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A Big Fat Indie Success Story? Press Discourses Surrounding the Making and Marketing of a "Hollywood" Movie

ALISA PERREN

DURING THE SUMMER AND FALL OF 2002, newspapers and magazines across North America prominently featured articles about the surprising box office performance of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The publications wrote of a low-budget romantic comedy—a movie with neither Hollywood stars nor special effects—that defied the odds to become the highest grossing independent film of all time. According to these sources, the film reputedly "sent a message" to Hollywood, challenging the way the industry does business (Holden E1). Whether the publication was *People* or the *New York Times* or the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the story was shockingly similar: a young woman, writer-actress Nia Vardalos—and a little movie—defied the odds to make good (and make money). This was the American dream in action.

As attractive and compelling as this story may be, it is neither accurate nor complete. In fact, the film's development, production, and distribution were far more complicated than most journalistic tales have suggested. In this paper, I provide an alternate perspective on the production and distribution of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. I argue that the standard accounts provided by most media outlets have not only constructed partial stories about the film, but even more importantly, they have reinforced a number of inaccuracies and misperceptions about the operations of the contemporary media industries. These stories have had the effect of constructing—and reinforcing—certain mythologies about the dichotomies between "Hollywood" and "independent" films, as well as between the film and television industries. These dichotomies, in turn, obscure the interconnectedness and fluidity within the contemporary film and television industries.

In this article, I dissect three primary claims made in mainstream publications about *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. First, by examining the film's production, distribution, and exhibition history, I complicate assertions that the film can be labeled "the most successful independent of all time." Second, I challenge the assumption that films such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* are rarely made anymore by Hollywood. I suggest that such arguments are based on narrow definitions of Hollywood and its product. Third, I problematize the declarations that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* represents a triumph in innovative "grassroots" marketing tactics and appealing to groups from the "bottom up." In place of such a perspective, I maintain that the tactics employed in selling the film are representative of long-standing tactics employed by niche marketers.

After surveying these dominant claims, I propose that the film's financial success should not be interpreted as evidence that Hollywood has lost its way, but rather as proof of the existence and effectiveness of specific business practices and aesthetic parameters within the contemporary media industries. Ultimately, I

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encourage media analysts to cease from viewing *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as an example of one woman and one film defying the odds. Instead, we should consider this film as an example of the uniformity of journalistic discourses, the complexity of the operations of contemporary Hollywood, and the continuing ideological power of the so-called American dream.

Questions of Methodology: How Do We Analyze the Contemporary Media Industries?

Before establishing and challenging several key claims about the making and marketing of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* it is important to note the methodological difficulties of conducting a study such as this in the first place. In writing this article, I have faced an issue encountered by many contemporary media analysts. Namely, how can I critique the discourses generated by the mainstream press about the entertainment industries at the same time that I rely heavily on these same sources to construct my argument? Or, put another way, how can one effectively conduct an analysis of the contemporary media industries? Whereas industry historians can often refer to a wide range of archival documents, due to legal and proprietary concerns, analysts of the contemporary media industries are often limited in their access to corporate materials. Thus much of their information must come from trade documents and mainstream publications, with interviews serving as a means of supplementing knowledge and checking facts.

There are two main ways in which I have tried to overcome these methodological challenges. First, I have looked to a wide range of news reports to confirm my information. Among the sources consulted for this article include industry trade journals *Variety, Hollywood Reporter,* and *Advertising Age;* a broad array of newspapers ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *New York Times* to the *London Guardian;* and several magazines and specialty publications such as *Salon.com, People,* and *Premiere.* Second, I situate these articles within the context of research on the structure, conduct, and performance of the entertainment industries. This knowledge comes from two main sources: work on media industry economics conducted by such scholars as Douglas Gomery, Alan Albarran, and Barry Litman; and trade books targeted to aspiring media makers and industry employees, such as Gregory Goodell's *Independent Feature Film Production* and Dov Simen's *From Reel to Deal.* While the former sources provide a theoretical framework from which to analyze the contemporary media industries, the latter enable one to understand the standard working methods and normative practices of today's Hollywood. Cumulatively, these materials provide a context within which the journalistic materials can be placed.

By situating the journalistic sources within this larger context, it becomes clear that such discourses are every bit as ideological as the media products generated by the media companies themselves. In this essay, I explore and challenge the main claims made by the mainstream press about the production and distribution of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding.* In the process, one can see not only the uniformity of the arguments made in popular magazines and newspapers, but also the extent to which these sources serve as a primary means by which misconceptions about the structure, conduct, and performance of Hollywood are perpetuated.

