

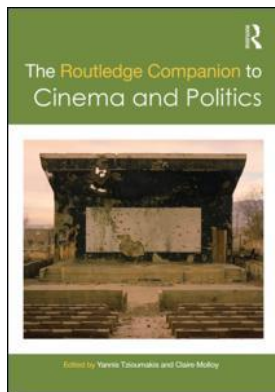
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### Reaganite Cinema

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## 25

# REAGANITE CINEMA

## What a feeling!

*Gary Needham*

In a revolutionary and political turn in *Cahiers du Cinema* at the end of the 1960s, published shortly thereafter in *Screen*, Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni's "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" asserted the need for the political and ideological to be examined in relation to cinema, stating that "every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it" (1971: 30). Flash-forward a number of years to 1986, with a Memorial Day weekend release and a tagline that reads "crime is a disease, meet the cure" and "strong arm of the law," *Cobra* (Cosmatos), a film starring and written by Sylvester Stallone, appears to be a typical example of a 1980s film absolutely "determined by the ideology that produces it." *Cobra* appears definitive in its mutual entanglement with the political rhetoric and assumed public sentiments of Ronald Reagan's Republican America. The film, or rather Stallone, ostentatiously gestures towards such presidential connections in displaying a giant portrait of Reagan in his character Marion 'Cobra' Cobretti's office; this is the man I serve, it implicitly proclaims.

*Cobra* is just one of a number of films that respond to the notion that America has gone soft and needs a 'strong arm' or better a strong body (Jeffords 1993), here in the shape of Stallone's detective, to bring America back in check after decades of waywardness. In *Cobra* the threat to national security is domestic rather than foreign with a group of Darwinian terrorists called New World Order going on a relentless killing spree in order to refashion social order through the extermination of the weak and, by extension, the survival of the strongest, which, as I will argue below, conveys Reaganite logic *par excellence*. *Cobra* seems to condemn these right-wing terrorists, yet their ideology and the pleasures of the film itself are not that far removed from the policies and practices of the New Right that *Cobra*, in its character's response to crime and violence, seems to be of equal reaction. As a right-wing text, *Cobra* revels in eschewing proper judicial and legal practice in the fight against crime. Instead, this film privileges the muscular male action hero, a man of few words, with a body and actions that speak for him and his power, and the use of more violence as the only way to deal with home-grown 'terrorists' in this home-front war. *Cobra's* fantasy is meant to accord with Reagan's domestic policy in which the nation and the family, one and the same thing in Reagan's America, are under serious threat, both real and imagined. The female lead in *Cobra* is fashion model Ingrid (Brigitte Nielsen), then Stallone's real wife, correspondingly reduced to a pre-feminist passive spectacle and obligatory soundtrack-selling

montage sequence, in which we are positioned to consume her body and the music as a 'package.' She will soon be adding 'damsel in distress' to her Reaganite film resume.

The film's 'position' is quite clearly mapped out in the opening and closing scenes as Reaganite films are neatly organized by their opening thematic distillations: here's the problem; and a firm closure: here's how we fixed it. Thus, *Cobra* begins with Stallone's voice-over narrating a series of crime statistics: "In America there's a burglary every eleven seconds, an armed robbery every sixty-five seconds ... and two-hundred and fifty rapes a day," while the barrel of a gun is turned to point directly at the audience and fires a slow-motion bullet that explodes into the film's title. We, the audience, America, are quite literally under attack. The credits are then intercut with a silhouette of an unspecified menace on his motorbike and the rallying together of the axe-wielding New World Order gang he represents, the members of which all share the same skull and crossbones tattoo we see in close-up. The gang member parks his bike outside a supermarket, walks inside, and begins gunning down the shoppers in cold blood. Even worse, this is all happening in the Christmas period reinforced by having someone blasted by the maniac's shotgun, in visually impacting slow motion, towards a Christmas tree in the decoration aisle. The premise of this opening scene is one of total threat reinforced with the gun pointing directly at the spectator followed by the gun fired at the seasonal shopper. Even the symbolism of children's toys, Christmas, and the Pepsi stand (integrated marketing even during heightened violence, see [Figure 25.1](#)) being obliterated is surely not lost on the audience as America itself is under attack. The 'Cobra' arrives in his vintage car (the number plate reads 'Awsom 50'), all reflective shades and chewing on a matchstick; he's just what we need, of course! He enters the supermarket, finds time to open a can of Coors beer (another product placement) and then shoots the 'domestic terrorist' dead. Following the event a journalist dares to question Cobra's actions as 'both judge and jury' only to be quickly grabbed and pushed aside; a clear and forceful silencing of the liberal voice.

