No discussion of American cinema, postmodern or otherwise, would be complete without an attempt to engage the realm of the family, gender relations, and sexuality, perhaps the most emotionally charged of all spheres of contemporary social life. The vast majority of film plots relate in some fashion to this sphere, even where (as in combat and sci-fi movies) it would seem to be rather peripheral within the larger narrative structure. If modernist filmmaking—rational, goal-oriented, successful hero narratives—has not always romanticized the conventional nuclear family, to one degree or another it has upheld this basic social unit of American society as the standard repository of established values, loving personal relationships, and effective childhood socialization. Hollywood studio heads typically venerated patriarchal family values even where reality is shown as radically departing from the ideal, as in the familiar noir cycle where children were nowhere to be seen and treachery was frequently the norm between husbands and wives. “Family values,” in one guise or another, has long been a cherished myth of American culture passed through the educational, legal, and political systems and, more recently, bastions of popular culture such as TV, advertising, and the omnipresent talk shows. Postmodern cinema, on the other hand, offers a far more jaundiced view of the family as an institution wracked by conflict, deceit, disillusionment, and mayhem in a rapidly changing Hobbesian labyrinth.

The term “postmodern,” first employed in connection with architecture, is now routinely applied to other realms of social and aesthetic life, including film. What we refer to as postmodern films are essentially popular works containing abundant elements of parody and pastiche (from “pasticcio,” which means “any work of art consisting of motifs borrowed from one or more masters or works of art”) and increasingly reveal a fragmented, chaotic, dystopic universe. What might be loosely understood as postmodern cinema first made its appearance during the late 1970s and has since followed multiple trajectories (see Jamison; Ashley; Best and Kellner).

Films labeled postmodern by academic and media critics frequently embrace strong undercurrents of mayhem, satire, irreverence, and irony, revealing at the same time a milieu in which social and personal relationships often enter into a process of breakdown and collapse. Although enormously diverse, such films tend to borrow stylistically and thematically from earlier works and genres as part of the modality of pastiche. Brian De Palma’s The Untouchables (1987), for example, has been labeled postmodern owing to its randomly violent narrative structure, its flawed hero, and its representation of social chaos. At one point, the film introduces a scene at a railroad
station that deliberately evokes the famous “Odessa Steps sequence” of Sergei Eisenstein’s classic *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Unlike Eisenstein’s original version, however, which emphasized citizen solidarity against Czarist atrocities, De Palma’s film focuses on a garden-variety shootout between federal agents and criminals. But an audience knowledgeable about film history will note the quotation and associate De Palma’s work with the great classic. This sort of quotation is an important hallmark of postmodern films, adding a stylistic element that calls attention to itself at the very moment it breaks down the illusion of seeing “reality.” Through such techniques, the audience is reminded that it is viewing an artifice rather than a slice of real life. Postmodern films depend upon such devices as jump cuts, flashbacks, flashforwards, split screens, and other formalist conventions that refocus attention to particular film discourses as artistic constructs, in the process approaching Bertolt Brecht’s theatrical dictum that audiences must never be lulled, even momentarily, into believing that they are viewing real-life representations.

Evolving over a period of roughly three decades, postmodern cinema represents a form of popular culture characteristic of the post-Fordist, globalized phase of capitalist development most visible in the United States. As a crucial dimension of media culture, with its abiding emphasis on new modes of technology, commodification, consumerism, and the society of the spectacle, filmmaking today celebrates increasingly diverse, experimental, and in some cases subversive types of aesthetic representation. It often questions established social hierarchies and discourses while depicting a society in the midst of turmoil, fragmentation, and violence—a social order that gives rise to and sustains popular moods of anxiety, cynicism, and powerlessness that, to one degree or another, enter into and help transform the family structure as we have known it. Postmodern cinema reflects and helps reproduce this milieu through its embrace of disjointed narratives, dystopic images, technological wizardry, and motifs dwelling upon mayhem, ambiguity, death of the classical hero, and breakdown of dominant values and social relations. While such film culture calls into question certain dimensions of the class and power structures, it simultaneously negates prospects for collective identity and subjectivity required for effective social change; its cultural radicalism is never translated into anything resembling political radicalism.

Postmodern film directors include Woody Allen, David Lynch, the Coen brothers, Quentin Tarantino, Tony Scott, Robert Altman, Peter Berg, John Waters, and, in some of his work, Oliver Stone. This nascent tradition presents a range of disturbing, disjointed, often ironic and comedic portraits of contemporary social life. They evoke a Hobbesian world transformed from an earlier industrial age characterized by mass production and the mass worker, as Emanuel Levy observes, to more flexible forms of independent production in the poststudio “New Hollywood” (55). There are few classical protagonists in postmodern cinema, where “heroes” tend to be severely disadvantaged, flawed, thwarted, and ultimately violated.

**Nuclear Family Under Siege**

Few aspects of American culture evoke more intense feelings than family life—or at least those symbols of family life—that have long permeated the national culture. Politicians regularly build their election campaigns around the well-worn theme of family values, although both the meaning and the policy implications of such “values” have always remained remote or opaque. One of the more controversial disputes over the meaning of “family values” emerged during the 1992 presidential election, when Vice President Dan Quayle attacked the *Murphy Brown* television show for its alleged subversion of “family values.” Quayle, of course, defined family values as those favoring two-parent nuclear families, as opposed to single-parent families, “careerist” mothers, gay/lesbian relationships, and other nontraditional forms. This attack occasioned a vigorous media
debate about the meaning of family values and the role of social and political policies—a debate that still resonates throughout the popular culture. For a variety of reasons, the “family values” mythology continues to attract tremendous amounts of media attention in the United States, although scarcely elsewhere (Coontz 4–7). By the nineteenth century, the family had been established as a core economic and social institution, furnishing labor for such activities as clearing land, planting, barn raising, house raising, and, of course, harvests. It was surely the central agency of childhood socialization and became a kind of “haven in a heartless world” (see Lasch) where both men and women could find solace away from the stresses and tribulations of social life. Large extended families prevailed during the first generations of colonization and the push westward, a period when the vast majority of Americans made their living off the land. In his book The Third Wave, Alvin Toffler refers to this largely agrarian period as the “First Wave” of social transformation, which eventually gave way to smaller “Second Wave” nuclear families. These “Second Wave” families, characteristic of a modern order shaped by industrialization and urbanization, have persisted into the contemporary period. Rapid and extensive transformations during the twentieth century placed enormous burdens and strains upon the larger families. Thus, as Toffler observes, the extended family unit typically inhabited by elderly relatives was not sufficiently adaptive or mobile, so it eventually became torn apart by migration to the cities, battered by the inevitable economic storms that accompanied modernity. The old family structures were increasingly streamlined, stripping themselves of unwanted dependents as they grew smaller, more flexible, and more detached from the economic sphere, and as they evolved to meet the complex pressures of industrial society (Toffler). It is these smaller, more adaptive nuclear families that have become synonymous with the concept of family life in present-day society, and it is this definition of family that resonated throughout the popular culture (including filmmaking) in the early decades of the twentieth century.