Challenging the Dominant Claims

Claim #1: My Big Fat Greek Wedding *is the highest-grossing independent film of all time*

Today Ms. Vardalos is having the last laugh, and it is louder and richer than she ever dreamed. The movie she wrote and starred in, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, *is the hit of the summer and one of the most profitable independent films ever made.*

The New York Times

Wedding *has broken several box-office records and is on its way to breaking more. It has far surpassed the Dollars 140m earned by previous indie champ* The

Blair Witch Project *in 1999. It's also the highest-grossing movie never to have reached number one on the weekly box-office chart, though it's been in the top 10 since July. Its 4,000% return ranks it with* Star Wars *and* Gone with the Wind *among the most profitable movies of all time. In America, it's the fourth-highest grossing movie of 2002 and is closing in on* Austin Powers in Goldmember *and* Signs . . .

The Guardian

Defining a film as "independent" has never been easy. In recent years, as independent films have become more popular (and more commercially viable), it has become even more of a challenge, and different analysts use different criteria to ascertain whether or not a media product is independent. Among these are: a film's source of financing; the industrial affiliations of the film's distributor (Prince xviii; Wyatt 75); the sites in which the film is exhibited (Gomery); the status of the talent in relation to Hollywood (Kleinhans 308–09); and the "spirit" of the film (usually interpreted to mean its aesthetic or generic ties to commercial or alternative media traditions).[1] In applying any of these criteria to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* we can see the film's claim of "independence" is tenuous at best.

First there is the matter of production money. Clearly we are not talking about a "guerilla" production in the mold of *El Mariachi* (1992) or *Clerks* (1994)—movies produced for a few thousand dollars each. Yet we are also not talking about an "ultra-low" budget production either (Broderick 46). The film's five-million-dollar budget is relatively average for a low-budget film in contemporary Hollywood (Matsumoto). Given the high costs of shooting movies these days—costs that include the expenses of film stock and processing, labor rates, and location expenses—it is extremely difficult to shoot on film (as opposed to digital video) for less than a million dollars. Yet, as noted above, we aren't talking about a million dollars—we are talking about several million, secured from established companies with strong ties to Hollywood.

Two companies cofinanced the film.[2] Gold Circle Films provided the first half of the money in exchange for the foreign rights to the film. This company can be identified as "independent" inasmuch as it lacks affiliations with the Hollywood majors. However, it has a rich source of support in its cofounder, Norm Waitt, who is also a cofounder of the computer hardware company, Gateway. The other half of the production money came from HBO—one of the most lucrative subsidiaries of the AOL Time Warner empire.

The way HBO became involved in the development of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is telling. The project was originally brought to HBO by Tom Hanks and his wife, Rita Wilson. After Wilson saw the stage version of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* she wanted to be involved in the play's transformation into film. She and Hanks subsequently approached HBO—with whom Hanks already had a successful relationship through his producing and directing roles in the HBO mini-series *From the Earth to the Moon* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001). The cable channel continued its relationship with Hanks' production company, Playtone, by providing 2.5 million dollars in production money "as a favor" (Eller, "Jilters" C1).

HBO's involvement should be underscored for a number of reasons. First, this financing history demonstrates the importance of relationships between top Hollywood talent and large media conglomerates in jump-starting the project. Second, it reinforces that from the outset there was the involvement of a Hollywood major—by way of a subsidiary company—in a so-called independent project. Third, HBO obtained specific rights—domestic cable and video—that affected the film's attractiveness to theatrical distributors. In the contemporary media marketplace, the Hollywood "majors" (generally defined at the time of the film's release as AOL Time Warner, Viacom, Disney, Vivendi-Universal, News Corp, and Sony) typically expect to obtain a minimum number of rights to projects they agree to distribute domestically.[3] These include (again at a minimum) domestic theatrical and domestic video rights, "domestic" meaning the United States and Canada. Increasingly, companies pursue "all domestic rights"—meaning pay cable, pay-

per-view, basic cable, and syndication, often in perpetuity. And it is not uncommon these days to seek "worldwide" rights also. The majors can demand these kinds of deals in large part because of the continuing glut in product in the wake of the independent boom of the 1990s. In addition, these companies have their own niche-oriented distribution arms that pursue projects from the script stage (which guarantees they retain all rights to the project). Further, they have a number of deals with established producers. These deals ensure that a regular supply of product will be developed "in-house," thereby diminishing the majors' interest in outside material, unless it can be obtained on highly favorable terms.

It is important to understand both the majors' current bargaining position and the contemporary rights scenario in order to comprehend the initial lack of interest on the part of distributors in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Given the fact that foreign, domestic video, and television rights had already been sold, it is not surprising that the majors passed on the project from the outset. This is not merely greed on the part of the studios, however. Launching movies theatrically is an expensive proposition these days. Regardless of the "negative cost" of the project (i.e., the budget), "P and A" costs (striking the "prints" and "advertising" the film) are often exorbitant. It is not unusual for marketing costs to account for at least 40 percent of the overall expense of making and releasing a film into theaters.[4] Much of this expense is due to the high cost of advertising on television—tapping into the variety of cable and broadcast channels and time slots necessary to build awareness of the project. Given the economics of today's Hollywood, most films do not make back their money until they move out of theaters and into video. Only rarely will a film make a profit theatrically; more frequently, theatrical distribution is perceived by the industry as a means of "establishing a brand" for future revenue streams such as video and pay cable.