The ending of *Cobra* is similarly brutal in its ideological transparency and confidence. Following the defeat of the gang and its leader, nicknamed the Night Slasher, Cobra gets on his bike with recently rescued Ingrid and a montage of them hitting the road is accompanied by a soft rock track titled "Voice of American Sons." The closure of *Cobra* suggests this character



Figure 25.1 Marketing and violence hand in hand in *Cobra*.

knows exactly where he is going and the woman is certainly willing to follow (and should be grateful for having been rescued anyway). The music is overtly masculine in its genre conventions and patriotic in its lyrics, and on the whole the last few minutes present a form of closure which is absolute in terms of confidence, motivation, and direction. Narrative resolution here functions as a form of political assertion, but more than that, if one is to understand these films as a response to a previous form of American cinema, *Cobra's* triumphant closure could be seen as a provocative reversal, even erasure, of *Easy Rider's* narrative resolution (Hopper, 1969). Both films are about 'the search for America,' both conclude on motorbikes, but the quest brings each protagonist to a very different ending, with the two easy riders, Captain American and Billy the Kid, shot and killed by American South hillbillies. In other words, *Cobra* is an implicit response to the nihilistic, directionless, incoherent, experimental questioning of American in the previous two decades of American cinema by a host of films broadly associated with the Hollywood Renaissance. The seeds of this sentiment and desire for coherence, simplicity, momentum, and aggressive reassurance were sown well before Reagan's election in a revealing statement by George Lucas in which he describes his film *Star Wars* (1977) as "an intergalactic story of heroism. Total fantasy for today's kids who don't have the opportunity to grow up watching *Flash Gordon* and have to sit through movies of insecurity instead" (Lucas, 1978). Lucas probably means films like *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson, 1970), *Klute* (Pakula, 1971), *The Last Detail* (Ashby, 1973), or *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1974), and of course *Easy Rider*.

Despite *Cobra's* obviousness as a reactionary and right-wing text, film culture, film reception, and the film industry are more complex than Comolli and Narboni perhaps assume, in addition to what such easy ideological readings at first suggest. Indeed, *Cobra* is not just a prop in popular culture's support for the moral conservatism and domestic policy of the New Right. The film also had the highest opening weekend box office of that year with \$15.6 million and "opened in 2,131 theaters in the United States and Canada, breaking the movie industry's all-time record for bookings" (Scott, 1986). Yet, despite the box-office success, which can translate into the idea that there is a public demand and desire for these macho action films, *Cobra's* production and reception recount several layers of unease, as I will discuss below. These layers suggest that affording these films such a monolithic status as "Reaganite Entertainment" (Britton, 1986) in our writing and perception of American film history, that is, the idea that film, politics, and public sentiment in this particular period are unquestionably reinforcing one another, is far from the straight-forward complicity that the term 'Reaganite' perhaps suggests. Nonetheless, one cannot think of another period in American film history in which such a concerted appeal to see film and presidential and political rhetoric so ruefully interconnected, further exacerbated by the continued evocation of film dialogue and references in the speeches and national addresses made by Reagan himself.

Back to the layers of unease, *Cobra* had a difficult time at the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which gave the first cut of the film an X rating, resulting in a situation in which the film could not have been advertised in newspapers and on network television, and therefore not deemed acceptable for mainstream consumption, despite Stallone's headlining status. Produced independently by Cannon Films and distributed by Warner Bros., *Cobra* suffered extensive re-editing to remove excessive violence and a bloated running time in order to secure both an R rating (a moral concern) and, importantly, to increase the number of possible daily screenings (an economic concern). What is interesting then is that this openly right-wing wish-fulfillment story about a muscular hero who gets the job done at the edge of the law (as *Cobra* says: 'this is where the law stops and I begin') and for which there was a significant audience at the time is also at odds with the moral conservatism driving American film censorship in the 1980s.

