appendix Two: For example Jill Bernstein has written about Hollywood's attempts (especially post-*Titanic*) to make films which appeal to teenage girls. In Jill Bernstein (1999) Growing Up In The Dark, *Premiere Women In Hollywood Special Issue*, (86-97).

Appendix Three: For example, Randa Haines, who went on to direct the Academy Award winning film *Children Of A Lesser God*, began her career in this way. Moreover, many women film directors have worked in television before making feature films, including Martha Coolidge and Betty Thomas.

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