

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE (Nora Ephron, 1993)

By Hannah Hamad

Introduction

When director Nora Ephron's modestly budgeted romantic comedy film *Sleepless in Seattle* was first released in the US in June 1993, few would have anticipated the level of success it would go on to achieve at the box-office, both domestically and beyond. It became the fourth highest grossing film in the US that year ("Domestic Box Office for 1993"), and one of the most commercially successful Hollywood films of its genre ever released into cinemas ("Romantic Comedy").¹ As Chuck Kleinhans notes in his overview of American cinema of that year, 1993 was a "boom year" for Hollywood. And the all-important summer season into which *Sleepless in Seattle* was released "brought in the highest box-office ever" with takings of \$2.1 billion (93).² He goes on to highlight that *Sleepless in*

¹ The only pre-1993 film listed by *Box Office Mojo* as a romantic comedy to make more money at the box-office than *Sleepless in Seattle* is *Coming to America* (John Landis, 1988). This is a film whose genre credentials as a romcom are tenuous given the centrality of the homosocial relationship between the two male leads (Akeem and Semmi, played by Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall), and its status as comedian-comedy star vehicle for Murphy. This is borne out by marketing materials like the one-sheet poster, which places Murphy's stardom at the front and centre of the campaign, and publicity stills that foreground the pairing of Murphy and Hall above anything concerning the heteroromantic strand of the narrative. *Sleepless and Seattle's* marketing campaign straightforwardly privileges the promise of a heteroromantic union between the two principals (depicting each of them on either side of the frame, with the skylines of their respective cities behind them, as they gaze wistfully upwards, each apparently imagining the other), more in line with industry practice and audience expectation of a romantic comedy.

² Only the path-breaking CGI dinosaur blockbuster *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), the Harrison Ford/Tommy Lee Jones double protagonist action thriller *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis, 1993) and the Tom

Seattle was responsible for \$126.6 million of those dollars in the domestic market, \$227.9 million in the worldwide market, and \$64.9 million in the home video market (94).

There are many ways in which *Sleepless in Seattle* stands out from its contemporaries as a flashpoint example of a hit film in 1990s Hollywood, and a number of things concerning the relationship between text and context that made it particularly impactful, and in some ways exceptional, which will be explored in this chapter. First, the fact that it rose to prominence as a relatively rare example (thanks in large part to Hollywood's unequally gendered employment practices) of a mainstream genre film becoming a major box-office smash having been directed by a woman and while targeting women audiences. And secondly, that the film resonated so clearly and explicitly with hot-button issues, debates and trends in the contemporary cultural politics of gender, but especially of mainstream hetero-masculinity. In these respects, *Sleepless in Seattle* proved itself both prescient and totemic.

The film narrates the unlikely romantic coupling of Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks) a widowed single father in Seattle, and Annie Reed (Meg Ryan) a journalist in Baltimore, who become instantly romantically attached when Sam's eight-year-old son Jonah (Ross Malinger) engineers their meeting atop the Empire State Building in New York, in a heavily diegetically integrated reference to the narrative climax of Leo McCarey's 1957 romantic drama *An Affair to Remember*. Annie writes a speculative love letter to Sam (and Jonah) after hearing him speak on a therapeutic radio call-in show after Jonah calls in on Christmas Eve night to ask for advice from the host, Dr Marcia Fieldstone, that will help his bereaved father to move on from his grief and his unplanned singlehood. Unbeknownst to Sam, Jonah replies to Annie's letter, and sets the wheels of their inevitable romantic union in motion.

Cruise legal thriller *The Firm* (Sydney Pollack, 1993) fared better at the US box-office that year than *Sleepless in Seattle*.