The film was also a critical failure and, despite a great opening weekend, was subject to excoriating reviews. For instance, *New York Times* critic Nina Darnton writes that it “is a disturbing movie from many points of view: disturbing for the violence it portrays, the ideas it represents and the large number of people who will undoubtedly go to see it and cheer on its dangerous hero” (1986). She also goes on to state that *Cobra* “shows such contempt for the most basic American values embodied in the concept of a fair trial that Mr. Stallone no longer, even nominally, represents an ideology that is recognizably American” (ibid.) Therefore, *Cobra*’s critical failure is that it is a dumb, violent movie with an ideology that is completely out of step with ‘core American values.’

The reason for opening this chapter with this substantial examination of a lesser, now all but forgotten, 1980s film, which nonetheless is typical of Reaganite Entertainment, is that contradiction is a defining feature of *Cobra*; it is equally supported and rejected by its own culture as a film, and it believes in the same ideological principles that its hero fights with a vengeance. In the final part of this chapter, I will return to another 1980s film, *Flashdance* (Lyne, 1983) to discuss its own contradictions, but before that it is necessary to revisit the political landscape and ideological sentiments of the decade and examine the ways in which they have seemingly shaped an entire decade through the conceptual terms ‘Reaganite Cinema’ and ‘Reaganite Entertainment.’

### American cinema/American politics

Every period in American cinema, whether decade long, longer, or even shorter, is of course inseparable from its political, social, and cultural contexts, whether it challenges, supports, or renders ambiguous the ideological and hegemonic relations of the ‘feeling’ of the majority and of those who represent governmental power. All American films seemingly enable readings whether implicit or explicit in either supporting or rejecting the policies and sentiments adopted by alternating Republican and Democratic presidencies and administrations. Much has already been written of Hollywood’s response to Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, (Muscio 1997; Giovacchini 2001), the effect of the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s (Prime 2013; Smith 2014), the grappling with counter-culture in the late 1960s (James 1989), the wave of ideological disintegration in the 1970s (Wood 1986; Elsaesser and King 2005), and so on. Despite these ‘moments’ of historical circumstance and political reification in American cinema, film scholarship has tended to recognize them as complex and often contradictory, especially compared to the monolithic status and neatness that is often afforded to 1980s Hollywood cinema.

However, while those earlier examples are by definition historical, the long-term effects of the consolidation of American cinema between 1976 and 1989 are still being felt today, through ways in which Reaganite films and their defining features and structures of feeling are evident in contemporary Hollywood. An index of the enduring appeal of *Star Wars*, *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978), *Ghostbusters* (Reitman, 1984), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981), *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982), *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino, 1987), and *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), the list goes on, with audiences too young to have seen them the first time around, signals their canonical status in popular culture but also their existence beyond Reagan’s two terms in office. So profound were the political and industrial shifts in American cinema in those years, the aesthetic and formal consequences of how the films looked and, arguably more important, how they were experienced by audiences, that culture has seemingly not yet recovered from the ‘interminable solipsism’ (Britton, 1986) that defined Reaganite cinema as one of pure, unadulterated entertainment and which goes a long

way to explain the recent remakes of classic 1980s films such as *The Karate Kid* (Zwart, 2010), *Footloose* (Brewer, 2012), *The Thing* (Van Heijningen Jr., 2011), *Conan the Barbarian* (Nispel, 2011), and several others.

*Superman* (Donner, 1978) was perhaps an early gesture that American cinema was changing in the late 1970s since the most fervent cycle of films with no sign of abating is the contemporaneous super hero juggernaut, with productions planned by Marvel Studios and its ilk well up to 2019 and beyond (Graser, 2014). It would seem therefore that Reaganite Cinema was both an historical moment and a founding template of contemporary Hollywood. What Reaganite Cinema and the contemporary Hollywood films share is a foregrounding of the 'experience' of cinema as an immediate and affective one; the triumphant endings of both *Star Wars* and *Cobra* attest to this over-investment in heavy affect, as do many latter-day examples such as *National Treasure* (Turteltaub, 2004) and *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005). However, and this is a key difference between the 1980s and now, the power of contemporary Hollywood cinema is not always, evidently, concertedly, tied to left or right, Republican or Democrat, especially when films like *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) are canny to exploit and negotiate both positions. Of course, not all films are that ambiguous or open to possibility, with *Taken* (Morel, 2008), for instance, unabashedly updating the right-wing vigilante trope, thus providing a strong example of a reactionary film in the late 2000s. As the most commercially successful film of all time, *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), seemingly of Reaganite fashion (let us not forget the military jingoism of Cameron's *Aliens* (1986)), privileges the spectator and his or her propensity for pleasure and awe, all the while providing positions that both celebrate military and scientific supremacy (the right position), while valuing environmentalism and condemning the genocide of an ersatz Native American race of blue aliens (the left position). How we have arrived at this current formation of American cinema is a direct consequence of the Reaganite Cinema of the 1980s and its legacy that cinematic value lies in pleasure rather than politics.