It might not be too far-fetched to say that the American nuclear family reached its most mature expression just when cinema was beginning to take off as a dynamic cultural form, and indeed depictions of more or less stable family life entered into the romanticized cinematic world erected by the first Hollywood studio chieftains whose mainstream audience was drawn largely from the ranks of the traditional working class. As Neil Gabler writes, “Publicly, the families of the Hollywood Jews were as beautiful, loving, secure, serene, and American as the families in the movies the Jews made. Publicly, the children were successes, the wives brilliantly domestic. Publicly, everything was as genteel as could be. For here, life not only imitated art. Here, among the Hollywood Jews, life became art itself” (245). Of course, mass media in the United States has always celebrated smaller nuclear families over traditional extended structures, a phenomenon that was indeed rarely depicted except as a target of ridicule, as in modern-day TV comedies like The Beverly Hillbillies and The Real McCoys. In general cultural terms, the modern nuclear family is understood as a pillar of social order and economic stability, vital to the reproduction of the status quo where gender relations and personal lives become normalized and rather predictable. The family as seen within this conservative outlook guarantees a smooth, harmonious evolution from one generation to another and from one social setting to another, ensuring a stable connection between intimate personal life and the larger institutional milieu.

The comfortable nuclear family so typical of modernist fare was nowhere more vividly depicted than in Capra’s It’s a Wonderful Life (1946), a film perhaps even better known for its idealized version of family life than for its uplifting messages about Christmas. The protagonist George Bailey takes it upon himself as the local Savings and Loan president to assist working-class people of Bedford Falls in financing their modest homes. Married with three children, Bailey winds up pitted against a wealthy Scrooge-like banker who, lacking any discernible family bonds, is driven by greed to acquire the town’s
whole expanse of real estate. The tear-jerking climax in which the entire community rises to support the Baileys with their hundreds of small donations powerfully reaffirms the values of family in small-town America, while also vilifying the rich businessman in his lust for power and wealth, a familiar Capra-esque theme. Capra’s film set the standard for postwar family melodramas, even as it embellished a cloying sentimentality that was destined to be experienced as maudlin by later audiences.

John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) depicts a “First Wave” extended family, the by-now famous Joads, that, through its protracted, difficult odyssey, winds up transformed into a “Second Wave” nuclear family in reaction to powerful social forces—Dust Bowl migration, agricultural centralization, the rise of labor unions—that formed the centerpiece of John Steinbeck’s earlier book. Galvanized by Ma Joad (Jane Darwell), a strongly maternal figure who struggles valiantly to keep the family together, the protagonists of *Grapes* face a series of harsh obstacles along their journey to California. Once removed from their Oklahoma roots, the family begins to disintegrate, the first casualty being Grandpa Joad, who initially refuses the invitation to move west and then dies shortly after the journey starts, followed shortly thereafter by Grandma Joad. Noah, the oldest child, drops out as the family reaches its destiny. Finally, the Joad family emerges as a smaller, reconstituted family unit that, in its compressed incarnation, bears a striking resemblance to the larger transition of First to Second Wave families, characteristic of American history at this juncture. Thus, from its initial composition of nine people spanning three generations, the Joads develop into a modern nuclear family comprising married parents with two children—presumably a more flexible and adaptive unit.

During the late 1940s, family films began to take on a more pessimistic tone, as older social forms like the extended family and even nuclear families were depicted cinematically as being in the throes of severe conflict, and in some cases, violent change. Both William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and George Marshall’s *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) depict with particular poignancy the bitter disappointment faced by returning World War II vets who survived battle only to confront fierce conflicts waged on the home front. Wyler focuses on shattered marriages and stressful, nontraditional relationships resulting from massive socioeconomic changes produced by the war and its aftermath. In *Best Years*, hardened veterans return to a community where perceptions of gender roles, social class, and race are changing. Similarly, Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) calls dramatic attention to a situation where disempowered, weakened, insecure men are forced to search for new masculine role models in a hostile, seemingly female-dominated world. Joshua Logan’s *Picnic* (1955) likewise dwells upon the sad trajectory of devalued men who find themselves trapped in what appears to be an increasingly feminized world. Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) involves a middle-aged widow (Jane Wyman) who falls in love with a younger man (Rock Hudson) against the fervent advice of her children and peers. Delmer Daves’s *A Summer Place* (1959) embellishes a tempestuous tale of adultery and teenage sexuality widely seen as an attack on traditional family values. Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) chronicles the story of a successful movie actress (Lana Turner) whose life becomes intertwined that of her own daughter (Sandra Dee), her African American maid (Juanita Moore), and her maid’s fair-skinned daughter (Susan Kohner). Such films depict the conventional family as imploding from severe challenges and stresses, among them class and ethnic tensions, misogyny, age conflicts, and, of course, racism (Schatz 221–60). Reflecting upon the thematic trajectory of postwar cinema, one could argue that a vital ingredient of the modernist hero (a lone male pitted against overwhelming odds) has been defense of the nuclear family, often waged against the most difficult external intrusions and obstacles. Thus, the protagonist of George Stevens’s classic western *Shane* (1953), played by Alan Ladd, winds up saving the Starrett family along with other local homesteaders by
outgunning the villains in a tense, action-packed shootout. As Shane prepares to ride into the sunset, little Joey Starrett (Brandon de Wilde) begs him to stay so that he can continue to protect the family, but Shane recognizes that his protector role is no longer needed, and that the family now has strength enough to go on without him. Yet the unstated premise of this film, like the majority of westerns, is that a Shane-like savior will manage to surface whenever needed to defeat omnipresent forces of evil and mayhem.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Americans gathered around their television sets to view modernist serials of family life such as *Leave It to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, *Dobie Gillis*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and *I Love Lucy*, all shows that were steeped in modern nuclear family values and depicted an essentially conservative image of daily life. Through literally hundreds of episodes, the family appeared as the unquestioned bastion from which virtually all social interaction flowed: dating, getting married, having children, sitting together at family meals, meeting with neighbors, sharing household chores, and so forth. As with TV, most popular films of the period embraced this idealized vision of family life, where stability was the norm, all problems were somehow manageable, and men were the breadwinners while women stayed home tending to child care and household duties, assumed to be their natural obligation. The nuclear family was first and foremost the center of everyday life, the pillar of traditional gender relations and social order, a conduit of socialization processes.

One of the great problems with contemporary family values discourse is its conflation of a particular family definition—heterosexual, monogamous, two-parent, single dwelling—with a particular set of values grounded in romantic love, emotional and social solidarity, material support, and, perhaps most importantly, the strong capacity to transmit behavioral patterns. Modes of social life that depart from or conflict with this idealized model have generally been regarded as “dysfunctional,” morally deficient, and the source of major social problems such as crime, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, health problems, educational failures, and so forth. A central ideological construct within mainstream culture, the family is the institution that the vast majority of Americans have come to equate with success, happiness, and community, their daily experiences to the contrary notwithstanding. Given this mythology, it is hardly surprising to find that most people know relatively little about the myriad transformations of American family life during the second part of the twentieth century. The idealized notion that the family lives on as the moral, psychological, social, and of course material center of personal life remains probably as strong today as ever, despite vast challenges and changes that are visible for any interested observer to see.

In the historical reality of our times, the “dysfunctional” family has become more the norm than the aberration. But before we discuss the conditions underlying the shift from “functional” to dysfunctional structures, let us examine the concept of “dysfunctional” itself. The word dysfunction means “a nonadaptive trait or condition, especially one failing to serve a useful or adjustive purpose in society,” with “nonadaptive” signifying a failure to respond creatively to rapidly changing social conditions or external threats, or to transform in the face of changing social conditions. No doubt most families shown in recent films could be labeled dysfunctional, though it might be argued that they have adapted to their surroundings rather effectively. The notion that the family lives on today as some kind of insulated “haven” detached from the Hobbesian milieu that shapes it cannot be sustained in the face of actual historical evidence. Boundaries separating the nuclear family from the larger pattern of social relations have almost totally vanished, rendering the concept “dysfunctional” largely meaningless.