Thus the fact that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* had a low budget is only meaningful to distributors up to a point. The limited number of rights available hurt the project from the start. There was, of course, the possibility that a theatrical distribution division within AOL Time Warner would take on the project, keeping it "in the family." Yet although many media analysts argue that consolidation and synergies have generated large, menacing, and impenetrable media empires, in most cases, divisions within conglomerates retain a degree of autonomy in their development and acquisition of product. In fact, there is often competition between divisions of conglomerates; in-fighting and bidding wars are not uncommon.

The theatrical distribution divisions at AOL Time Warner that might have acquired *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* include Warner Bros., New Line, and Fine Line. Yet *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*'s subject matter and style did not fit with the kinds of films pursued by these divisions. Like the other majors, Warner Bros.' theatrical label is interested in high concept "event" films—films based on "presold" material (books, video games, etc.), and/or films with lots of effects and well-known actors.[5] In general, New Line focuses on projects targeted at the African American market (*All about the Benjamins* [2000], *Friday after Next* [2002]) or the teen and young adult markets (*Blade II* [2002], *Mr. Deeds* [2002]). And of course, the company also has developed its own franchises of late, including the *Austin Powers* [1997, 1999, 2002], *Rush Hour* [1998, 2001], and *Lord of the Rings* [2001, 2002, 2003] series. More specialized fare at this time was left to New Line's spin-off company, Fine Line Pictures, developed in the early 1990s to tap into the same market being pursued by Miramax and Sony Pictures Classics. By the early 2000s, however, Fine Line's activities were being substantially scaled back (Eller, "Niche" C1).[6]

What becomes apparent is that each of the various AOL Time Warner theatrical distribution divisions has a "profile" for the types of films it considers commercially viable. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* did not fit those profiles. To be a Warner Bros. film, it needed a star—Julia Roberts or at least Jennifer Lopez; to be a Fine Line film, it needed some sex, some violence—or a

few subtitles. At the very least, it needed to be "dark." Too commercial in genre and style to be labeled independent and travel the festival route to success, but too lacking in stars to be promoted as an "event," *Wedding* was a film the executives did not know how to distribute.

Thus it was a combination of aesthetic and industrial factors that made the film unattractive to top theatrical distributors. The nonmajors had mixed feelings about the film as well, as noted by *Premiere*'s Fred Schruers in an article on the decision by Lion's Gate, the film's original distributor, to drop it even after positive test screenings (42). Ultimately IFC Films acquired the movie on what the majors would consider unfavorable terms for a distributor. When the majors agree to distribute a film, it is not unusual for them to receive between 25 and 50 percent of the money back from the box office. After the exhibitor takes its share (typically about 50 percent of the grosses), the rest of the returns (called "rentals") go back to distributors. From this money, on average, 10 percent covers P and A costs and 15 percent is charged by the distributor as a fee for its services. The remaining 25 percent goes to the financier. In contemporary Hollywood, the financier is often the studio as well, meaning that it is not uncommon for all of the rentals to go back to the distributor.

This was not the case for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In fact, IFC did not even handle P and A (and thus stood to receive an even smaller percentage); those costs were borne by Gold Circle (Seiler 4D). IFC had what is called a "service deal," meaning that its sole responsibility was in handling the film's theatrical release. This arrangement meant that IFC's earnings on the film would be small relative to the amount taken in by the producers/financiers (Eller, "Jilters" C1).[7] Given this scenario, it is once again not surprising that most distributors were not overeager to secure rights to the film.

Yet IFC's motivations for acquiring *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* begin to make sense when we consider the status of the company's theatrical film division. Formed as a spin-off of the basic cable station IFC (Independent Film Channel), IFC Films began distributing films theatrically with the Ned Beatty-Liev Schreiber drama *Spring Forward* (1999). Following that, IFC Films released a number of critically praised but low-earning projects, such as *Happy Accidents* (2000), *The Business of Strangers* (2001), and *Go Tigers!* (2001). Two thousand two proved to be a banner year for the company, as it not only played a role in the release of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* but was also involved with the North American distribution of the highly praised (and high earning) Spanish-language film, *Y Tú Mamá También*. Together, these films signified IFC Film's move up to the status of major player in the low-budget film world.

Although "independent" was part of IFC's name, this does not suggest the company was without strong conglomerate ties. IFC may have been a relatively new entrant into the theatrical film world, but it was co-owned by several of the wealthiest media companies in North America. Along with cable channels AMC, WE: Women's Entertainment, and muchmusic usa, IFC was a division of Rainbow Media Holdings (at the time of the film's release, a joint venture of Cablevision Systems Corporation, General Electric/NBC, and MGM). Considering its powerful corporate owners, it becomes clear that the "independent" in "Independent Film Channel" is more of a brand name than a description of its industrial relationships. While IFC Films was not a major per se, its ties to corporate Hollywood were far more complex than its name or advertisements might imply.