### 1980s: political and cultural context

While Ronald Regan's first term in office was not until 1981 there was already a cultural and political shift underway in the latter half of the 1970s that was indicative of how the New Right came to power with a landslide victory. The 1979 'Disco Sucks' riot in Chicago was a symbolic event that speaks of an idea that the long party and the fun of the 1970s were over. Baseball fans gathered to blow-up disco records during a baseball match half-time that became a riot chanting 'disco sucks' that quite explicitly targeted two groups seen to have been over-privileged in the preceding decades, namely, women and gay men since the slogan of 'disco sucks' itself is hardly veiled in its attack to be read simply as 'cocksuckers like disco.' Republicans characterized the 1960s and 1970s as wayward decades, unruly and hedonistic, insecure and paranoid, leading the US towards moral and economic decline, distrust in the government, and a weakened international image. Despite the associations with the uplift of disco and a hit soundtrack, one should remember that *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham, 1978) is actually an anti-disco movie that also de-gays and de-blacks the music phenomenon and instead, almost as a prediction, asserts a hegemonic white masculinity. It would seem natural then that Sylvester Stallone would helm the film's sequel *Staying Alive* (1983) and that John Travolta's slender disco body would be transformed by hard muscle to such an extent that it might appear that Rambo had instead taken to the dance floor.

The blame on the wayward decade was directed towards a disorganized Left, the Carter administration, poor fiscal mismanagement, feminism, gay rights, civil rights, as if they were



all conspiring to take the US into a state of decline. In this sense, the eventual success of the Right, to the extent that they also controlled The Senate for the first time since 1956, was connected quite explicitly to both the perceived and the actual failures of the Left. Reagan counselled a return to *Father Knows Best* (CBS/NBC 1954–60) sitcom politics of 1950s, the decade in which he was also a Hollywood film star and conservatism and containment culture were at their peak, while one should also note that when he was president of the Screen Actors Guild in that decade Reagan provided testimony in support of the communist witch-hunts (Rogin 1988: 28–32). In this respect, it is no surprise that that 1950s operate as a halcyon decade in 1980s Republican discourse, rewritten as the time before it all went wrong in the 1960s and 1970s. The 1950s also became a popular setting for a number of 1980s films, including the appropriately titled *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985) alongside *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Coppola, 1986), *Diner* (Levinson, 1982), *Grease 2* (Birch, 1982), *Stand By Me* (Reiner, 1986), and *Streets of Fire* (Hill, 1984).

The return to 1950s values is a return to family values, that is to say, a return to patriarchal values, and the political battles of the Reagan era were often couched in familial and moral terms evocative of the 1950s. Robin Wood (1986: 162–4) refers to the 1980s as an era of ‘reassurance’ and ‘reaction’ and one might add a range of alliterating terms to capture the breadth of sentiments and situations of Reagan’s America: restoration of the family; recuperation of the military image; renewal of right-wing policy; regression of intellect and left-wing thinking; return of patriarchy; revenge on minorities who made significant progress in the two preceding decades; retaliation against foreign powers after a series of humiliating defeats and military interventions; renaissance in moral conservatism and religion; rejection of Equal Rights Amendment; repeal of *Roe v. Wade*. Furthermore, this brutal neo-conservatism emphasized a new faith in technology, consumerism, capitalism, and the service economy, all to be delivered by newly deregulated private sector companies. The consequence of this is where the world currently is, namely, Neoliberalism.