The small family unit has collapsed under the strain of unprecedented burdens, many of them deriving from those very elevated promises and hopes generated by the family values myth itself. As Jodi O’Brien puts it, “What doesn’t seem to vary is the perception that true happiness is based
on being a part of an ideal couple who are building an ideal family. Most people feel that they are failures if they have not achieved this ideal. Yet these are extensive, potentially conflicting demands to make on two people: produce children, provide all their economic needs, teach them everything they need to know to eventually make it on their own, and do all this while being best friends, constant companions, unconditionally supportive and forever attracted to each other. That’s a lot to pack into a single equation” (168). Here the myth of family values inevitably conflicts with the harsh reality of the violent, competitive, individualistic, materialistic world—a world, moreover, where vital social services (health care, education, child care, and so forth) are for the majority of people sadly inadequate. It is a world that saw the older idealized nuclear family subjected to intense economic pressures forcing women to enter the workplace so that their incomes, combined with those of their husbands, would be sufficient to remain in the relative comforts enjoyed by the professional middle class. The disintegration of family life in the United States, along with its many psychological horrors, can be attributed to pressures associated with this conflict between hyperinflated expectations and the daily material and psychological pressures of work, consumption, and survival.

One arena in which the departure of actual everyday life from the lore of family values seems most dramatic is that of childhood socialization. As Judith Rich Harris argues, the commonly held assumption that virtually all of learned behavior is transmitted from parents to children no longer holds up to empirical scrutiny; children today are increasingly exposed to and transformed by deep influences that come from a multitude of structures and processes in the larger society: schools, the mass media, popular culture, and, what Harris most emphasizes, peer groups. The rarely investigated power of parents to mold children in accordance with a specific set of norms and values turns out to be yet another myth. Research indicates that in the contemporary, industrialized, urbanized setting, most children look to create their own rules and discourses, often motivated by separation from or hostility toward elders and frequently inspired by images and messages available from a huge cultural expanse beyond the family. Children are more a product of the general society, as typically mediated through peers, than of a neatly constructed, insular family unit where parents have the power (not to mention the time and energy) to turn their children into happy and successful adults—or into terrible monsters (Harris 327). This loss of socialization functions as one of the most important measures of family demise today, a trend essentially ignored within mainstream cultural, political, and academic life but significantly embellished within postmodern cinema and reflected in such films as Trading Places (1983), The Truman Show (1998), Avalon (1990), American Beauty (1999), and S1m0ne (2002).

The idealized nuclear family has been, in great measure, a construct of mainstream television programming that first brought sit-com culture to the American public in the 1950s. The model family emerging from these storybook narratives was illusory even for the times, but its impact on significant discourses in public life over time is impossible to exaggerate. What we see in such television programs as Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, and The Brady Bunch is a patriarchal father with a stable professional job, a cheerful mother who tends to household chores, and well-groomed (if not always well-behaved) children—all residing in a neatly landscaped suburban home. Plot lines revolve around trivial conflicts of daily life that are quickly (and humorously) handled through the wise intervention of parents and/or friends; severe forms of turbulence and dysfunction are nowhere to be seen, except in the case of supposedly “deviant” working-class families depicted in All in the Family, Married with Children, and Roseanne (presumably more “realistic” portraits of family life). TV visions of domestic bliss are at least indirectly connected to themes of prosperity, happiness, success, and, where relevant, upward mobility. Such timeworn glorification of the American family has been fostered through the medium of advertisement,
driven by corporate pursuit of markets and profits directed toward the always expanding sphere of family consumption (see Taylor). Here, nuclear family life, suburban households, white middle-class lifestyles, and consumerism merge to form a labyrinth of the American Dream—the moral, emotional, and social center of a mythological universe, the hegemonic power of which has been amazingly durable. As O’Brien notes, the TV sitcoms (and all of the advertising that supports them) imply a backdrop of economic stability and material prosperity. Thus: “The plots in these shows revolve around family squabbles, miscommunications, and conflicts of interest that are inevitably resolved through caring dialogue intended to reveal the strong moral fiber underlying the surface conflict. The implicit message is that family solidarity somehow sustains or is unproblematically enmeshed in economic stability” (170). This assumption, like the myth of family values itself, has come to bear less and less relationship to social reality.

The Transformed American Family

Since the 1960s, this familiar romanticized image of the American nuclear family has come under sustained challenge, to the point where it may now be possible to speak of a postmodern shift in which the old model has given way to fundamentally new social realities. Toffler pointed toward the onset of a “Third Wave” shaped by unprecedented diversity and fragmentation of social life in general, reflecting changes even more profound than those accompanying the earlier industrial revolution (see Chapter 4). With the emergence of post-Fordist society defined by heightened geographical mobility, social dispersion, and deep cultural transformations, the nuclear family appears as simply one of several alternative family structures that include single households, group living arrangements, gay/lesbian families, single-parent families, and couples without children. The Ozzie and Harriet pattern stands today as rather exceptional, both in its composition and in its romanticized stability. Where the contemporary American family is concerned, the prevailing experience is more often that of fragmentation, alienation, and conflict, a trend unfolding over several decades even as the popular culture often ignored or deflected it. In the United States, as in other advanced industrial societies, divorce rates have skyrocketed (the US rate is now nearly sixty percent), while the average length of marriages has plummeted to just twenty-six months. Children are influenced more by mass media and peer groups than by parents. Family bonds have eroded in the face of far-reaching changes in the workforce, suburbanization, the pervasive role of media and popular culture, and cultural trends growing out of the 1960s, including the sexual (and rock music) revolution, feminism, and the broader consequences of social and geographical mobility. While the Third Wave family structure described by Toffler and others was expected to be emancipatory, the historical reality has turned into something much harsher; the Hobbesian chaos that seems increasingly endemic to civil society as a whole has now infiltrated the most intimate arenas of daily life, including the nuclear family itself. This has become one of the defining characteristics of postmodern cinema as it builds upon the more established legacy of film noir. Conventional marital and familial arrangements have become perhaps the most demeaned social arena in both film noir and postmodern cinema, where sexuality is depicted less as a pleasurable, loving activity than as something alienating, routinized, even tormented. Where the family does not vanish altogether within such cinematic narratives, it is frequently depicted as a sphere of deceit, conflict, disorder, and violence—befitting the harsh urban existence of film noir. This is no doubt a great remove from the modernist worldview initially articulated by Hegel, who understood the family as a divinely ordained union established upon “love, trust, and common sharing” and built upon the sacred purpose of conceiving and nurturing children. Postmodern cinema tends to view the family as a social entity totally bereft of love and romance, rife with
jealousy, betrayal, and violence, and grounded in little more than crude, scheming instrumentalism. Intense personal conflicts involving duplicity, treachery, and murder have long been the staple of film narratives, going back to early crime thrillers and dramas, as well as such classics as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Written on the Wind* (1957), *The Graduate* (1967), and *The Last Picture Show* (1971). Indeed adultery, deceit, and triangular affairs can be found in such literature as the Bible (and of course enters into a good deal of ancient mythology); we know that Eve tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden (first chapter of Genesis) and that Delila betrayed Sampson. Classic *noir* movies dwelled upon duplicitous relationships that, more often than not, led to mayhem and murder. Much the same could be said of most *neo-noir* films released during the 1970s and later. What sets postmodern cinema apart from its antecedents, however, is the relentlessly harsh cynicism (and fatalism) it expresses regarding what has been considered—at least on the surface—the most sacred institution of American society. The extent to which Hollywood filmmaking has presented such an anguished, tormented, and ultimately hopeless image of the contemporary family reflects the way in which family and personal relationships have so drastically eroded over the past three decades. Films like Woody Allen’s *Interiors* (1978), Robert Benton’s *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), Paul Mazursky’s *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), Lewis John Carlino’s *The Great Santini* (1980), and Graeme Clifford’s *Frances* (1982) all, in quite different ways, exposed the deep and often paralyzing contradictions of family life in the modern, urbanized setting. Perhaps more to the point, as Michael Medved argues, the observer is hard put to find *any* positive representations of the family in even conventional movies made after the 1960s (95–157). However bleak this picture, it merely served to lay the groundwork for increasingly dark images of family life constructed by major filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s.