Up to now, we have seen that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was produced and distributed by some of the most powerful individuals and companies in Hollywood. While it had some affiliations with the independent film world (the movie wasn't directly released by a major studio), a number of media conglomerates and industry players were involved with the making and marketing of the film. Further, in terms of style and genre, the film is anything but independent. Indeed, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is interesting in how utterly *un*original it is—in fact, as many critics noted, it seems more like a ninety-minute sitcom than a feature-length film.[8]

The only other link the film might have to the world of independents would be the means by which it was exhibited. Yet in this arena as well, the film was hardly treated as an independent product. In fact, one of the most effective marketing tactics used in selling the film was in opting to release it as if it were a commercial film rather than an "indie" (Kinzer E1; Schruers 42). As noted by *USA Today,* the "big inspiration" of then IFC distribution and marketing head Bob Berney involved making *Wedding* look like a major release from a major studio, not an art-house film "from a group of small companies that moviegoers have never heard of"; this entailed opening the film wide in a limited number of cities, opting for theater chains rather than art houses wherever possible, and running television spots on cable channels in the regions where the film was opening (Seiler 4D). The expenditures required to open the movie were anything but small—as the film's marketers declared on more than one occasion, they spent eight million dollars to make the first nine million (Schruers 42). These release strategies, which blended the marketing and distribution techniques employed in the last decade by independents, specialized companies, and major studios, proved quite effective, generating nearly two hundred fifty million dollars at the domestic box office.

In this closer look at the exhibition of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*—much as with the interrogation of its production and distribution—we can see the problematic nature of the "independent" label. Like most projects coming out of Hollywood these days, *Wedding* was developed through a complex set of relationships between producers, distributors, and media conglomerates. Labeling any of the individuals or companies involved "independent" has a number of ramifications. First, it obscures the complex industrial and aesthetic nature of media products. Second, it turns media analysts into tools of the marketing and publicity machinery involved in selling movies. In sum, "independent" has become so obscured in the last decade—due to a combination of journalistic hype in the "age of the indies," a lack of clarity by media analysts about industrial practices, and rapid institutional changes—that these days the label often confuses more than it clarifies. As the next section demonstrates, the discourses surrounding "Hollywood" similarly reinforce long-held cultural biases at the same time that they hide the regular interchange between film and television production and distribution.

Claim #2: Wedding *is an example of the kind of film that today can only be made outside of Hollywood*

What Makes a 'Big Fat' Film Hit? This Success is All Greek to Hollywood

Headline, *The Boston Herald*

Maybe 'Greek Wedding' *Will Wake Up Hollywood Bigwigs*

Headline, *USA Today*

The story of 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' *has already become a Hollywood myth—a tale (supposedly) of artistic passion and creative purity trumping the sort of suffocating studio machinery most in evidence this time of year, when megabudget films with treacly emotions and fast-food tie-ins are rolled out. It's a myth illuminating simple truths about the role serendipity can still play in the movies and other pop culture factories . . .*

The San Francisco Chronicle

"Hollywood" is often bandied about by journalists with as little clarification as the label "independent" is. Writers often assume their readers understand what "Hollywood" means and thus take little, if any, time to explain the word. In the studio era, "Hollywood" conjured up images of movie stars, film moguls, and major motion picture studios. To some, the term implied (and continues to imply) glitz and glamour; to others it refers to a cultural void. While in fact it refers to an actual locale in the center of Los Angeles, few people mean this when they speak dreamily—or critically—of Hollywood. What is clear is that, in the past several decades, the word has been used in a number of contradictory and imprecise ways.

As has been well documented by New Hollywood scholars in recent years, the motion

picture industry cannot be thought of as a distinctive entity any longer.[9] Since the studios were purchased in the 1960s—and increasingly incorporated into large multinational conglomerates—"Hollywood" has been more useful as a marketing tool than as an indicator of specific aesthetic characteristics or industrial, economic, and cultural conditions. In order to challenge some of the erroneous claims about both *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and the status of the film industry today, it is important to clarify what I mean by "Hollywood."

When I refer to "Hollywood," I do not mean autonomously functioning motion picture studios that generate movies for theatrical release. Such entities no longer exist—at least, they no longer exist in isolation from a number of related media industries, including television, video, and cable distribution. Thus, by "Hollywood" I mean a complex network of media industries in which major entertainment conglomerates exist at the center, financing products intended for distribution via a number of "pipelines" around the world. The commercial products generated by "Hollywood" are generally either event-oriented projects designed to cross over to a variety of demographic groups and appeal to large numbers of people, or they are niche-targeted projects aimed at specific groups.

The most important thing to note here is that "Hollywood" refers to both the film *and* television industries. The case of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* shows why we cannot speak of Hollywood without speaking of both film and television. Further, this case study demonstrates why we must view these two industries operating in relation to one another. If we perceive the two industries as fundamentally interconnected in their modes of production, generic traits, and aesthetic characteristics, then we can see the problematic nature of the argument that movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* aren't made anymore—or at least, aren't made within Hollywood.

