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## **Working Title Films and Universal: The Integration of a British Production Company into a Hollywood Studio**

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# Working Title Films and Universal: The Integration of a British Production Company into a Hollywood Studio

Nathan Townsend

## Abstract:

Working Title Films is arguably the most successful and well-known production company in Britain today. For over 30 years, it has produced a diverse range of critically and commercially successful British films including romantic comedies such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), family films like *Bean* (1997) and *Nanny McPhee* (2005) and dramas including *Atonement* (2007) and *The Theory of Everything* (2014). For the majority of its history, however, Working Title has been defined in business terms by its status as a subsidiary of one of two multinational media conglomerates, PolyGram (1992–8) and Universal (1998–present). The transition between the two began when PolyGram, and its film studio, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (PFE), was sold to Seagram, the parent company of Universal. This article examines Working Title's integration into Universal and the evolving media ecology which shaped the processes of development, green-lighting, production, marketing and distribution at play within and between both companies between 1998 and 2006. In these respects, Working Title's transition between parent companies is a narrative of both continuity and change. Significantly, three key stages of gatekeeping remained common to both the PFE and Universal eras: development, green-lighting and distribution. The institutional perimeters within which these points of decision-making occurred, however, changed considerably. The article concludes by considering the impact of such structures and processes on the films which Working Title produced, particularly their various representations of Britain and 'Britishness'.

**Keywords:** PolyGram Filmed Entertainment; UIP; Universal; UPI; Working Title Films.

## Introduction

During the 1990s Working Title Films became the most successful production company based in Britain, responsible for a string of critically and commercially successful films including *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Bean* (1997), *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Notting Hill* (1999). This success was supported by the company's status as a subsidiary of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (PFE), a nascent film studio which was, in turn, a subsidiary of the major record company, PolyGram. The business relationship between the two would, however, come to an abrupt end in December 1998 when PolyGram, and with it PFE, was acquired by Seagram, the parent company of Universal. Over the course of the following year PolyGram and certain PFE assets, including Working Title, were integrated into the Hollywood studio. In the aftermath of

this transition, the company achieved an unprecedented level of commercial success and diversity of output which included medium-budget hits such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Love Actually* (2003), 'specialty' prestige dramas like *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and *Atonement* (2007) and a series of low-budget films including *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Shaun of the Dead* (2004).

The relationship between the film industries and cultures of Britain and Hollywood has been a subject of perennial interest to British cinema scholars, resulting in significant monographs (Glancy 1999; Ryall 2001; Street 2002) which explore, among other things, patterns of economic negotiation, issues of textual hybridity and cross-cultural reception. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the scholarship to date about Working Title has also focused on the transnational and, more particularly, transatlantic dimensions of the company. Michael Wayne (2006), for example, positions Working Title's films within what he calls the 'Atlanticist paradigm for British cinema' and argues that the company has been integrated into the Hollywood film industry and operates in a subordinate position whereby the films it produces must take a 'cultural detour' through the American market before arriving in the British market. Elsewhere, Johanne Brunet and Galina Gornostaeva (2006) compare the historical structures of the British and Hollywood film industries before examining Working Title's relationship with Universal. Taking a somewhat different approach, Tobias Hochscherf and James Leggott acknowledge the 'potpourri of British and American characteristics' (2010: 9) on display in many of Working Title's films while also arguing for the company's place within the film industries and cultures of Europe.

In turn, Working Title's romantic comedies, particularly those written by Richard Curtis, have attracted considerable academic interest from varying perspectives. Robert Murphy (2001), for example, describes them as 'urban fairy-tales' in which London becomes an enchanted 'city of delights'. Paul Dave (2006) extends the fairy tale concept by examining the representation of social class. Among other things, he notes the construction of a middleclass 'metropolitan idyll' which is exclusive and privileged yet omits visible enclosure or contestation. Elsewhere, Working Title's romantic comedies are considered in the context of British traditions of comedy (Mather 2006; Leggott 2012), or in relation to globalisation (Kerry 2011). In contrast, Annabelle Honess Roe (2009) focuses her analysis on the relationships between British and American characters in Working Title's romantic comedies, suggesting that they play out the 'special relationship' between the two nations by actively contrasting many of the stereotypical cultural tropes associated with each. Much less, however, has been written about Working Title as a functioning production company and the creative

and business processes and structures which link it to Universal. This article addresses that deficit by examining Working Title's integration into the Hollywood studio and the evolving media ecology that shaped the processes of development, green-lighting, production, marketing and distribution at play within and between both companies. In these respects, Working Title's transition between PFE and Universal is a narrative of both continuity and change. Significantly, three key stages of gatekeeping remained common to both the PFE and Universal eras: development, green-lighting and distribution. The institutional boundaries within which these key points of decision-making occurred, however, shifted considerably. Thus the approach taken here will examine development, green-lighting and distribution as discrete steps of gatekeeping within a dynamic and evolving studio system.