In *The Great Santini*, Robert Duvall plays Lt. Colonel Bull Meacham, a skilled Marine fighter pilot obsessed with his macho image and with the idea of going to war at a time (1962) when there is no war around to fight. Meacham’s modus operandi is to confront the world head-on, neither giving nor taking quarter, starting with his treatment of young pilots assigned to him and carrying into his apparently picture-perfect family over which he strives to create a dictatorship. Family members set out to mediate this dictatorial rule in small ways, but with only minimal results. Meacham’s oldest son Ben (Michael O’Keefe) experiences the greatest difficulties as he struggles to achieve manhood under the commandeering eye of “The Great Santini,” as his father is nicknamed. Ben is initially unable to confront his father, who repeatedly insults and humiliates him over the most trivial failings. For example, when Ben plays for his high school basketball team against a heated rival, his father demands that he “deck” an opposing player—an action that breaks the player’s arm and gets Ben thrown off the team for the rest of the season. Over time, as family members rebel one after the other, Meacham’s goal of converting his family into a hierarchical, disciplined military unit fails; the whole structure falls apart, generating far more chaos than stability and reason. Meacham exudes an obsessive lifestyle and authoritarian tendency that in the end do not prevail; at the same time, he does partially redeem himself by selecting his own death as he steers his crippled plane away from a populated area rather than saving himself by bailing out over the town. One possible conclusion here is that the breakup of such families (and there are many others) signals the emergence of new, freer but more dispersed social forms that have become the hallmark of the postmodern era.

One of Woody Allen’s few “serious” films, *Interiors*, draws upon the talents of Diane Keaton, Kristin Griffith, Mary Beth Hurt, E. G. Marshall, Geraldine Page, Maureen Stapleton, and Sam Waterston, who comprise an extended family of talented, upper-middle-class persons facing the difficult breakup of parents, with its devastating emotional impact on the three daughters and their
husbands. We witness an entire social unit reeling from the shock of a disintegrating relationship, which seems to hit the mother Eve (Page) hardest. Having designed the interiors of their fashionable apartment tastefully if also very precisely, earning her the epithet “Ice Queen,” Eve is so domineering that her husband Arthur (Marshall) decides he has no recourse but to leave. As he announces his idea of a “trial separation” at the start of the film, the others are immediately thrown into a state of anguish and disorientation—but this scarcely determs him from remarrying a woman just the opposite of Eve, someone far more lively and socially outgoing. Harborers a desire to reconcile with Arthur, Eve becomes increasingly depressed and eventually winds up committing suicide. In the wake of such trauma, the family is able to pull together enough to furnish its members with crucial elements of stability and normalcy, suggesting that at least some harmonious family life can be attained even in the midst of emotional conflict and social breakdown. While Interiors departs slightly from Allen’s typically jaundiced view of relationships, the mood it conveys is nothing short of relentless depression. The film is so depressing that Allen himself has expressed the desire to remake it with a new director of photography replacing Gordon Willis. Allen writes that “Willis contributed to a feeling of coolness about it, which I could improve on. It would be more fun for the audience” (117).

In Husbands and Wives (1992), Allen achieved his ideal of greater fluidity thanks to Carlo Di Palma’s constantly moving hand-held camera, while covering thematic ground very similar to Interiors (the breakup of a marriage and its aftermath) and building upon such previous works as Annie Hall (1977), Manhattan (1979), and Hannah and Her Sisters (1986). In Husbands and Wives, the saga begins when Jack and Sally (Sydney Pollack and Judy Davis) announce to Gabe and Judy Roth (Allen and Mia Farrow) that they are separating. The announcement strikes a nerve in Judy, who explodes in anger and outrage presumably because she harbors suppressed desires for Michael (Liam Neeson), a young Irishman working in her office. While Gabe takes up with a twenty-something aerobics instructor obsessed with astrology and health foods (predilections long satirized by Allen), Judy introduces Sally to her friend Michael, concealing her strong feelings for him. Michael falls madly in love with Sally, though she seems unready for a new relationship. Gabe, a college English professor, finds himself attracted to Rain (Juliette Lewis), a beautiful and talented young student who worships him and seems to have a propensity for older men. Allen portrays the turbulence of these relationships with great directness, raising the quintessential question: “What happened after the honeymoon was over? Does desire really grow with the years, or did familiarity cause partners to long for other lovers?” While the audience mulls over these issues, he follows up with another even more perplexing question: “Is the notion of ever-deepening romance a myth we had grown up with, along with simultaneous orgasms?” After experimenting with new lovers, Jack and Sally rediscover their love for each other and reunite, while Gabe and Judy continue to move in separate directions. We know now that this film has more than just a peripheral autobiographical dimension: just as the film appeared, Allen’s partner Mia Farrow exposed his sexual relationship with her adopted Korean daughter Soon-Yi, who turns out to be about the same age as the Rain character in Husbands and Wives. Though deeply attracted to Rain, Gabe concludes that she is much too young and decides to part with her, a solution quite at odds with Allen’s own public persona. Here we have yet another occasion where art imitates life, but not completely.

**Postmodern Ethos and Family Chaos**

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, cinematic depictions of family life turned increasingly mordant and violent, filled with characters who are cold, selfish, hateful, and murderous (children...
as well as spouses and parents); gender relations embody little that is positive or redeeming, much less loving and romantic. In Medved’s view, dystopic images of the family must be understood as part of a broader ideological onslaught: “It’s the wildly disproportionate emphasis on the darkest, most downbeat aspects of marriage that betrays Hollywood’s anti-family agenda” (137). Medved refers to such films as *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), *Mortal Thoughts* (1991), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1990), *War of the Roses* (1989), and Scorsese’s remake of *Cape Fear* (1991)—all produced after the late 1980s—as strong indictments of monogamy, romance, marriage, and the nuclear family. One of the most frightening depictions is *Fatal Attraction* (directed by Adrian Lyne 1987), which by the late 1990s had become a sort of cult classic, perhaps the most written-about film in recent history.