### Reaganite film culture

Cinema did not immediately shift to the right all of a sudden in 1981 as Reagan took root in The White House. Seeds of conservative reassurance appeared by the latter half of the 1970s, and even the 1980s did not overwhelmingly embody all the sentiments of the New Right. On reflection, there are numerous films released around 1980, interestingly all commercial failures, such as *Cruising* (Friedkin, 1980), *All That Jazz* (Fosse, 1979), and *Thief* (Mann, 1981) that belong to the cinema of the 1970s, ‘incoherent texts’ (Wood, 1986), existentialist and concerted in their refusal to make it ‘easy’ for the spectator. *9 to 5* (Higgins, 1980) continues to explore some tenets of second-wave feminism in the workplace, the horror in *Day of the Dead* (Romero, 1985) is not the zombies but what happens when a macho military is in total control of everything, while *They Live* (Carpenter, 1988) is an exercise aiming to reveal how ideology works to keep us all in check. But the majority of films, especially blockbusters like *Superman* (which saw three sequels in the 1980s), exerted a simplified narrative structure, were loaded with spectacle and acts of heroism, and provided a more comfortable and reassuring place for the film spectator than earlier films such as the *The King of Marvin Gardens* (Rafelson, 1972) that typified a bleak nihilism while also being formally challenging.

Robin Wood (1986) and Andrew Britton (1986) both outline a series of dominant tendencies or characteristics that articulate the Reaganite ideology on several levels including form, genre, predictability, and experience. Chief among those ideological tendencies or

goals are the above-mentioned restoration of patriarchy and recuperation of the military (*The Great Santini* (Carlino, 1979), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Hackford, 1982)), alongside the alleviation of nuclear anxieties (*War Games* (Badham, 1983), *Ghostbusters*) and the regression of the audience to a state of infantile wonder (*ET: The Extra Terrestrial*, *Short Circuit* (Badham, 1986)). It is the latter affect of regression that supports the former ideological project, a sort of renewed faith in the power of the apparatus (Baudry, 1986), in that one is supposed to self-consciously make sense of 1980s film as quite simply harmless entertainment, in Britton's terms: a cinema defined by "interminable solipsism" (1986: 3) and entertainment "defined as a commodity to be consumed rather than a text to be read" (1986: 4). "Keep repeating 'it's only a movie'" used to be the tagline for the most cruel and disturbing horror movies of the 1960s and 1970s like *Mark of the Devil* (Armstrong, 1970) and the shocking *Last House on the Left* (Craven, 1972) but by the 1980s the same phrase became the solipsistic mantra associated with not taking the movies seriously and thus not seeing them as having any political agency and efficacy in relation to highly persuasive ideologies, lest one be accused of spoiling all the fun of the apparatus. In apparently constructing the adult spectator as a child, socially and psychologically, there is no place to think when confronted by awe and wonder. During the exhilarating mine cart sequence in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg, 1984) one is caught up in the suspense and energy of a good old-fashioned chase reconfigured as an ersatz rollercoaster ride for the spectator so that we forget, regress, or not even notice that the film is one of the most outrageously racist films of the decade; a nadir of neo-colonial fantasy in which the 'savages' are an immoral bunch of Asians who include child slavery, human sacrifice of white women, and a gluttony for eyeball soup and cold monkey brains, among their many bizarre and heinous practices.

The key theme of the restoration of patriarchy is often complemented by meting out punishment against women for their, mostly, sexual transgressions outside the family. The backlash against feminism (Faludi 1991; Modleski 1991) and, put even more simply, women's economic and familial independence are repeatedly recoded through themes and images of frequently violent punishment and male moral superiority, which, at one end, includes a vicious trial by jury and expulsion of the mother from the family (*Kramer versus Kramer* (Benton, 1979)) and, at the other, in the most extreme versions includes homicidal misogyny (*Maniac* (Lustig, 1980), with a tagline 'I told you not to go out tonight'). *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980), *Terms of Endearment* (Brooks, 1983), and *Fatal Attraction*



Figure 25.2 Stylized murder in *Dressed to Kill*.