In some respects, *Sleepless in Seattle* did have certain familiar ingredients in place to enable the expectation of at least modest commercial success. Above all, it featured two rising stars, both of whom came to the project with proven box-office bankability. Hanks, already familiar to television audiences in the US via his role in the early 1980s ABC sitcom *Bosom Buddies* (tx. 1980-1982) had experienced breakthrough success in a starring role on the big screen with the fantasy romantic comedy *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984), in which he starred alongside Daryl Hannah as a man who falls in love with a mermaid. But he shot to elevated star status four years later following the runaway success of *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988) in which he plays a 13-year-old who gets trapped in the body of an adult man. *Big* became the fourth highest grossing film of that year, cementing Hanks' status as a newly A-list box-office draw when he was correspondingly named the third highest money-making star of 1988 by Quigley Publishing's annual poll of US cinema exhibitors. Prior to the release of *Sleepless in Seattle*, Hanks also had further hits with *Turner and Hooch* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1989) in which he starred alongside a dog; and *A League of their Own* (Penny Marshall, 1992), a period piece in which, although top billed as the film's biggest star, he plays a supporting role to an ensemble cast of women as the coach to a women's baseball team in the 1940s.

Ryan had meanwhile come to popular attention in a supporting role as Carole, the wife of the ill-fated Goose (Anthony Edwards) in the smash-hit air combat action film and Tom Cruise star vehicle *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), which had topped the US box-office in its year of release. But it was her starring role in the Nora Ephron scripted and arguably genre-defining (Krutnik; Shumway) romantic comedy landmark *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989) that proved star-making. This film inaugurated the mutually constitutive association between Ryan's star persona and the romantic comedy genre that would be cemented first and foremost by *Sleepless in Seattle* and later by *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998). In the latter, Ephron judiciously re-teamed the winning combination of Hanks and Ryan for a contemporary reworking of the classical Hollywood film *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940), here reimagined as a romcom for the early internet

age, with the epistolary courtship between the two central characters this time taking place in their America Online e-mail inboxes.

Less of a known quantity with respect to *Sleepless in Seattle*'s commercial success was the involvement of Nora Ephron as director. By this point in her Hollywood career, Ephron was an established success as a screenwriter, having achieved a major box-office hit with *When Harry Met Sally*, and notable industry recognition in the form of Academy Award nominations for best screenplay for both *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983) and *When Harry Met Sally*, and a BAFTA win for the latter. But her credentials as a commercially viable director had yet to be tested. Ephron's only big-screen directorial credit before *Sleepless in Seattle* was the maternal drama *This Is My Life* (Nora Ephron, 1992) – a small film, with a commensurately small release and distribution. Moreover, Ephron was a woman.

Nora Ephron and Women Directors in Hollywood

One reason that *Sleepless in Seattle* stands so far out from other Hollywood films of its period in any genre is simply by virtue of its having been directed by a woman. A high-end, high-grossing Hollywood film with a woman director at the helm was a rare thing indeed in 1993. And as Martha Lauzen and her colleagues at the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University have demonstrated year-on-year, dishearteningly little would change over time in this respect in ensuing years and decades (2021). Until, that is, the revelations of the so-called 'Me Too' and 'Time's Up' movements which heralded the onset of what Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck have dubbed the 'Post Weinstein' era (2019)³ in Hollywood and beyond. This forced the US film industry's hand somewhat, with respect to the need to make discernible efforts at above-the-line

³ This is in reference of course to the decades-long campaign of sexual violence against women waged by former film producer Harvey Weinstein, public exposure of which gave rise to the entertainment industry strands of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements.

diversity and inclusion, including (and especially) when it comes to the employment of women directors.

In its earliest years the 'Post Weinstein' era heralded a small amount of change in upwardly quantitative terms for the heretofore relatively static percentage proportions of women directors who get to direct mainstream big-budget and high-grossing Hollywood films. However, to keep the scale and pace of the change in this regard in perspective – from the 1990s context in which Ephron directed *Sleepless in Seattle*, to the 'Post Weinstein' era of 2018 onwards – the proportion of women directing the highest-grossing (and often, correspondingly, the biggest budget) Hollywood films between those times remained tiny, fluctuating up and down but only ever ranging between 2% and 8% from 1990 to 2018 (Lauzen 5). After that it increased to 12% in 2019, 16% in 2020 and 12% in 2021 (Lauzen 10). So, at the time of writing in 2022, almost thirty years on from the release and success of *Sleepless in Seattle*, the proportion of women directing the highest-grossing high-end Hollywood films had yet to even approach breaking 20%.