Lyne’s film revolves around the infamous extramarital affair between Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas), a highly charged business executive, and Alex Forrest (Glenn Close), an editor for a publishing house. The two meet at an office Christmas party and become immediately attracted to each other; with Dan’s wife out of town, he appears quite vulnerable to Alex’s seductive charms. After initial physical contact, their encounter explodes in a bout of lovemaking at Alex’s apartment. The sex takes place with heated passion as well as some humorous ineptness, reflecting Lyne’s desire to belittle a relationship destined to be nothing more than a brief fling. Indeed Dan, still committed to his wife (Anne Archer), considers this to be a casual encounter. For Alex, however, a romantic interlude with Dan means that she has found a true mate; she quickly becomes cloying and possessive. After Dan returns home, she phones him and demands, “What happened? I woke up and you weren’t there. I hate that!” Psychological turbulence for both of them is the inevitable result, giving rise to all manifestations of scheming, counterscheming, and mayhem within a narrative that by now has become familiar to most Americans. Feeling rejected and humiliated, Alex threatens to tell Dan’s wife about the encounter to place the marriage in jeopardy. She threatens, “I’m not gonna be ignored, Dan!” In the end, frustrated and desperate, Alex tries to murder Dan’s wife but, after a harrowing struggle, it is Alex who ends up killed by her intended victim. Not only does Alex’s menacing behavior violate the unspoken rules of extramarital affairs (above all, discretion), but she is forced to pay the ultimate price (her life) for brief moments of sexual indiscretion. Despite the fact that Dan’s family remains together after Alex is killed, *Fatal Attraction* evokes deep-seated fears of intimacy—not to mention severe risks that accompany sexual desire. Of course, risks have always been present, yet rarely have they been portrayed with the kind of compelling and frightening power of fatal consequences. The film demonstrates, moreover, just how easily familial arrangements can be challenged, subverted, and subjected to nightmarish outcomes. Interestingly, this film was released in two versions: the one discussed above and another variant in which Alex commits suicide with Dan’s knife, thereby assuring that he will be convicted of her murder. This version was released to audiences in Japan and France, and later on video in the United States (1992), embracing an even more mordant, dystopic view of family life than Lyne’s first version.

Martin Scorsese’s 1991 remake of *Cape Fear* evoked a similar thesis, with equal force, in a film with a far more postmodern veneer than the original. The basic motif of the earlier narrative has been aptly described as “Leave It to Beaver Goes to Hell” (Meyer 67), but the remake departs significantly from the original even as the plot line changes little. The lawyer in Scorsese’s adaptation (Nick Nolte) contrasts with Peck’s earlier representation insofar as he runs a sleazy, highly unethical legal practice that even his wife (Jessica Lange) attacks for its excessive reliance on “dirty tricks.” (Peck’s lawyerly status in the original *Cape Fear*, on the other hand, was nothing if not blandly respectable.) Further, appropriate to the postmodern ethos, Scorsese’s Bowden is shown cheating on his wife and is even caught at it, provoking a series of violent rows, whereas Thompson’s Bowden lived a very traditional
Midwestern existence not too far removed from 1950s TV sit-coms. More tellingly, the free-spirited young woman involved with Bowden is later raped by Cady (Robert DeNiro) in the kind of brutal scene that would never have found its way into the original script. Scorsese’s Bowden also withheld crucial evidence at Cady’s trial, as opposed to the earlier Bowden who conducted himself with ethical propriety—shifting the emphasis from a noble defense attorney (Peck) to a crooked lawyer whose social standing and professional respect were sharply called into question. In the end, Scorsese’s remake of Cape Fear, exhibited almost thirty years after the original, represents a darker, more relentlessly pessimistic vision of both the family and its menacing environs.

Curtis Hanson’s The Hand that Rocks the Cradle (1992) chronicles a ruthless assault against contemporary family life. A young doctor’s widow named Peyton Flanders (Rebecca De Mornay) seeks revenge against the Bartel family for the parents’ alleged role in her husband’s suicide. The saga commences when Claire Bartel (Annabella Sciorra) undergoes a routine physical exam by Peyton’s gynecologist husband and is fondled, prompting her to file sexual abuse charges with the support of her husband Michael. Devastated by the charges, Dr. Flanders commits suicide, whereupon Peyton goes into a bout of hysteria and loses the baby she was carrying. She blames the Bartels for her husband’s death and decides to seek revenge by getting hired as a nanny for the Bartels’ infant child. Unaware of Peyton’s sinister motives, the Bartels welcome her to the household—but the welcome is soon worn thin as the family is put in a state of siege by a series of calamities resulting from the diabolical schemes of the new nanny. Emotional discord quickly takes over the previously tranquil Bartel home, in much the same way it consumed the Bowden family in Cape Fear. Hanson captures the extreme vulnerability of the family to powerful incursions coming from both within and outside the household. Here the tension is ultimately resolved only through Peyton’s death, a fate that befalls her only after her plots against child and husband go awry. Although the Bartel family eventually manages to survive these catastrophes, it is forced into a state of siege requiring it to adopt aggressive, manipulative, and street-smart modes of coping with a harsh social reality. This film, much like Fatal Attraction (which probably served as its inspiration), resurrects the bleak portrait of nuclear family life that permeated classical noir cinema: threats to personal and social stability can appear at any time, perhaps without reason or logic. The Hand that Rocks the Cradle suggests that everyday American life has become so venal and corrupt that even the “safe haven” of the family provides no secure place to hide; Hobbesian social relations permeate even the most intimate of realms. The film graphically warns that we are unwise to trust our doctors, our nannies, our babysitters, and indeed members of our own family; we have come to recognize that evil lurks everywhere—an abiding theme, for example, in Hitchcock’s films.

An even bleaker view of personal life resonates throughout Nicholas Kazan’s Dream Lover (1994), which pairs wealthy, divorced architect Ray (James Spader) with the beautiful yet enigmatic Lena (Madchen Amick). Lena arranges to meet Ray, initiates a torrid romance, and Ray impulsively decides to marry Lena. However, Ray soon becomes suspicious of Lena, whom he believes is concealing important aspects of her life and her background, an awareness partly inspired through recurring dreams that take place at a carnival where clowns mock his capricious and hasty choice of a partner. He learns that Lena has been spending one day each week at a local hotel and is immediately convinced she is having an affair. As suspicions pile up, Ray investigates Lena’s life history (which reveals much deceit) and finally questions her about what she has been doing at the hotel. Overcome by a rush of honesty, Lena speaks glowingly of her sexual encounters, provoking such intense anger in him that he attacks her—a moment she brilliantly seizes upon to commit her husband to a mental asylum. In the asylum, with plenty of time to reflect, Ray comes to believe that his wife has been scheming from the outset to have him...
institutionalized so that she could get his money. The whole concept of “dream lover” upon which the relationship had been built turns out to be completely fraudulent and menacing, with Lena surfacing as the quintessential *femme noir*. Ray, for his part, becomes yet another victim of the marriage trap, an arrangement intrinsically duplicitous, corrupt, and violent. He finally achieves the ultimate revenge when he lures his wife to the asylum with the intent of strangling her to death, knowing that as a certified lunatic he cannot be held legally accountable for his deed. He winds up transformed from naïve, helpless victim into a scheming, ruthless murderer, all in defense of his dignity and property. In postmodern fashion, *Dream Lover* illustrates that redemptive violence is the most efficacious response for human beings faced with a universe of thieves, con artists, character assassins, and murderers, replicating the familiar themes of *Fatal Attraction* and others such as *The Grifters* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *A Perfect Murder* (1998).

**Dysfunctions Old and New**

The families we have explored above generally are composed of middle-class Anglos, which provides us with only a partial view of the multicultural terrain that is contemporary American society. More recent films that have been labeled “postmodern” reflect recent social and demographic changes that have resulted in a vastly different family structure, one closely resembling Toffler’s Third Wave stage. It is no wonder, then, that recent filmmakers have begun to explore a few of the nuances and implications of these new family structures. In its own halting and limited fashion, Hollywood cinema has begun to engage a more culturally diverse family structure—a phenomenon that might be associated loosely with the postmodern turn.