### **The demise of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment and the integration of Working Title Films into Universal**

In May 1998 it was announced in the trade press that PolyGram had been acquired by Seagram for \$10.6 billion. The enormous price tag primarily represented the value of PolyGram's music assets, the company having grown to become the largest of the major record companies over the course of the 1990s. While steps to integrate PolyGram into Universal Music Group were undertaken almost immediately, the fate of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment was not so clear-cut (Peers 1998: 1). By the time Seagram acquired PolyGram in December 1998 for the revised figure of \$10.4 billion, several unsuccessful attempts had been made to sell PFE as a going concern (Carver and Petrikin 1998: 1). Over the course of the following year, the majority of PFE's production, marketing and distribution assets would be broken up and sold to third parties or closed down. The most notable exceptions were PolyGram Filmed Entertainment International (PFEI) – PFE's international network of marketing and distribution companies – and Working Title Films.

Seagram's Chairman and CEO, Edgar Bronfman Jr, was keen to ensure that Working Title continue as part of Universal – unlike most of PFE's production assets. In particular, Working Title's success in the expanding international market, combined with the company's economy in production, proved to be considerable draws. The particular contractual circumstances surrounding Working Title's integration into the studio also ensured that the production company's co-chairmen, Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner, were in a seller's market. As Fellner explains:

We were very fortunate because our service contracts had expired and so Tim and I were free agents. Working Title had no value outside Tim and I running it, so we were lucky and able to steer the company to where we wanted it to go, regardless of its asset value, whatever that was perceived to be. Wherever we went, the Working Title name and brand would have gone. We did a separate negotiation with Universal, it just so happened that it was the same place as where the PolyGram assets had ended up ... There were a lot of reasons to do it at Universal but primarily it was the relationship with staff there and the promise that Edgar Bronfman, who owned Seagram and the studio then made us, which was he wanted to set up a company that was additional to the slate, to the core slate, and that additionality meant that he was making films that the studio wouldn't normally have made, and that's what he wanted us to do. Everyone else would have tried to subsume us into the main slate and we'd never have got any films made.<sup>1</sup>

The films that a Hollywood studio 'wouldn't normally have made' were exemplified by much of Working Title's back catalogue, particularly the unlikely low- to medium-budget British hit films for which the company had become best known. In this way, Working Title's years as a subsidiary of PFE had acted as a proving ground for what British films in popular genres could achieve at the worldwide box office. In turn, an integral element of that success was also attributed to PFE's development of the so-called 'control sheet', a creative and commercial filter used to assess the risk and reward profile of film projects. As I have described elsewhere (2017), the control sheet was a document that presented revenue and expenditure forecasts produced by PFE's marketing and distribution divisions for films in development at PFE's production companies. The control sheet then became a key tool in informing green-lighting decisions which were collectively made by PFE's senior management, production companies and marketing and distribution divisions. During the months of contract negotiations between Working Title and Universal, Angela Morrison, Working Title COO, took a leading role alongside Bevan and Fellner. Considering the company's priorities in brokering a deal with the studio, she elaborates:

We wanted to maintain the degree of autonomy that we had managed to get to with PolyGram. We'd learned the lessons, we'd been through the rigours of the control sheet and green-lighting and we thought that we were at the point in our collective company career that we could make some of our own decisions without having to get approval from LA. We were successful in negotiating a lot of things along those lines to do with what we spent on our overhead, how we managed the business, the staffing, then how we managed production, how much we could spend on productions without a full green-light decision being made with the studio.<sup>2</sup>