In fact, movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*—innocuous romances and/or comedies featuring B or C-list talent—are made in Hollywood all the time. The key question is not whether such movies are made, but *where* such movies are shown. As discussed briefly above, the economics of the film business are such that two main types of movies are viewed as viable for the theatrical marketplace: high-concept event films and "edgy" niche films. The majors release the event films; specialty divisions within the majors release the niche films. However, hundreds of films are made each year that never receive a theatrical release.

There are two main reasons why a movie doesn't "open" in theaters. First, the producers may believe the genre, style, or lack of stars makes the movie better suited for a video or television release. These movies are often created with a television market in mind from the outset. This is frequently the case with romantic comedies. A number of television, video, and cable distributors are interested in "premiering" movies. Among the light-hearted projects to go directly to television of late include the Chazz Palminteri–directed *Women v. Men* (2002, Showtime), the Charlie Sheen vehicle *Good Advice* (2001, HBO), and the Peter Bogdanovich–directed *A Saintly Switch* (1999, ABC). In some cases, movies that premiere on television in the U.S. open in theaters overseas. Such was the case with the NBC miniseries *Uprising* (2001), for example.

Second, for any number of reasons, the producers or distributors may decide that a movie intended to premiere in theaters should go directly to television or video instead. They could choose television because the movie does not test well with audiences, causing potential distributors to see a theatrical release as too substantial an expense for too uncertain a project. Controversial films sometimes end up with a television premiere after initially being targeted for the theatrical market. Such was the case with *The Believer* (2001), a film about a Jewish boy who becomes violently anti-Semitic. Although the movie won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, it couldn't hold on to a distributor. Ultimately, Showtime picked up the rights to the project and aired it with much fanfare and acclaim on its cable network.

Oftentimes, even though a film tests well with sample audiences, distributors remain uncertain how to sell it. (This was almost the case with *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.) A theatrical release is also sometimes skipped due to producers' and filmmakers' perception that the film will "connect" better with television audiences.[10] For example, director Allison Anders originally made *Things Behind the Sun* (2001) with the theatrical audience in mind. However, after meeting with different distributors, she and the producers chose to release the film on Showtime. Their decision was based in large part on the belief that, although a theatrical release might bring the film more prestige, a cable premiere would bring more eyeballs.[11]

On the most basic level, this discussion demonstrates that Hollywood has not stopped making movies like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In actuality, such movies are regularly produced and distributed. What the industry—as well as journalists and scholars—*has* done is perpetuate a vision of Hollywood as a movie factory that releases films solely for theatrical release. Such constructions obscure the fact that motion pictures are made and distributed in a variety of other ways, ways that are often as profitable as (sometimes more than) the old factory method. The truth is that the industrial and aesthetic distinctions between film and television continue to blur, fueled in large part by the desire of media conglomerates to exploit any and every distribution avenue. Yet if this scenario holds true, it begs the question of who continues to construct such rigid distinctions between film and television—and why?

Different groups employ two distinct discourses to distinguish between film and television. First, a number of media makers, critics, and scholars have reinforced the notion that film texts are "art" forms, which are somehow unique from (and inherently superior to) television. Motion pictures are represented as singular creations that stem from the individual visions of their particular creators. Much of this distinction stems from the profound impact of the auteur theory of cinema, popularized from the 1950s onward in European (and later American) film criticism. While the auteur theory did much to legitimate and invigorate film studies, it had the unfortunate side effect of reinforcing the idea that television was the Other. Whereas film was represented as worthy of study, television was portrayed as a highly commercialized, creatively bankrupt medium—an opiate for the masses.

What is striking is the degree to which the auteurist perspective remains intact, in spite of the dominance of high-concept, big-budget motion pictures. The rise of "independent" cinema in the 1990s played a substantial part in keeping such discourses alive; such indie films were portrayed as "real" cinema, while event films were dismissed as commercial Hollywood product (again, in spite of the fact that both were frequently distributed by subsidiaries within the same conglomerates). Film schools, specialty film publications, film festivals, and regional film societies all strengthened these distinctions. The tendency of mass media publications to discuss the two media on different pages further reinforced the biases.

Even as various factions have depicted films as aesthetically and generically distinctive, a number of groups have also portrayed the motion picture industry as an isolated enterprise, operating separately from the television business. Historically, film and television have developed as separate industries in a number of crucial ways. One central difference has been the film industry's ability to "self-regulate," while the television industry has been subject to substantial oversight by various federal entities, including the Federal Communications Commission. These divergent regulatory histories have contributed to specific sets of industrial structures, business practices, and program development processes within the two media. However, whatever barriers were once in place between the two media have eroded substantially over the last three decades. Deregulation during the 1980s and 1990s enabled a number of mergers and acquisitions, during the course of which film and television distributors became part of the same conglomerates. As these film and television divisions were

incorporated into the same companies, creative talent and executive figures increasingly moved between the two media. More and more, styles and stories were shared in the name of synergy. And, most importantly for this discussion of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* product became more fluid as well; movies were not destined either to film or television before the fact, as they had been prior to the 1980s.[12]