Wayne Wang’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) traces a Chinese family’s journey from China in the 1940s to California in the 1990s. It is a long and difficult odyssey during which the family experiences any number of hardships, deprivations, adultery, abduction, and even murder. Along the way, one Chinese mother is even forced to abandon her infant children during the brutal Japanese invasion. The story begins when June (Ming-Na Wen), a young Californian, receives a letter from her long-lost cousins, abandoned infants who remained in China. June decides to visit China in order to be reunited with this hitherto unknown (to her) branch of the family. Using Amy Tan’s narrative as a foundation, Wang interweaves poignant stories of family life in China during the 1940s, most of it narrated through flashbacks involving her aunts. This film can be broadly understood as part of a category of family “weepies” that evoke powerful emotional responses to ongoing personal dramas. The older generations depicted in this film represent Toffler’s First Wave of extended families, while the younger members have entered into the realm of Third Wave families where divorce and remarriage have thoroughly eroded the Second Wave of nuclear family structures. Comparable films established along the extended versus postmodern family opposition include Peter Wang’s *A Great Wall* (1986), which chronicles a Chinese American family’s journey to China in search of long-lost relatives, and Steven Okazaki’s *Living on Tokyo Time* (1987), which replays with some variations essentially the same drama from a Japanese point of view.

Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala* (1992) casts Sarita Chaudhury as Mina, a young East-Indian/ Kenyan/American woman who irrevocably crosses racial barriers by falling in love with a black man, Demetrius (played by Denzel Washington). Mina’s family is characterized as a First Wave extended clan that is clearly out of step with the various African American families shown in the film. This is not a simple East/West story, though, insofar as both characters have deep African roots. Despite pressures from both families to call off a relationship that is both intercultural and interracial, the two young people elope to aspirations for carving out a life for themselves, much like millions of people in contemporary American society who have elected
to marry outside their particular ethnic groups—one manifestation of the Third Wave postmodern family conceptualized by Toffler.

Prominent African American directors of recent years depict postmodern families in equally poignant if less sentimental tones. In many of these films, the family is represented as a form subjected to precisely those social and cultural pressures at work in society as a whole. Thus Spike Lee’s *Mo’ Better Blues* (1990) derives its psychological tension from the sexual and aesthetic drives of its hero, Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington), a jazz trumpeter who cannot decide between the love of two beautiful women and thereby winds up losing both of them. *Mo’ Better Blues* involves Gilliam’s attempts to save Giant (Lee), his gambling-addicted manager and best friend, from a beating by gangsters that results in his own severe injuries requiring several months of recovery. Gilliam realizes he has lost his trumpet-playing skills and, in desperation, turns to one of the ex-girlfriends (Joie Lee) for help. He then returns to the more conventional sexual and familial world by marrying Lee and raising a child, but not before he experiences terrible depression, alienation, and defeat. In this case, filmmaker Lee retreats into the more traditional nuclear family, which seems to be his way of resolving the film’s initial dalliance with postmodern departures.

John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) goes even further in its harsh portrayal of contemporary African American family life—surely among the best “family” films of the 1990s—receiving Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Director. Singleton chose South Central Los Angeles, an area of working- and lower-middle-class African American families living in small cottages, as his setting. His characters include Furious (Lawrence Fishburne) and Brenda Styles (Nia Long), divorced parents of Tre (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), a teenager growing up in the custody of both. Tre’s best friends in the “hood” are Ricky (Morris Chestnut) and Doughboy (Ice Cube), two half-brothers living with their divorced mother. Other residents in the neighborhood include crack addicts and “gangsters,” along with street toughs engaging in constant urban guerrilla warfare. The boys and their neighborhood friends routinely witness rotting corpses, drug addiction, burglaries, and murder. Their neighborhood is a veritable battlefield, permeated by perpetual background noise of police choppers, airplanes, sirens, and machine gun fire. Their single-parent families do everything in their power to raise their children “normally” amidst constant threats of violence and mayhem. All of the characters, even the relatively strong Furious Styles, find themselves sucked ever deeper into a vortex of chaos and violence from which there seems little hope of escape. In the final scene, Ricky and Doughboy are murdered by gangsters, while Tre barely escapes the same fate. Singleton reveals little optimism toward breaking the unending cycle of murder and revenge that claimed Ricky and Doughboy and that profoundly shapes all other characters in the film. Witness Doughboy’s final comment (before his own assassination): “Turned on the TV this morning. I heard this shit on the box about being in a violent world. Showed all these foreign places—where foreigners live and all. Started thinkin’ they either don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the ‘hood. They had all this foreign shit, and they didn’t have shit on my brother.” Only Tre and his girlfriend Brandi manage to escape the downward cycle of violence and despair when they finally leave the ‘hood for college.

The fact that Tre survives such a harsh, menacing environment is Singleton’s lone ray of hope in the midst of cultural chaos. Tre, after all, is as much a product of a single-parent home as Doughboy; only the exceptional parenting skills of his father, assisted by his absent mother, allow Tre to escape the same destiny. *Boyz N the Hood* illustrates that single-parent homes are not inevitably dysfunctional for children. Coontz, in her study of changing family trends in the United States, observes that single parenthood, like that depicted in Singleton’s film, is not always the horrific nightmare that mainstream politicians seem to imagine. According to Coontz, children raised in single-parent households can actually be
blessed with distinct advantages over children raised in two-parent nuclear families. Adolescents encounter fewer pressures to conform to traditional gender roles, mainly because adult models for both roles are absent. The result is more likely to be greater maturity, autonomy, and self-confidence. Problems resulting from single parenthood, Coontz suggests, tend to be greatest among groups whose cultural values most emphasize two-parent families and parental authority and least among those who have a history of tolerance for single parents. African Americans, largely owing to socioeconomic pressures associated with the prevailing single-parent household, tend to be more culturally receptive to single-parent families, whereas Hispanics, for example, tend to resist alternatives to the conventional family structure. Perspectives among Caucasians most frequently fall somewhere between these two extremes (164).

The Family Impasse Deepens

Sam Mendes’s Oscar-winning film American Beauty (1999) depicts one of the most dysfunctional families in the history of American cinema. Kevin Spacey plays Lester Burnham, an advertising executive who hates his job and who is married to Caroline (Annette Bening), a realtor on the verge of an affair with Buddy (Peter Gallagher), the self-styled “king of real estate.” Thora Birch plays Jane, the couple’s teenage daughter. The middle-aged Lester becomes infatuated with his daughter’s high school friend Angela (Mena Suvari), precipitating a severe midlife crisis. Lester quits his job, starts jogging and pumping iron, and smokes marijuana with teenage neighbor Ricky who has a crush on his daughter. In fast motion, the Burnham family begins to unravel as Lester and Caroline declare war on each other just after Lester decides to take a job at a local hamburger stand. All three family members despise each other at one time or another throughout the film. Then Ricky’s homophobic but latently gay father, who imagines his son Ricky and Lester in an affair, murders Lester. Caroline becomes convinced that she was in love with Lester all along and feels guilty for not making amends. By film’s end, the Burnhams regain a sense of normalcy, accomplished only after Caroline’s affair with Buddy, Lester’s obsessive infatuation with a teenager, and Lester’s tragic murder. The notion of “beauty” contained in the film’s title refers to the love that family members share for each other, but the enormous pressures of a conflicted, individualistic, materialistic world have effectively driven that love out of their consciousness.