(Lyne, 1987) are all exemplary of Reaganism in this respect. In *Dressed to Kill*, Angie Dickinson's extramarital pick-up in an art gallery, a dialogue-free ten-minute cinematic tour de force of steadicam ingenuity and film scoring, results in her contracting a sexually transmitted infection. Upon discovery of a medical note and after she flees her one-night-stand's apartment, she is greeted in the elevator by a transvestite killer who slashes her to death with an open razor (see [Figure 25.2](#)). The 'problem' with *Dressed to Kill* is that it is such a beautifully edited, shot, and scored film, playful in its Hitchcockian allusions, but it just so happens that its formal qualities are used to show the explicit murder of woman by a queer killer; a punishment for female sexual transgression meted out by another pervert. So much care has gone in to those shots in terms of framing and their relationship to each other that unflinchingly depict a straight razor slashing upwards towards a woman's genitals and across her cheek that we are meant to think about form, suspense, and shock rather than politics, message, and meaning.

The message here is that she deserves it! Like the mine cart sequence in *Indiana Jones*, we are meant to focus on the immediacy and sensation of the scene, which in *Dressed to Kill* is all about surprise and shock, rather than what it actually means in the context of a political climate in which women's agency is being compromised, feminism undone, misogyny plainly accepted, and the fantasy played out is one of deadly punishment for an anti-familial transgression. Gender and the family are but one area among many that get 'worked over' by Reaganite ideology and one could also draw links between Reagan's increase of defense spending and militaristic fantasy and macho heroics (*Firefox* (Eastwood, 1982), *Blue Thunder* (Badham, 1983) *Invasion U.S.A.* (Zito, 1985), *Iron Eagle* (Furie, 1986), and *Top Gun* (T. Scott, 1986, perfectly encapsulated in the title of the main song from the film "Take My Breath Away!") which equally dominate the decade and have been mapped out in details by others (Ryan and Kellner 1990; Jeffords 1993). However, I would like to use the space here to conclude with a discussion of dance-musical *Flashdance* as a model example of Reaganite filmmaking. Despite the fact that, on first sight, it does not seem to be an obvious choice for a discussion of a political film in the 1980s, as I will argue, *Flashdance* speaks both of industrial transformations in Hollywood, a decade also characterized by transitions in industry practice and structure (Prince, 2000), and provides secure ideological consent through solipsistic pleasures that are created by its textual structures.

### The politics of *Flashdance*

*Flashdance* is the story of Alex (Jennifer Beals) who works as a welder by day and an erotic dancer by night. Her life gets complicated when she falls in love with Nick Hurley, the owner of the steel mill in which Alex works, while hoping to apply to the Pittsburgh Conservatory of Dance and Repertory. Alex aspires to be a ballerina and transcend her current conditions but she lacks the confidence and formal education to do so. After a series of relationship ups and downs, Alex secures an audition at the Conservatory thanks to Nick's connections. Following a successful audition in which both the audition panel and film audience are blown away by her dancing she runs outside in to the arms of Nick who was waiting with a bunch of roses. The film ends on a freeze-frame of Alex and Nick as the triumphant music from the dance studio continues uninterrupted: narrative closure, romance, success, achievement ... 'what a feeling,' indeed!

*Flashdance* is illustrative of the industrial transformation of Hollywood cinema in the 1980s, in part a result of the processes of mergers and acquisitions, deregulation and increased market competition, all of which were exacerbated by the Reagan administration's economic

policies. The ‘big business’ mindedness of ‘Reaganomics’ brought about an overt integration of the film and music industry as well as diversification of the Hollywood majors into a range of ancillary markets. The conspicuous interdependency of the music and film industry in the 1980s becomes key to the success and appeal in a number of films that make heavy use of popular music and songs, including: *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidelman, 1985), *Footloose* (Ross, 1984), *Top Gun*, and *Dirty Dancing*, although the model and benchmark for this kind of cross-promotion was set in the previous decade by *Saturday Night Fever* (see Smith 1998). In *Flashdance*, the synergistic cross-promotion between two industries resulted in two hit singles: the film’s pre-release single that generated ‘buzz’ for the film, Irene Cara’s “Flashdance .... What a Feeling,” and a further single, Michael Sembello’s “Maniac,” released during the film’s theatrical run. The *Flashdance* album, released in conjunction with the film in 1983, sold well over six million units in the US alone (RIAA). Deriving from this industrial cross-promotion of music and film was the development of a new, montage-driven audio-visual aesthetic, also marked by the introduction of MTV in the early 1980s.