In spite of the increasing convergence of business practices and industrial structures, scholars, critics, and the industry itself often did not acknowledge the overlap. In part this has to do with the longstanding cultural biases toward the two media; it is also a function of the compartmentalization of work in a post-industrial society. Marketing has also played an important role in reinforcing the divisions between film and television. In a media environment in which consumers can view movies in a number of different ways— at theaters, on video, via satellite, not to mention on cable and broadcast television—differentiation is crucial. Much of this differentiation has occurred through advertising that promotes specific programs, movies, and channels as superior in some manner (e.g., "Not TV. It's HBO"). Promoting cultural hierarchies is a means of "branding," of distinguishing products in the marketplace and facilitating differentiation.

There is another consequence of such methods of differentiation. Pointing to the "uniqueness" of film and television products reinforces the view that these are separate industries, operating in nearly complete isolation from each other. Such a construction furthers the interests of the conglomerates in two important ways. First, it shifts attention away from the consolidation occurring within the media industries. Second, this construction—in tandem with the idea that film, not television, is the dominant economic and aesthetic form of Hollywood—favors an understanding of the media industries in terms of a "film paradigm." This paradigm has significant regulatory implications: if film is thought to be the driver of media industries, then those industries can more easily be spoken of as self-regulating. Shifting the discussion away from television both obscures the economic, cultural, and aesthetic centrality of television, and effectively takes talk of regulation off the table.

Bringing us back more directly to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* another interesting (and typically unmentioned) dimension of the movie's history was its formulation as a television series long *before* the motion picture opened in theaters. The deal for the television series was struck with CBS back in October 2001—a few months after production wrapped but several months prior to the movie's theatrical release. Another intriguing component of the deal involves the man who set up Vardalos's contract. Her representative was Brad Grey, who, in addition to negotiating the actress's deal, also arranged to produce the show via his Brad Gray Television division (in conjunction with Columbia TriStar TV and Playtone Prods.) (Adalian 1). This is an important piece of information because Brad Grey is one of the most prominent manager-producers in Hollywood. This backstory not only reinforces yet another way in which film and television intersected early in the development of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* but also poses a challenge to the "Cinderella story" of Vardalos's success—a story repeated many times after the movie became a phenomenon. This Cinderella story was developed early on as a way to market the film. Exploring the evolution of that story—as well as the broader strategies used to sell the film—enables me to challenge yet another misperception about the movie's success.

Claim #3: Wedding *is evidence of the success of grassroots marketing*

Guerilla Marketers of the Year; It's All Greek to Thee
Headline, *Brandweek*

The surprise summer hit 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' *was built with a grass-roots marketing program—quite literally. "We gave out Frisbees at picnics," says Paula Silver, president of Beyond the Box Productions and marketing consultant for the film's producer, Playtone Pictures. "I went up to Seattle to a Greek dance festival to give out T-shirts."*
Advertising Age

Journalists told two main Cinderella stories about *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. First, there was the tale of Nia Vardalos herself.[13] This version was offered up to the press from the very first public screening, in July 2001 (Hoffman R1). In this narrative, Vardalos was just a "girl from Winnipeg" who, through hard work and comedic skill, managed to hit the jackpot. This story portrayed a struggling actress who, through a little luck and a lot of talent, was able to get her autobiographical story of cross-cultural courtship into the right hands—Tom Hanks's hands, to be precise.

Vardalos's rise to prominence was not quite as dramatic as was often depicted; she did not come "out of nowhere." In fact, her resume included an extended stint with Second City, one of the premiere comedy troupes in North America. Vardalos was just one in a string of actor-comedians who emerged from this troupe to attain success in the entertainment industry (other Second City alumni include Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, John Candy, Eugene Levy, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Martin Short, Shelley Long, Mike Myers, Chris Farley, and *Greek Wedding* co-star Andrea Martin). By the time she made *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Vardalos was no stranger to the low-budget film world; she appeared in several supporting roles in romantic comedies over the years, including *Men Seeking Women* (1997) and *Meet Prince Charming* (1999). In addition, she performed on several sitcoms during the 1990s, including the following ABC series: *Two Guys, A Girl and a Pizza Place; It's Like, You Know . . . ; High Incident; Common Law;* and *Boy Meets World.*

The second fairy tale involves the film itself. This is the story of the "little film that could"—a small movie, with neither stars nor explosions, that, through an ambitious, grassroots marketing campaign, took the box office by storm and outperformed the studios' summer event films. Whereas Vardalos's Cinderella story was spun by public relations and marketing staff from the outset, this second fairy tale developed over many months as a result of the film's surprising box office success.