In March 1999 Bevan and Fellner committed to a five-year deal which would see Working Title continue life as a subsidiary of Universal. Within the terms of the new

agreement, the producers were permitted to green-light up to five films a year with individual production budgets of up to \$25 million without approval from Universal. Films with budgets over \$25 million would be considered on a case-by-case basis with the studio's involvement (Dawtre 1999: 1). In May, Universal and Canal Plus agreed to co-finance the operational, development

and production costs of Working Title on a 50:50 basis. In return for their contribution, Canal Plus received television rights to all Working Title's films in continental Europe (excluding the UK and Ireland) and French theatrical and video rights for every second film for the first three years of the deal. In the fourth and final year of the agreement, Canal Plus would receive theatrical and video rights in all territories in continental Europe (Dawtre 1999b: 8), a clause which foreshadowed the company's expansion into theatrical distribution and the rebranding of its production and distribution arm as StudioCanal the following year (James 2000: 1).

The combination of financial backing and creative autonomy which Working Title had achieved made the company an unrivalled force not only within the British film industry, but also within Europe. Simultaneously, Working Title became just one of 35 production companies that were under contract to Universal in 1999 (Carver 1999: 84). Unlike the majority of these production companies, however, Working Title is a directly owned subsidiary as opposed to an independent. This status was reflected in the business relationship between the two which was exclusive, rather than the more usual 'first look' deal. Working Title's special status of being at once within and without the studio perfectly mirrored the company's relationship with the British film industry. While its head office was on Oxford Street in London, Working Title also had an office on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills and remained a component part of a multinational media conglomerate headquartered in Los Angeles.

### **Gate I: Development**

Working Title's status as a subsidiary of Universal and the exclusive contractual commitment of its key personnel to the studio ensured that the company operated as an internal business within a studio system. Thus the company was provided with annual overhead, development and production budgets by Universal and StudioCanal in order to complete its two essential functions: the development and production of feature films. A crucial aspect of this arrangement was creative autonomy at the point of development, a freedom that the company had also attained under PFE. While Bevan and Fellner jointly decided which film projects to develop, the slate was subsequently divided between the two producers, with each managing

the development and production of individual projects separately thereafter. The role of the producer, and by extension the production company, is perhaps best characterised as the intermediary between creativity and commerce. As Fellner explains:

A producer is like the chief executive of any business. He has to build the business, come up with the ideas, come up with the money to support those ideas and find the creative and technical talent to make those ideas into reality. He has to finance the business going forward, run the business to a schedule and a budget, and ensure that every single person employed is doing absolutely everything that he or she ought to be doing and support them, in all the ways that you can support them, so they can do their best work. Then, when they've made their product, he ensures that that product is as good as it possibly can be and that it gets to market, that it's properly marketed and distributed.<sup>3</sup>

The four integrated film-making departments which the company had established at the start of the PFE era – development, production, US office and legal and business affairs – remained in place, as did the majority of key personnel. Debra Hayward continued in post as head of development in London, while Liza Chasin remained her opposite number in Los Angeles. Similarly, Angela Morrison continued to manage the legal and business affairs department, which not only serviced development and production internally, but also mediated Working Title's relationship with Universal and StudioCanal at a strategic level. Jane Frazer, however, stepped down as head of production to be replaced by Michelle Wright. A broad sense of continuity was felt in most areas of Working Title's relationship with its new parent company, albeit one of increased scale. As Hayward notes:

When you are lucky enough to see a film from its conception all the way through to its execution, everybody learns that way, everybody that is involved learns. If you are able to do that over and over again, which is what we were doing at Working Title, then you hone your skills and become better and better . . . It'll always just keep coming back to material for me, which is, all of a sudden there's resources to develop more material. In developing more material . . . you have a number of films hanging over these possible slots and you've got production financing which is allowing you to make a film. You're in a cycle of making films and when you're posting one you're prepping another. You can keep the machine rolling along when you're capitalised like that, as opposed to raising the money to make a film and then starting that whole process again.<sup>4</sup>

The distribution of Working Title's influence and resources among the wider British film industry could also be measured by its cyclical contractual ties with both other production companies and individuals beyond its development departments. In maintaining external development deals with, among others, Richard Curtis, Joe Wright, Stephen Daldry and Edgar

Wright, Working Title had begun to act like a miniature British-based studio. Indeed, it extended the same level of developmental autonomy to the independent companies on its books that it had been granted by Universal. While the majority of Working Title's development, production, legal and business infrastructure was based in London, the company's LA office continued to prove vital in bridging the gap between the UK and Hollywood industries. As Chasin explains:

I view my role as the front man to the business on this end . . . I have very close twenty plus year relationships with the industry on this end, so I do a lot of the interfacing with the studio, with Universal, and a lot of the day-to-day with the community at large, whether it be directly with the talent that lives here or with the agents, lawyers, managers etcetera who represent the talent . . . We run, I would say, not really half the slate, but half the active projects out of the LA office with a view to making probably one to two films a year on this end, versus the numbers on that end. So, there's a lot of managing the actual slate . . . we can't make a film over there without it taking up a lot of space over here, it's just the nature of the way it works. It's really liaising with the town and pushing these things forward and, of course, getting the new material and getting people to want to come work here.<sup>5</sup>

The integration also prompted the establishment of Working Title's own subsidiary production company, WT2, in May 1999 which was given the remit of producing films with budgets of \$5 million or less (Dawtre 1999c: 12). Under the leadership of Natascha Wharton, the new company operated as a separate development and production unit with its own staff and budgets but remained in Working Title's London office and continued to report to Bevan and Fellner. Considering the new company's position and remit, Wharton elaborates:

It's quite rare to be making a film at a \$5 million level and assume that it will then play internationally. Bizarrely sometimes they do, and the ones that you don't expect do . . . It was quite a challenge because we were looking at really interesting film-makers and we always did have an eye on audience as well. Again, when you're making films at that sort of level that is quite a challenge. If you look at most of the British films that are made with emerging talent at the moment, they're much more overtly festival driven films, whereas our agenda was to try to find that talent, and to try and make those films, but for those films to have a similar sort of mainstream appeal as the other Working Title films.<sup>6</sup>

The production department maintained its reputation as lavish by the standards of the independent British film industry, but highly cost effective by the standards of Hollywood. Since the advent of section 42 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 1992 and section 48 of the Finance (No. 2) Act 1997 tax relief, Working Title had, like many other UK-based production companies, benefitted from the fertile economic climate which the legislation promoted. In



1992, for example, 30 films were produced in the UK at a combined cost of £98.48 million. In the final year of the same decade 92 films had been produced for £506.68 million, and by 2006 134 films were produced for £845.33 million (UKFC 2009: 121–3). As Wright explains, her job was to interrogate all of the production planning from a logistical and economic perspective in collaboration with the principal film-makers:

If a movie is worth so much money to the financiers and the producers and the distributors, then how do we make that work? That's the challenge of it and the fun of it . . . Once we have a script that everybody likes, that may be in re-writes, but we know pretty much the structure of what the script is going to be, and we have film-makers attached, we have a package. We go in and we break it down. We take the script and we try to turn it into a fine science by breaking it down into a schedule and a budget. It's a management tool to do so, that's the only way to manage something that's creative like that. We break it down into a schedule: how many days can you shoot it? How do you shoot it? Where do you shoot it? How much will it cost? Once we have that package, we get to work on figuring out that normally it's too much and we figure out how we can make it less.<sup>7</sup>

A film in development at Working Title would, however, only go into production when a green-light decision was made. According to reports in the trade press, Working Title's relationship with Universal was based upon a high degree of creative and financial autonomy. Where Working Title had been subject to the rigours of the control sheet under PFE, the company now appeared to have free rein to develop and produce any film with a budget under \$25 million.

## **Gate II: Green-lighting**

The most closely guarded decision in the film-making process is the decision to green-light a project in development and thus set in motion the production of a feature film. 'Our relationship for green-lighting was channelled through Universal. They were the ultimate decision maker on the big-budget movies', Morrison explains. 'Going back to the lower budget movies, even where we had what we called the "puts" we didn't exercise them. We would go through the greenlight process and make sure everybody was happy with that.' The 'puts', she elaborated, was a situation in which Working Title had the contractual autonomy to green-light a film up to a certain budget level and were so-called because 'we could "put them to the studio", we could force them to green-light them'.<sup>8</sup> Thus Working Title's transition from PFE to Universal did not alter the fundamental premise of the parent-subsidiary company dynamic which relied on consensus building and collective decision making, as Fellner confirms:

The bottom line is that it didn't mean an awful lot in terms of day-to-day operation, because you can green-light a film but you don't want to green-light it unless the distributor wants to distribute it, because otherwise you greenlight a film that gets dumped and there is nothing more depressing than that. If you understand the power of distribution and marketing, you understand that equation, and we understood that. We didn't just immediately go, 'we're making this, we're making that, we're making the other'. We developed a relationship with the studio to try to make sure that everything we wanted to make, they wanted, and that UIP would distribute it properly and that it would get a real life in the marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

In the first instance, the green-lighting process involved a discussion between Working Title and Universal about the former's development slate and the projects that were being put forward for green-lighting. Beneath Universal Pictures Chair, Stacey Snider, the key players at Universal included Co-Presidents of Production Mary Parent and Scott Stuber, and a host of Vice Presidents who oversaw Universal's slate at large and managed its relationships with its contracted production companies and individuals. In practice, the green-lighting process within Universal acted as an extension and reiteration of the processes undertaken by Working Title during development. The discussions leading to a green-light decision considered the entire package of the film – script, cast, crew, budget – were discussed in a collective and iterative fashion. All such decisions were, however, also directed through a creative and commercial filter which resembled the 'control sheet' that PFE had used throughout the 1990s. Indeed, control sheet-like practices had also been adopted by the Hollywood studios at large. For Working Title, this process was initially undertaken within Universal's Business Development and Strategic Planning Group in Los Angeles. Gareth Wilson, who began working within the group in 2003, was responsible for generating revenue forecasts for all of the films in development at the various production companies under contact to Universal. As he explains:

When it was a young project at Universal we'd run a set of numbers that were effectively driven by a model that has been built up over time. The model aggregates historical film performances and uses that data to forecast future performance at various box office levels. That helps formulate the initial view as to the film's profitability and helps inform decisions about participations, [as] key creative players often get paid based on film performance. As the project takes shape over time, that's when you start going to all the different distribution departments saying 'what do you think this film will do?' so you have figures for box office, home video in all its various forms, and TV with corresponding marketing and distribution costs. By the time you get a green-lit film you have, as PolyGram would call it, a 'control sheet' or what Universal calls a 'ten column'. The ten column is ten scenarios from a low-performance scenario to a high-performance scenario and one of those scenarios will be a green-light case where you have a set of numbers that everyone thinks they can deliver on. That case will build

in a return on investment based on various metrics, which differed depending on the owner.<sup>10</sup>

As well as generating revenue forecasts which indicated the anticipated profitability of each film project under consideration for greenlighting, the 'ten column' also initiated the planning stages of the marketing and distribution campaigns which would be further developed in cases where a green-light decision was reached. The studio's return on investment over the course of a film's first product lifecycle was simultaneously examined, as Wilson elaborates:

For an accounting perspective you'll have your production costs amortised over the lifecycle of eight years, which is how long studios are required to forecast what their films will make. And so, that's what, really, we're looking at when we're looking at a control sheet or you're looking at a ten column. You're estimating, approximately, the first lifecycle ... Roll forward as the revenue drips in over the course of eight years, obviously most of it in the first two years as your theatrical, video and TV revenues come in and then at the end of the day make sure that on an annualised basis you've made a seven per cent return. That was the threshold. Seven to ten seems to be the going rate around the industry.<sup>11</sup>

In 2006, Wilson moved from Universal's LA headquarters to Working Title's head office in London to begin producing ten columns exclusively for Working Title's development slate. 'It was a notion of just wanting the capability to look a little bit more closely and have the flexibility to run your own models as opposed to relying on Universal where you might not be getting the full information, just simply because there is a bit of negotiation there', Wilson explains. 'For us to get films made, if Universal's going to make them, we have to sell them on the film. Even though we're partners with them in many ways, they're still across the table in some others.'<sup>12</sup>

Working Title's production activities were, of course, also dependent on the wider production strategy of Universal. Speaking in 2005, Snider described the 'portfolio' strategy which she had implemented since her elevation to Chair of Universal Pictures in 1999. The strategy involved producing fourteen to sixteen films a year with a range of budgets and genres, often with the potential for sequels. This included one or two big-budget 'tent pole' films such as *Jurassic Park III* (2001) and *King Kong* (2005), four or five medium-budget 'event' films such as *Meet the Parents* (2000) and *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and seven or eight low-budget 'portfolio' films including *American Pie* (1999) and *Bring It On* (2000). Between 1999 and 2006 Working Title produced 34 films for Universal which were released at a rate of between three and seven a year. All of these films fell within or between the medium budget 'event' and

low-budget ‘portfolio’ categories and displayed the diversity of genre required by the wider Universal strategy.