In 1993 though, two months ahead of the initial release of *Sleepless in Seattle* in June, and aping discourse circulating in relation to US political culture celebrating the fact that a record (but trifling) four women had recently been elected to office in the United States Senate elections in November 1992 (this led to the media labelling it the 'Year of the Woman'), the Academy Awards self-congratulatorily themed itself under the banner "Oscar Celebrates Women and the Movies" (Ford and Gallupo; McFadden). Although Ephron did go on, the following year, to be nominated (along with co-writers David S. Ward and Jeff Arch) for *Sleepless in Seattle* with her screenwriting, no woman would receive the Academy Award for Best Director until Kathryn Bigelow, tellingly working in the traditionally masculine and more Oscar-friendly genre of the war film, received it for *The Hurt Locker* (2009) in 2010.

In the 1990s Ephron was one of a minuscule number of women who could get hired (occasionally) to direct a Hollywood film,⁴ and one of an even smaller number of women who could get re-hired to do so. Other noteworthy films that she helmed in that decade include *Michael* (1996), a romantic fantasy drama and star vehicle for John Travolta in which he plays an angel sent to earth from heaven to facilitate the formation of a heteroromantic union between lovelorn characters played by William Hurt and Andie MacDowell, and the aforementioned *You've Got Mail* - another romantic comedy that re-teamed *Sleepless in Seattle*'s well-received star/genre pairing of Hanks and Ryan.

Unsurprisingly then, the prospects for a woman director in 1990s Hollywood tended to be enabled by working in romantic genres: often romantic drama, but preferably romantic comedy. Though frequently critically maligned and often dismissed via the pejoratively gendered 'chick flick' label (a cultural phenomenon which is diegetically incorporated and addressed head-on in *Sleepless*

⁴ Other noteworthy commercially successful female directors of the 1990s include Penny Marshall, whose films *Awakenings* (1990), *A League of Their Own* (1992) and *The Preacher's Wife* (1996) number among her releases that decade (Foster 242); Amy Heckerling, who successfully followed up her earlier box-office hit *Look Who's Talking* (1989) with its sequel *Look Who's Talking Too* (1990) and went on to make the iconic *Clueless* (1995) later that decade (Speed 2017); Kathryn Bigelow (Jermyn and Redmond eds), exceptionally directing films like *Blue Steel* (1990), *Point Break* (1991) and *Strange Days* (1995) beyond the genre silos that so often kept women directors at that time, including those mentioned here, working in critically maligned genres like romantic drama, romantic comedy and family comedy, which are often associated with women audiences and pejoratively labelled 'chick flicks' (Ferriss and Young; Hollinger); and Nancy Meyers who made her directorial that decade in 1998 with *The Parent Trap* (1998) (Jermyn). Other high-profile women directors of the 1990s are noteworthy for having already established industry status as big-screen stars, such as Jodie Foster who directed for the big screen for the first time that decade with *Little Man Tate* (1991), and Barbra Streisand who followed up her earlier directorial effort *Yentl* (1983) by directing a big-screen adaptation of Pat Conroy's best-selling novel *The Prince of Tides* (1991).

in *Seattle* when Sam himself dismisses *An Affair to Remember*, intertextually invoked as a touchstone of the romance genres throughout the film, as “a chick’s movie”), these genres and modes lent themselves well to textual engagements with contextual phenomena to do with the gendered cultural politics of love, work, marriage, family, sex, relationship dynamics and all of their many discursive intersections and overlaps. This in turn enabled many of these films’ engagements with discourse from and about feminism and its contemporary aftermaths. In the early 1990s of *Sleepless in Seattle*’s production, it opened up space for Hollywood to respond opportunistically to what at the time was the cultural zeitgeist of early postfeminism, encompassing the so-called ‘backlash’ against the gains (perceived or otherwise) of second wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement of the previous decades, as well as commensurately changing understandings and negotiations of what constituted normatively ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell). Both of these discursive phenomena rise to prominence in *Sleepless in Seattle*.