The crucial element of this story is its argument for the power of "grassroots" marketing strategies—sales techniques aimed at specific communities on a small scale. In launching the film, this was certainly one crucial tactic; marketers did indeed begin their promotions by targeting Greek communities in major cities such as Seattle, New York, and Philadelphia and in key regions such as Michigan and New Jersey. Marketers placed flyers and posters at Greek churches, dances, and ethnic festivals. In addition, Greek community leaders were recruited to attend advance screenings (Matsumoto). However, although the Greek population was one of the first to be pursued by the film's marketers, it was by no means the only one.[14]

Using "grassroots" techniques to sell media products is not new; in fact, such strategies have been employed by advertisers for decades.[15] During the 1990s, this practice became an art form in the hands of specialized film companies, with Miramax leading the way in developing innovative sales strategies. Yet labeling *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* an example of the power of grassroots marketing is not only an exaggeration, it is a misrepresentation. While such strategies were a component of the film's success, they were by no means the primary or sole means by which non-Greek audiences became aware of the movie. After initial audience response to the film proved encouraging, Gold Circle committed a significant amount of money to advertising. In keeping with Berney's strategy of making the film look like a major release from a major studio (rather than an art-house film), Gold Circle invested in saturation advertising in the areas where the film was playing. This included print advertisements as well as local cable television spots. As awareness of the film continued to expand, Gold Circle sought a broader audience via traditional niche-marketing methods. Women were pursued more heavily via television spots on *Oprah* and *Live with Regis and Kelly* as well as a number of Lifetime cable programs. Point-of-purchase promotions were established with consumer stores Things Remembered and Bed, Bath and Beyond; at the same time, *Bride's* magazine ran a *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

sweepstakes. By September 2002, Gold Circle had invested close to twenty million dollars in marketing the movie (Eller, "Jilters" C1). While this was not the forty million typically spent by major studios on the marketing of event films, it was still substantially more than the claims of "grassroots promotion" imply.

Cumulatively, this analysis of the release of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* suggests that while marketers used a variety of inventive methods to sell the film, their primary achievement was in targeting specific audiences via established media (especially television) rather than in generating widespread interest via grassroots marketing tactics. Their most original decision was to position the film as simultaneously commercial and independent. The film was "independent" to the extent that it was portrayed as "not Hollywood"—a singular product of the enthusiasm and vision of one young Greek woman who, through hard work and perseverance, made the industry take notice. At the same time, marketers wisely veered away from the established means of distributing art-house or "indie" films; the film appeared at a limited number of festivals, opened at few art houses, and depended minimally on positive critical response. In sum, the distribution of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* involved a blending of the marketing practices employed by the Hollywood majors and their specialty, niche-oriented divisions. Meanwhile, widespread journalistic coverage marveling at the magical path to stardom of both Vardalos and her movie provided the film with the media coverage it was unable to attain via awards and critical prestige.

What a *Greek Wedding* Teaches Us: Lessons on the Practices and Products of Contemporary Hollywood

Contrary to journalistic claims that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* shows that "Hollywood has lost its way," the film's success in fact demonstrates the clarity with which the Hollywood system operates today. This film can be perceived as the exception which proves a number of rules. As the above analysis has demonstrated, Hollywood's hands are all over this film, throughout the production, distribution, and exhibition processes. The majors didn't want the film initially because the majors didn't need it; because of the way rights were sold off in advance, the film was not considered worth the investment.[16] There were specific reasons why the film seemed somewhat different from the other films playing in movie theaters at the time: namely, most standard generic romantic comedies with no stars (and no "edge") don't receive theatrical distribution in North America. However, they are regularly found on video shelves and aired on television. Specific industrial factors—including strong connections to prominent Hollywood talent—enabled the movie to play at theaters, whereas others like it have not.

An industrial analysis of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* shows the extent to which the rules of contemporary Hollywood have been institutionalized and formalized: certain types of movies go to theaters; others don't. The distribution path a particular film takes is based predominantly on its mixture of style, tone, genre, and talent. Favorable critical response or prominent media coverage is important inasmuch as it adds to a movie's public profile; while bad reviews will typically not hurt a film, good reviews or extensive publicity (due to controversy, the presence of a major star, etc.) can positively impact the product's box office success or ratings fortunes.

It is important to note, however, that although my analysis has placed the success of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* within a particular institutional and industrial context, by no means can it explain why the movie resonated with audiences to the extent that it did. This point reinforces why it is important to differentiate the production and distribution of a product from the reception of that product; discussing why and how a movie appears where it does is very different from exploring what it means to any group or individual. One of the major problems with much of the journalistic discourse is its inability to distinguish between production and reception. In eliding the two, it obscures

the distinctions between cause, context, and effect, and thereby helps to perpetuate certain misconceptions.