Montage sequences in 1980s films are cynically used not so much to capture the film’s theme or manage temporal relations as in earlier films, like *The Graduate*, (Nichols, 1967) but are instead promotional tools, adverts for the soundtrack of the films. For this reason, in films like *Flashdance*, *Xanadu* (Kelly, 1980), and many others, there is an over-driven music track that frequently competes with image and narrative for structural dominance. In other words, the look and the sound of *Flashdance* signifies an integration of marketing and industrial synergy, and the text becomes merely an advertisement for other products and a ‘component’ in a larger capitalist-entertainment-business system of “commercial intertextuality” (Maltby 1998: 26) and “high-concept” (Wyatt 1994). The impact of music video promotion and advertising codes, often called “the MTV aesthetic” (Dickinson 2003), upon the spatial and temporal construction of *Flashdance* cannot be understated. For example, both the first Mawby’s bar sequence (“He’s a Dream”) (see [Figure 25.3](#)) and the gym sequence (“I Love Rock and Roll”) are able to stand alone as self-contained music videos or ‘modules’ (Wyatt 1994: 17) whether in *Flashdance* or on MTV.



Figure 25.3 MTV aesthetics in *Flashdance*.

*Flashdance*'s Reaganomic business practices seem to be matched by the regeneration of the musical in the 1980s as an ideological genre project concomitant with conservative politics. In *Flashdance*, as in *Dirty Dancing*, both music and dance play key roles in securing the ideological consent through solipsism and film form in which a woman's place is determined through patriarchal relations: men lead and women follow. *Flashdance* uses the pleasure of music and dance to position its female protagonist Alex as far away as possible from both her financial independence and 'masculine' job as a welder, at the beginning of the film, into the more traditional trajectory of a career in both ballet and romance, by the end of the film. Like *Cobra*, *Flashdance* poses a problem in the opening scenes of the film (Alex is too independent and masculine) and resolves it by the end (she is in a relationship and ready to start studying ballet). The position that she finally takes up at the end of the film, captured in a freeze-frame and echoed in the lyrics "What a Feeling" secures her a place in a traditional, appropriately feminine, patriarchal system.

*Flashdance* achieves its ideological consent not through overt politic means but rather through the use of narrative closure and genre motivated spectacle. The 'true' ending of *Flashdance* is the point at which we realize Alex has won over the audition panel with her energetic performance to "What a Feeling." The music at this point is established as diegetic, since Alex brings along the record and we see her play it as part of her audition. Her dancing is impressive, combining elements of both ballet and street dance (at one point she leaps in the air and descends in a tumble, with the same spectacular shot repeated three times in succession). The gradual acceleration and momentum of this scene in terms of performance, music and editing and the fact that it does not even have to be spoken that she has won over the conservatory make for a truly uplifting moment that takes the audience to the giddy highs of plenitude. This, however, is not where *Flashdance* actually ends. In a single cut we see Alex run out from the Conservatory and in to the waiting arms of Nick and only then does the film end on a freeze-frame of the embracing couple and the credits begin. It is in that single cut from interior to exterior, from audition to romance, from the loss of an independent life to one of coupledness and financial dependence where *Flashdance* does make its politics known. The power of this shift and the ideological sentiments that it secures are achieved by having the pleasures of the dance audition (the generic element) mapped on to the romance and loss of independence (the ideological element). Everything that we feel about Alex's success as a dancer through her performance and the music is hijacked at the point the music shifts from diegetic to non-diegetic so that our 'feeling' about success, performance, and dance is conflated with romance, surrender, and the loss of independence. The 'trick' of *Flashdance*'s ending is to confuse two endings, to exploit the feelings generated from within the genre (the music and the dancing) so that those pleasurable generic elements are experienced in the service of ideology; that is how the Reaganite cinema secures its ideological consent.

Criticizing *Flashdance*'s gender politics would of course be taking away the fun, just as it would if we started talking about race in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. It is an ideal situation in which the pleasure of triumphant, celebratory, and uplifting moments obscures the ways in which ideology works to maintain a social status quo based on inequality. *Flashdance* provides what Jameson calls "imaginary resolutions" (Jameson 1992: 26) to real-world contradictions (women's rights and agency, gender equality) that, in context, relate to the film's place in the neoconservative gender politics and the backlash against feminism in the Reagan era. The sleight of hand in Reaganite cinema is those canny textual strategies, also emerging from shifts in industrial practice, that transform politics into pleasures, a cinema that has exchanged thinking for feeling and is seemingly here to stay.

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