Don Roos’s sex comedy The Opposite of Sex (1998) presents another image of American family life that could not be further removed from Capra’s romantic vision It’s a Wonderful Life, made more than fifty years earlier. The film’s star (and narrator) Christina Ricci plays Deedee Truitt, a precocious, scheming, sexually active sixteen-year-old from a typical “dysfunctional” home. The Truitt family includes Deedee’s shrewish, self-centered mother, a gay half-brother, and the latest of her several stepfathers. Deedee nonchalantly informs the audience that the Truitts “started out as a typical American family, and you know how that ends up—they typically went to shit pretty quick.” Her stepfather dies early in the film, and Deedee decides to run away from her suffocating Louisiana home to live with stepbrother Bill (Martin Donovan), a gay high school teacher living in a small Indiana town. Arriving on Bill’s doorstep, she meets Matt (Ivan Sergei), Bill’s youthful live-in lover; she proceeds to seduce Matt because she finds gays “clean” and “attractive.” Deedee soon announces that she is pregnant, presumably the result of her liaison with Matt. Pleased that she is going to have his baby, Matt opts to escape with Deedee and set up housekeeping in Los Angeles. Devastated by this turn of events, Bill does everything he can to track down the couple in hopes of being reunited with Matt. Meanwhile, Bill’s friend and fellow English teacher Lucia (Lisa Kudrow) decides to make a play for the now-available Bill. The two track Deedee and Matt to Los Angeles with the help of their sheriff friend Carl (Lyle Lovett), who is
infatuated with Lucia. This Byzantine plot becomes even more intricate with the appearance of Jason (Johnny Galecky), Deedee’s teenage lover, who, we learn, is the real father of the baby she is carrying and whom she accidentally shoots and kills during a heated argument. She and Matt flee to Canada, where they encounter first Bill and Lucia, who have been trailing them, and then Carl, who has been following Lucia. Eventually, in this postmodern family plot, Deedee gives birth to a boy, Matt links up with a young man, Bill becomes involved with Deedee’s male probation officer, Deedee leaves Bill and his partner with the baby, Lucia becomes pregnant by Carl, and Lucia and Carl marry and have the child. Everyone in the melodrama finds happiness except Deedee who, by the end of the film, decides yet again to flee. In the final scene, she cynically tells the audience: “sex always ends up in kids or disease or, like, you know, relationships. That’s just what I don’t want—I want the opposite of all that, because it’s not worth it.”

_The Opposite of Sex_ epitomizes postmodern sensibilities toward family life and personal relationships, celebrating a wide variety of phenomena never associated with earlier Hollywood versions of the harmonious nuclear family: abject personal irresponsibility, flight from familial obligations, divorce, remarriage, homosexuality, bisexuality, unwed pregnancies, infidelity, and simple mayhem. In place of the established pattern of “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back,” this film refashions that narrative structure into “girl meets boy who is bisexual, loses boy to another boy, has child out of wedlock, leaves it with her gay half-brother, and then abandons them all.” Despite such a radical departure from established patterns and the collapse of anything resembling familial stability, this film manages to end on a strikingly positive note, as Deedee grudgingly admits she has matured while the other characters seem to have achieved loving relationships in the most difficult circumstances. Here, _The Opposite of Sex_ echoes sentiments contained in _American Beauty_ with its tongue-in-cheek cynicism about family life—though conceding the possibility of a reconstituted (i.e., postmodern) family in some form. Still, this and other pictures of its genre portray a vision of families and relationships rife with sexual tensions and infidelities, fear of commitment, moral breakdown, and selfish materialism. Problems such as teenage sexuality, homosexuality, AIDS, drug use, personal duplicity, emotional callousness, and theft of property form the backdrop against which the multitude of individual characters enter into often irrevocably difficult relationships.

Following this trend, Neil LaBute’s _Your Friends and Neighbors_ (1998) explores the intricate personal lives of two couples and two individuals trapped in a series of love triangles. Building upon terrain he first established with his 1997 film debut _In the Company of Men_, LaBute focuses his narrative mainly around the psychological dynamics of three male characters. He whimsically gives all of his characters rhyming names: Mary, Barry, Cheri, Terri, Cary, and Jerry (played by Amy Brenneman, Aaron Eckhart, Nastassja Kinski, Catherine Keener, Jason Patric, and Ben Stiller, respectively). The crosscutting personal interactions charted in _Your Friends and Neighbors_ begin to unravel after Cary (Patric), who lives with Cheri (Kinski), seduces Mary (Brenneman), who is married to Cary’s best friend (Eckhart). Cheri and Barry soon discover the infidelity, which spurs Cheri toward a covert homosexual relationship with Terri (Keener); other relationships soon begin to disintegrate while new ones appear. Thus, Mary pairs with Jerry (Stiller) and Cheri with Terri. This film can be interpreted as a powerful statement about the increasing fragility of contemporary gender relations and sexuality which, it would appear, remain trapped within the larger world of fragmentation and alienation endemic to post-Fordist capitalist society. Despite the painful fragility and vulnerability of relationships in this film, however, new relationships seem to begin quickly and easily, thereby leaving the impression that contemporary relationships, though ephemeral, are at the same time easily replaceable.

Steven Soderbergh’s _Erin Brockovich_ (2000) provides yet another view of the postmodern
condition, one grounded in the social struggles against corporate power. This film contains a nuanced mixture of modern and postmodern set against the Promethean legal battles waged by Brockovich (Julia Roberts) and her attorney boss Ed Masry (Albert Finney) on behalf of hundreds of victims of toxic chemicals that California utility giant PG&E allowed to seep into the groundwater over several decades. In the vein of Mike Nichols’s *Norma Rae* (1979), Brockovich, a twice-divorced mother of three young children, represents the divorced-woman-with-children committed to social justice side of the family trajectory. Soderbergh’s film chronicles Brockovich’s difficult but inspiring emergence from abject poverty to millionaire legal researcher—a true account that comes across as stranger than fiction. While she connects romantically with an unemployed biker (Aaron Eckhart), she builds her most durable relationships with the working-class residents of the desert town of Hinckley. To them, she has become a heroine owing to her tireless, selfless fight to expose the horrors that PG&E has visited upon an entire community of residents. As in *Norma Rae*, personal relationships in *Brockovich* deteriorate because the heroine lacks the needed time and energy for family, which the viewer might conclude is one of the inevitable costs of women’s participation in social movements. Viewed in a more positive light, *Erin Brockovich* emerges as the portrait of postmodern social interaction extending to the workplace as well as other regions of everyday life outside the confines of the nuclear family; it offers some vision of a “reconstituted” sense of community appropriate to the more dispersed and pluralistic life-world of advanced industrial society. Forced to be independent, working to provide survival for herself and her children, Brockovich must sacrifice the perceived normalcy and contentment of two-parent family life with a new kind of social existence where she must combine demands of parenting with pressures of the workplace. Her experience typifies that of a growing number of single-parent families; today at least one-quarter of all children live with single mothers who are unmarried or divorced (Coontz 78). Two-thirds of American women with preschool children and fifty-six percent of those with infants under a year old are now in the labor force, an increase of nearly one-third from just twenty years ago. Despite a rapidly growing legion of working mothers, the general public attitude toward this group is strongly critical, with nearly ninety percent still opposed to women with infants entering the workforce (Lewin). This astonishing statistic means that the vast majority of men still oppose women entering the workforce and that, moreover, most women do not fully accept the situation their very independence has created—i.e., women with children working outside the home.