While the reasons for the appeal of *Wedding* constitute a different study, it is worthwhile to consider what the film's status as a cultural phenomenon might indicate. The movie was released in 2002, when the fortunes of the U.S. seemed on the decline. Stock prices were dropping, unemployment rising. The Internet bubble had burst. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty about the nation's fortunes and future seemed to prevail. In addition, when *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was released, there were few movies like it in theaters—comforting, genial, light-hearted stories that featured normal, everyday people improving their individual fortunes (and physical appearances), finding love, and discovering ways to relate to other cultures.[17] A list of the top five films playing at the beginning of July 2002 hints at why *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* might have had the longevity it did: *Mr. Deeds, Minority Report, Lilo and Stitch, Scooby-Doo,* and *The Bourne Identity.* Whereas these films appealed to rather specific demographic groups (children, young men, etc.), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* appealed to multiple groups. It was truly a rare film, one to which grandmothers, mothers, and granddaughters could (and did) go together.

An analysis of the release of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* offers a compelling snapshot on the practices and processes of Hollywood in the early 2000s. Several key lessons can be drawn. First, the label "independent" needs to be analyzed more extensively. Studio and "independent" production and distribution processes continue to blend together. These are not distinctive enterprises, but interactive ones. Filmmakers cannot work "outside of Hollywood" and expect their products to be widely released in theaters in the U.S. Second, we need to look more closely at the interrelationships and interdependencies between the studios and the independents and between the film and television industries. Understanding the relationships between the various practitioners and practices is crucial to an effective industrial analysis. Third, we must understand how "software" (the industry word for film and television content) continues to be vital to the success of the entertainment industry. Control of software is crucial to the viability of the industry—but this software must be accessible to a company through as many distribution channels as possible. It is not worthwhile for companies to invest time and money in "establishing a brand" for a product if future rights to that product are unavailable. Fourth, we can see that while predicting box office success is extremely difficult (at best), there are ways to limit losses. To do so, the majors generally release high-concept, big-budget, special effects–driven movies, while their specialty divisions focus on low-budget, niche-oriented films with "edge."

As *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* goes on traveling through the system in various iterations—as television series, a video and DVD release, and a cable favorite—it is important to continue evaluating what the movie's success means for the state of the film and television industries, as well as the status of media culture. In making such evaluations, we must also continue to recognize that the ideological power of journalistic discourses can sometimes be as potent as the ideologies of the media texts themselves.

NOTES

1. This auteur-oriented perspective is often favored by popular trade press writers. See Lyons; Levy.

2. See Eller, "Jilters." The project was originally "discovered" by another production company, MPH. This company had produced *Men Seeking Women,* a film in which Nia Vardalos had a role. According to the *Los Angeles Times,* the company's cofounder, Jim Milio, had originally optioned *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* for five hundred dollars, then later renewed the option for another five hundred. For a while the company shopped the project around on its own, seeking financing of 1.5 million dollars. Ultimately it bought the property for sixty thousand dollars, only to sell it to HBO for 200 thousand dollars.

3. Since the release of the film, Time Warner has removed "AOL" from its name and Vivendi has negotiated the sale of Universal to General Electric/NBC.

4. The MPAA reports $31.01 as the average P and A cost for feature films distributed by its members in

2001. For more figures, see ‹http://www.mpaa.org/useconomicreview/2001Economic/sld016.html›.

5. For a discussion of high concept "event" films, see Schatz; Wyatt.

6. Fine Line's difficulties in the early 2000s have been widely noted. Ultimately, Fine Line was phased out and Warner Bros. developed a new niche division in its place. In 2003, Warner Independent Pictures was officially launched, with former Miramax executive Mark Gill as its head. See Eller, "Niche" C1.

7. The *Los Angeles Times* reports that IFC was initially paid a distribution fee of 200 thousand dollars and, when the movie became a hit, the company got a bonus of 300 thousand dollars. Though the company's final income has not been reported, it has been acknowledged that the company "will see a significant seven-figure sum." Compared to what the majors would get for distributing this film, this is still a small amount. See Eller, "Jilters" C1.

8. For examples, see Harvey; Taylor; and Jacobson and Puig.

9. Some of the most extensive examinations of the relationship between film and television can be found in work by media economists and New Hollywood scholars. For examples of the media economic approach, see Compaine and Gomery; for the New Hollywood approach, see Schatz.

10. On occasion, a movie will garner enough prestige during its television airing to have a limited theatrical run after the fact. Such was the case with *The Last Seduction* (1994), which initially broadcast on HBO and went on to a successful theatrical run.

11. This observation came during a panel discussion, "The Basics of Distribution," at the South by Southwest festival, Austin, TX, March 9–17, 2001.

12. This is not to say that all barriers and differences have eroded; rather, I am suggesting there is an increasing amount of overlap.

13. See Friedman; Schruers; and Seiler.

14. With less than one half of 1 percent identifying itself as Greek for the U.S. Census Bureau (1,175,591 persons), this would be too narrow a demographic to target in isolation. Statistics at ‹http://factfinder.census.gov›.

15. For a discussion of the development of niche marketing tactics, see Turow.

16. Only by earning the hundreds of millions of dollars that it did earn—which, as the discussion of the discourses surrounding this film shows, is an extremely rare occurrence—could the movie have been a worthwhile investment for a major studio, their specialty divisions, or the top independent distributors.

17. Thanks to Caroline Frick for her input on this topic.

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