While the ‘event’ and ‘portfolio’ categories are imprecise, Working Title’s slate in this period can be broadly divided into two subsets of film which broadly conform to either the portfolio or event labels. Table 1 shows Working Title’s main slate by genre which comprises largely ‘event’ films but also some ‘portfolio’ films. In contrast, Table 2 shows the films produced by WT2 by genre which exclusively fall into the ‘portfolio’ category. It is worth noting that the average cost of a film in Working Title’s main slate between 1999 and 2006 was \$34.1 million<sup>13</sup>, a figure considerably below the Hollywood average which stood at \$51.5 million in 1999 and increased to \$65.8 million by 2006 (MPAA 2003, 2007). The considerably lower cost of WT2 films would, of course, lower the average substantially if the slates of both companies were considered as a whole.

Examining Working Title’s output between 1999 and 2006, of course, highlights the films which were green-lit by Universal. All of these were official UK productions or co-productions, which typically also reflected the national economic inputs of both Universal (US) and StudioCanal (France). Within this slate, eighteen out of 34 can be classed as ‘culturally British’ insofar as they featured predominantly British characters, settings and narrative themes. Significantly, however, in reaching a green-light decision both Working Title and Universal viewed each film project through the ten column and thus through the prism of worldwide commercial appeal. Considering the consequences of being a British production company which produces culturally British films within the contemporary Hollywood studio system, Bevan explains:

One of the issues with being a British producer is that, unlike being a French producer or an Italian producer or a German producer, you share your native language with the biggest producer of motion pictures in the world. That brings a set of advantages and a set of disadvantages. The set of advantages it brings is that you will probably get your films distributed around the world easier than your French, Italian or German

**Table 1 –Working Title main slate by genre, 1999-2006 (all figures in \$USD million)**

Title /Genre	Year	Origin	Culturally British?	Prod. Budget	Domestic BO (%)	International BO (%)	UK BO (%)	Worldwide BO
<b>Comedy (Romantic)</b>								
<i>Notting Hill</i>	1999	UK/US	Yes	42	116 (31.9)	247.8 (68.1)	49.2 (13.5)	363.8
<i>Bridget Jones's Diary</i>	2001	UK/US/FR	Yes	25	71.5 (25.4)	210.3 (74.6)	60.2 (21.4)	281.8
<i>40 Days and 40 Nights</i>	2002	UK/US/FR	No	-	37.9 (39.9)	57.1 (60.1)	7.7 (8.1)	95.0
<i>The Guru</i>	2002	UK/US/FR	No	-	3.0 (12.5)	21.0 (87.5)	10.1 (42.1)	24.0

<i>Love Actually</i>	2003	UK/US/FR	Yes	40	59.6 (24.1)	187.2 (75.9)	62.6 (25.4)	246.8
<i>Wimbledon</i>	2004	UK/US/FR	Yes	31	17.0 (41.0)	24.5 (59.0)	12.9 (31.1)	41.5
<i>Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason</i>	2004	UK/US/FR/ GER/IRE	Yes	40	40.2 (15.3)	222.2 (84.7)	68.2 (26.0)	262.4

#### Comedy / Comedy Drama

<i>High Fidelity</i>	2000	UK/US	No	30	27.2 (57.9)	19.8 (42.1)	-	47.0
<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i>	2000	UK/US/FR	No	-	45.5 (63.4)	26.3 (36.6)	-	71.8
<i>About a Boy</i>	2002	UK/US/FR/ GER	Yes	30	41.3 (31.7)	89.1 (68.3)	24.3 (18.6)	130.4
<i>Johnny English</i>	2003	UK/US/FR	Yes	40	28.0 (17.4)	132.5 (82.6)	31.1 (19.4)	160.5