Another film with a strikingly mordant, dystopic sensibility toward the nuclear family is Peter Berg’s *Very Bad Things* (1998), reflective of what might be called the postmodern black comedy in the tradition of the Coen brothers’ *Blood Simple* (1983). The film chronicles a series of extremely bloody events occurring during and just after an out-of-control bachelor party in Las Vegas. Five young men embark upon a wild night of celebrating the long-anticipated marriage of one of them, Robert, to the beautiful but domineering Laura (Cameron Diaz). The party begins over drinks at a few Vegas casinos and then takes off in earnest as the men imbibe prodigious amounts of alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine, reaching a peak when Kyle (Christian Slater) hires a prostitute to visit their hotel room. After the prostitute arrives, the men become absolutely wild, falling down and breaking furniture—but the real mayhem occurs when one of the men, Michael, accidentally kills the prostitute as he impales her head against a light fixture while having frenetic sex with her. Faced with a dead, naked woman bleeding all over the bathroom floor, the group sober up and, with Kyle acting as leader, the men decide to spirit the body out of the hotel and bury it in the desert. Before they can pull off this feat, however, a hotel security officer visits the suite and discovers the prostitute’s body. Kyle stabs and kills the officer to keep things quiet. United in their resolve to conceal their murderous deeds, the men clean up the hotel...
room (no small task) before proceeding to dismember the two corpses and stuff them into two suitcases, which they take to the desert in the middle of the night. Later, having returned to the surface calm of their suburban homes without being discovered, the men become frightened when they see a newspaper photo of the security guard listed as a “missing person.” Here the plot degenerates into further violence and chaos as the various characters become totally unglued and start attacking each other. In outlandish comedic fashion, this brutal action unfolds against the ceremonious backdrop of the long-planned wedding. At Kyle’s insistence, the men manage to act calmly during the wedding rehearsal dinner, but two of them (brothers) wind up fighting in the parking lot until one fatally rams the other with a sport utility vehicle. Although they avoid suspicion by telling police that the death was accidental, by this point Kyle emerges as a full-fledged psychopath. He dispatches the now-suspicious wife of the dead brother (Jeanne Tripplehorn), then shoots and kills the surviving brother in order to give these new crimes the semblance of a torturous and bloody love triangle among family members. As the wedding day arrives, best man Kyle realizes he must murder the groom out of fear he will talk to authorities about the grisly events. Discovering Kyle in the act of murdering her future husband, Laura nearly beats the assailant to death with a floor lamp. Though badly beaten and bloodied, Kyle intends to climb the stairs and burst into the wedding, but one of the men flings a door open and accidentally pushes him down the stairs, finishing off the killing job Laura had begun. After the wedding, Laura, having shown her own psychopathic side, orders Robert to murder his one remaining friend—and bury them both in the desert. At the last moment, Robert refuses to go along with this scheme, but as the two men drive home, they run head-on into another vehicle. In the final scene, Robert has both legs amputated at the knees, while his friend is turned into a paraplegic. Robert and Laura gain custody of two handicapped young boys belonging to the dead couple. Watching the two men and two boys, along with their cripped dog, playing in her back yard, Laura sees Robert’s wheelchair overturn, dumping the double-amputee ingloriously on the lawn. She runs into the street screaming in agony and is nearly run over by a car. When we last see Laura, who alone among this macabre group remains physically intact, she has suffered a total mental breakdown. Lying in the middle of the street, we see her furiously pounding her fists into the pavement. Very Bad Things no doubt stands alone as an improbably dark representation of contemporary family and personal life where, among other things, intimacy quickly and irrationally turns into deadly violence. By comparison, such films as Interiors and The Last Seduction, forerunners of the more full-blown postmodern narrative of familial demise, seem rather tepid if not archaic. In Very Bad Things, we end up with a cycle of absolute mayhem and destruction, with deceit and violence penetrating the deepest consciousness of practically every character in the film. We know that Laura and her new family ultimately survive the chaos, but they wind up so completely disabled, both physically and mentally, that we are left with nothing less than a deadening process that seems to immobilize interpersonal relations.

The Convergence of Art and Reality

Widely diverse images of family life depicted in postmodern cinema revolve around a jaundiced, sometimes confused, often violence-laden understanding of gender relations, intimacy, and sexuality, where once-common references to “dysfunctional” families may come to appear rather archaic; these families are nothing if not moribund, useless relics of the past. Postmodern filmmaking embraces images of family life that, seething with infidelity and corruption, breed all forms of mayhem and violence, going well beyond anything contained in the film noir tradition. The romantic discourses typical of mainstream classics like It’s a Wonderful Life, historical dramas, John Ford westerns, and
mainstream TV fare must appear today as essentially bizarre, alien representations. Such representations are probably closer to the truth than anything found in these older classics, and surely closer to the truth than most Americans may be willing to concede. In actuality, the nuclear family, born during early phases of industrialism, has, for better or worse, become a casualty of the times, a victim of post-Fordist social fragmentation, heightened mobility, massive technological and cultural changes, and more recently, the disruptive impact of globalization. Postmodern filmmakers like the Coen brothers, Peter Berg, Ridley and Tony Scott, Woody Allen, Mike Figgis, and Robert Altman have been criticized for exaggerating the chaos, duplicity, and harshness of what remains of the American family, but their narrative renditions can hardly be said to be out of touch with social reality.

"Postmodern" families today are rife with insecurity, fear, hatred, and violence, reflections of a larger society veering toward uncontrollable levels of civic (and indeed domestic) violence. The relationship here between art and reality, between film and society, seems abundantly clear: themes commonplace in the film industry of the 1980s and 1990s were not long ago taboo in Hollywood, not to mention popular culture as a whole. Thus we now see fathers molesting their children and sometimes even their grandchildren, mothers seducing their sons, fathers lusting after young girlfriends of their daughters, wives and husbands cheating with their partners’ best friends, wives and husbands plotting to kill each other, teenagers having sex with multiple partners, relationships falling apart at the slightest provocation, and so on. Moreover, homosexuality and bisexuality regularly appear in these films as subplots, usually with no stigma attached. This is hardly the stuff of “family values” that seems to so thoroughly captivate politicians and pundits, but it is no doubt much closer to the daily lives of ordinary Americans who are regularly forced to listen to such rhetoric. If postmodern cinema is bleak, it is probably not much bleaker than the social relations it has come to encapsulate, however unevenly and melodramatically. There is yet another side to the depiction of postmodern relationships: we find that a few romantic, binding personal relationships do manage to survive the morass of tangled social realities, visible, for example, in such films as Fatal Attraction (released version), The Opposite of Sex, Erin Brockovich, and even Your Friends and Neighbors. These pictures convey a series of relationships that are fragile and ready to implode alongside those where romance and companionship seem to be at least remotely possible; duplicity, mayhem, and coercion are not yet universal in scope. In The Opposite of Sex, Deedee might not be ready for the obligations of marriage and child-rearing, but she is only a teenager and thus can hardly be expected to have reached the point where mature relationships are really possible. Other characters in this film, however, do manage to establish new intimate relationships. Erin Brockovich’s family and love interests might have been strained to the maximum, but she does forge new (“postmodern”) relationships with her work companions and the citizens of Hinckley. Even the philandering characters in Your Friends and Neighbors, seemingly with little effort, do ultimately become involved in new (presumably more satisfying) relationships. So the message emanating from this cycle of films is not altogether mordant and dystopic, even if that is the main thrust.

As postmodern cinema reveals a Hobbesian world of urban chaos, fearsome scenarios, and dystopic futures, its dark images of the family, marriage, gender relations, and sexuality appear no less oppressive and frightening—trends long ago set in motion by the classic noir cycle of the 1940s and 1950s. This is a universe filled with isolated, alienated individuals devoid of authentic relationships, swept up like manipulated objects into destructive webs of intrigue, struggles for survival, and violence. There are no assurances that seemingly gentle, charming, attractive characters—like Kyle, Robert, or Laura in Very Bad Things—will turn out to be anything other than psychotic killers. There is little to guarantee that familial relations will be consonant with anything resembling a “haven in a heartless world,” the stuff of romantic mythology. Characters trapped
within the postmodern condition can rarely hope to escape the lethal power and impact of that condition any more than they can hope to fully escape the social Darwinian ethos of capitalism. In this world, there are few truly noble characters, and even fewer heroic protagonists.

Works Cited