***Sleepless in Seattle* and the Backlash Against Feminism**

Becoming browbeaten by Jonah’s persistent campaign to persuade him to make contact with Annie after receiving and reading her letter, a frustrated Sam attempts to temper his son’s enthusiasm for the idea by reaching for a reference point from contemporary popular culture that would have been instantly recognisable to audiences of mainstream US cinema in 1993: “Didn’t you see *Fatal Attraction*?!” he asks him, continuing, “It scared the shit out of me. It scared the shit out of every man in America.” The reference was to Adrian Lyne’s hit film of 1987, a smash at the US box-office, and the second highest grossing film of 1987. *Sleepless in Seattle* thus contrives a scenario for Sam explicitly to invoke the spectre of one of US pop culture’s most iconic bogey-women of the period in openly imagining Annie as a ‘bunnyboiler.’ The term refers to the moment in *Fatal Attraction*’s most famous scene in which Alex Forrest (Glenn Close), the discarded party from a weekend extra-marital affair that Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) disastrously enters into, takes revenge on her former lover by killing his daughter’s pet rabbit in a pot of boiling water on the stove. Significantly, Alex is a

single, 36-year-old career woman who becomes murderously consumed by her desire to maintain the relationship with Dan, and to have his baby. As Suzanne Leonard writes, 'bunnyboiler' "entered the popular lexicon... as a shorthand for women willing to resort to sadistic methods with which to make their presence known to current or former lovers..., [as] a rejoinder against making poor romantic decisions... [and] as a caution for men against fraternizing with an intense woman, lest attraction... blind one to her sinister potentialities" (3).

By the time Ephron's film was subsequently being written and produced in the early 1990s, 'bunnyboiler' had long since become a synecdoche for a prominent strand of the discourse circulating about what Susan Faludi had famously expostulated as the 'backlash' against feminism (front matter). Specifically, the currency of the figure of the 'bunnyboiler' at that time was connected to a contemporaneously high-profile postfeminist cultural panic, one that is likewise integrated into narrative of *Sleepless in Seattle*, and in ways that, it is suggested, drive and explain some of the characters' motivations and choices – principally, Annie's decision to get engaged to the manifestly unsuitable and comically charmless Walter (Bill Pullman). This panic concerned the spurious but negotiable notion, propagated in the US mainstream media by an infamous cover story in *Newsweek* magazine (Garber), to the effect that there was a shortage of marriageable men for single women in the heteroromantic market, especially those in their thirties, who had mis-prioritised their life goals due to the misguiding influence of feminism, which had (so the logic of 'backlash' postfeminism went) ushered them into corner offices and boardrooms and away from the arms of their future husbands, and many of them, according to this anti-feminist propaganda, were realising this too late.

Assembling around a table for what appears to be an editorial meeting at their workplace, the offices of the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper, Annie's colleagues are abuzz discussing 'Sleepless in Seattle', as Sam has been nicknamed further to his on-air revelations on Christmas Eve night. As part of this chat, one of Annie's male colleagues smugly declares (in a direct reference to the infamous

Newsweek article) that “It’s easier to be killed by a terrorist than it is to find a husband over the age of 40.” Pushing back, Annie immediately refutes the spuriousness of this claim, retorting “That is not true. That statistic is not true.” Tellingly though, the response of her female colleague and best friend Becky (Rosie O’Donnell) - “That’s right, it’s not true. But it *feels* true.” – is symptomatic of the idea that women in early postfeminism were internalising the patriarchal cultural logics of ‘backlash’ rhetoric in ways that enabled them to be negotiated as common-sense truths on the strength of feelings rather than facts, and Annie’s misguided engagement to Walter seem responsive to this. However, a contemporaneous phenomenon of early postfeminism also saw some of the cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity being re-negotiated, manifesting in the form of a cultural figure who was arguably as prominent in pop culture discourse about men, as the ‘bunnyboiler’ was in discourse about women: the ‘new man.’ With *Fatal Attraction*, Hollywood had played its part in providing the go-to cultural reference point for the ‘bunnyboiler,’ and with *Sleepless in Seattle* it would do likewise for the ‘new man.’