#### Drama

<i>The Man Who Cried</i>	1999	UK/FR	No	-	0.7 (100)	-	-	0.7
<i>Captain Corelli's Mandolin</i>	2001	UK/US/FR	No	57	25.5 (41.1)	36.5 (58.9)	12.9 (20.8)	62.0
<i>The Man Who Wasn't There</i>	2001	UK/US	No	20	7.5 (37.9)	11.4 (60.3)	2.3 (12.2)	18.9
<i>The Shape of Things</i>	2003	UK/US/FR	No	4	0.7 (100)	-	-	0.7
<i>Ned Kelly</i>	2003	UK/US/AUS/ FR	No	-	0.1 (1.2)	6.4 (98.8)	0.8 (12.3)	6.5
<i>Pride &amp; Prejudice</i>	2005	UK/US/FR	Yes	28	38.4 (31.7)	82.7 (68.3)	26.5 (21.9)	121.1

#### Family

<i>Thunderbirds</i>	2004	UK/FR	Yes	57	6.8 (24.1)	21.4 (75.9)	10.1 (35.8)	28.2
<i>Nanny McPhee</i>	2005	UK/US/FR	Yes	25	47.1 (38.5)	75.3 (61.5)	29.1 (23.8)	122.4

#### Thriller/Action

<i>Plunkett and Maclean</i>	1999	UK	Yes	-	0.4 (100)	-	-	0.4
<i>The Interpreter</i>	2005	UK/US/FR/ GER	No	80	72.7 (44.6)	90.2 (55.4)	13.7 (8.4)	162.9
<i>Smokin' Aces</i>	2006	UK/US	No	17	35.7 (62.6)	21.3 (37.4)	6.2 (10.9)	57.0
<i>United 93</i>	2006	UK/US/FR	No	15	31.4 (41.2)	44.8 (58.8)	5.3 (7.0)	76.2
<i>Catch a Fire</i>	2006	UK/US/FR/ SA	No	-	4.2 (75.0)	1.4 (25.0)	0.1 (1.8)	5.6
<b>TOTAL</b>					<b>758.38 (31.8)</b>	<b>1629.2 (68.2)</b>	<b>433.3 (18.1)</b>	<b>2387.6</b>

Sources: Boxofficemojo.com (box office data) imdb.com (origin and production budgets)

**Table 2 –WT<sup>2</sup> slate by genre 1999-2006 (all figures in \$USD million)**

Title /Genre	Year	Origin	Culturally British?	Prod. Budget	Domestic BO (%)	International BO (%)	UK BO (%)	Worldwide BO
<b>Comedy / Comedy Drama</b>								
<i>Ali G Indahouse</i>	2002	UK/US/FR/ GER	Yes	5	-	23.2 (100)	14.8 (63.8)	23.2
<i>Shaun of the Dead</i>	2004	UK/US/FR	Yes	4	13.5 (45.2)	16.4 (54.8)	12.3 (41.1)	29.9
<i>The Calcium Kid</i>	2004	UK	Yes	-	-	0.1 (100)	0.1 (100)	0.1
<i>Mickeybo and Me</i>	2004	UK	Yes	5	-	0.4 (100)	0.4 (100)	0.4
<i>Inside I'm Dancing</i>	2004	UK/FR/IRE	No	-	0.02 (1.6)	1.2 (98.4)	1.2 (98.4)	1.2
<i>Sixty Six</i>	2006	UK/FR	Yes	-	0.2 (11.1)	1.6 (88.9)	1.5 (83.3)	1.8
<b>Drama</b>								
<i>Billy Elliot</i>	2000	UK/FR	Yes	5	21.9 (20.1)	87.2 (79.9)	25.2 (23.1)	109.1
<b>Horror</b>								
<i>Longtime Dead</i>	2002	UK/FR	Yes	-	-	13.1 (100)	2.5 (19.1)	13.1

<i>My Little Eye</i>	2002	UK/US/FR/ CAN	No	2	-	6.8 (100)	4.0 (58.8)	6.8
<i>Gone</i>	2006	UK/AUS	No	-	-	-	-	0.0
<b>TOTAL</b>					<b>35.62 (19.2)</b>	<b>150 (80.8)</b>	<b>62 (33.4)</b>	<b>185.6</b>

Sources: Boxofficemojo.com (box office data) imdb.com (origin and production budgets).

equivalent. The disadvantage is that you're going to be compared to Hollywood. If you're making movies for a living, the frustration quickly becomes not about getting your film made, but about getting your film seen by as many people as you possibly can. It seemed obvious to me when I was making independent films that the things audiences liked were production values, famous actors and genre – stories that they could relate to. Eric and I decided to apply that to the sorts of films that we made.<sup>14</sup>