The ‘New Man’ in 1990s Hollywood

After hearing Sam bare his bereaved soul on national radio, his insufferably overbearing client Claire Bennet (Dana Ivey) accosts him at his workplace and sycophantically opines “It’s so nice when a man can express his feelings.” In so doing, she vocalises what was discursively understood as the defining characteristic of what at the time was a major media manifestation of normatively mainstream manhood. Emotionally literate masculinity characterised by men’s ability to demonstrate being in touch with their feelings was central to this masculine identity formation of early postfeminism, which began gaining cultural traction alongside the backlash against feminism. This was the so-called ‘new man.’ As Sarah Gamble explains the term: “popularised in the mass media during the 1980s... [it] describes men whose lifestyles have been influenced by feminism, and who give at least tacit support to feminist ideology. Typically, cooperation with the redistribution of domestic roles and

parenting duties, a countering of traditional patterns of 'male' or 'masculine' ascribed behaviour and a resistance to gender and sexual stereotyping are associated with the New Man." (282-283)

The early 1990s became an important period of time when Hollywood successfully negotiated the cultural currency of this 'new man' masculinity in ways that generated big business at the box-office (Chapman; Jeffords; Pfeil), with the smash-hit success of sensitive masculinity themed blockbusters that spanned the genre spectrum, and included *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991) and, of course, *Sleepless in Seattle*. Tom Hanks also rose to prominence as someone whose star persona at this time was key to this. And Sam Baldwin, who showcased the extent to which he was in touch with his feelings on a national media stage in one of the romantic comedy genre's most ambitious 'meet cutes', was arguably the zenith; both of this phase of Hanks' star career as a sensitive romantic hero, and of Hollywood's love affair with 'new man' masculinity. As Mary Beth Haralovich writes of his persona at the time, "Hanks was delivering multifaceted and intricate masculinity, men whose wisdom and strength were tempered with fragility." (157)

Nothing draws a clearer line under this than Sam's status as Hollywood's widowed single father *par excellence*. Sam's opening line of dialogue, "Mommy got sick," which provides voice-over narration for the film's iconic opening long shot depicting Maggie Baldwin's funeral, and the tiny figures of Sam and Jonah standing beside her casket at the top of the frame, establishes widowed single fatherhood as Sam's defining characteristic from the film's opening seconds. As I have argued elsewhere (Hamad 17-21) the marginalisation of motherhood through narrative contrivances that explain maternal absence (the most common and convenient, as in the case of *Sleepless in Seattle*, being the mother's death) is a major trope among many that have interoperated to enable the negotiation of fatherhood as the new hegemonic masculinity in Hollywood cinema since second wave feminism. And *Sleepless in Seattle*, especially considering the heavy extent to which Sam's widowed single fatherhood is bound up both with the film's negotiation of his 'new man'

masculinity, and also the film's narrative drive to place him in a heteroromantic union with Annie, quickly became a touchstone text for the negotiation of this trope. As one *New York Times* journalist, writing in 1993 in the aftermath of *Sleepless in Seattle's* release and success, opined: "Sam Baldwin is perfect. He is charming, wry, sensitive, successful, handsome, a great father, and most of all, he absolutely adores his wife. Oh, the perfect part? She's dead." In this way, she identifies *Sleepless in Seattle* as the *urtext* for the then emergent, now normalised paradigm that she terms "Hollywood's widower fantasy" (Yoffe).

This chapter has shown just some of the ways in which *Sleepless in Seattle* and its extraordinary resonance and impact have enabled it to stand above and beyond so many of its 1990s contemporaries as a cultural touchstone of Hollywood cinema of that decade. Hollywood fantasies of widowed single fatherhood abounded in the years that followed *Sleepless in Seattle*, as Hollywood hit upon a winning formula for the negotiation of its new formation of hegemonic masculinity: via emotionally charged appeals to victim status that conveniently wrote mothers out of the picture (Hamad 19-21) As my analysis has illustrated, *Sleepless in Seattle* has become both an *urtext* of the romantic comedy genre, and one of the most commercially successful films of its time to be directed by a woman.

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