By combining the dominant aesthetic and cultural forms of Hollywood film-making – production values, star actors and genre – with British characters, settings and cultural themes, Working Title reasserted its reputation as the pre-eminent producer of globally oriented British cinema. Within this broad creative framework, however, there was considerable room for diversity, ranging from the 'event' films of the main slate which typically included higher production values and established Hollywood film stars to the 'portfolio' films of WT2, which produced films with lower production values and stars primarily established in the UK. This diversity was, however, substantially reduced when WT2 was folded into Working Title in 2005, continuing as a 'label' into 2006 before being disbanded (Hoffman 2006: 2).

### **Gate III: Distribution**

The position that Working Title had negotiated with Universal was replicated in its relationship with the studio's international distribution company, United International Pictures (UIP). Originally operated as a joint venture between MGM, Paramount and Universal, UIP was headquartered in London but operated directly in 35 'international' markets outside the 'domestic' market of the US and Canada, and subcontracted third-party distributors in dozens of other territories. Despite MGM leaving the UIP partnership in 2001, the company continued to distribute 35 to 40 films a year, including films produced by Dreamworks, which had a distribution agreement with Universal.

At the point of PFE's integration, Universal had planned to replace UIP with PFEI, PFE's international network of thirteen marketing and distribution companies, which was renamed Universal Pictures International (UPI) in 1999. The plan was, however, soon reversed and the venture was largely dismantled. One of the few UPI assets to survive was its London-

based marketing division run by former PFEI executive, David Livingstone, who was appointed UPI President of Marketing and Distribution. The unit was initially given the remit of marketing Working Title's films alongside international marketing of Universal's specialty films and international acquisitions (Dawtrety 2000: 16). The division was later brought in-house at Working Title with Livingstone appointed the company's President of Worldwide Marketing. Explaining the rationale for transition from Working Title's perspective, Livingstone notes:

I think they'd grown used to being in control of their own destiny and even though I was working for another company, I'd worked very, very closely and very well with them. I think they suddenly thought 'God, if we suddenly end up going through this big faceless company, UIP, we will be one of 35 films they're releasing each year' whereas they'd got used to, with me there, being one of ten films . . . [UIP] had so many films to release that it was a slightly homogenised environment. I don't want to be too critical of it, but they had so many films and so many bosses and so many territories that it was quite hard to get attention. We used to, basically, deliver to them what we wanted and try and make it work that way, by basically delivering them a completed package.<sup>15</sup>

In practice, Livingstone worked closely with Bevan and Fellner to produce briefs that were then distributed to third-party creative agencies which designed the marketing materials for Working Title's films. The results would be subject to further refinement before being submitted to Universal for approval and ultimately delivery to UIP. Thereafter Livingstone would manage the publicity and promotional campaigns which simultaneously accompanied the release of Working Title's films. The distribution and marketing budget for any given film was, however, initially planned at the green-lighting stage and scaled in relation to the film's production budget, an approach which favoured Working Title's medium-budget 'event' films over low-budget 'portfolio' films. As UIP's former Chairman and CEO, Paul Oneile, explains:

It was on a film-by-film basis. If you go back to the green-lighting process, obviously Universal was heavily involved in the green-lighting process for Working Title product and that would be all part of it. This is how much the film production was going to cost and on that basis – provided the film turns out as we all hope it will – then we will look at spending 'x' dollars marketing it around the world and 'y' on prints. Once the film has been produced you look at it and say 'yes, it has turned out as well as we'd hoped' ... so we'll go ahead with the release strategy as we had anticipated it during the greenlighting process. It never actually worked that way because it became much more complicated and I'd like to think much more business-like.<sup>16</sup>

While an assessment of the completed film could prompt a revision of the initial distribution and marketing budget upwards or downwards, the release strategy was also predicated upon an assessment of the market potential of the film by territory and, ultimately,

the establishment of market success or failure upon release. As UIP's former COO and President, Andrew Cripps, explains:

We would agree collaboratively with the studio how much we were going to spend. If you were unsure about the international prospects of a film you wouldn't release all your territories day-and-date, you'd go on a staggered release plan and say, 'here are the three or four markets where the feedback from the territories was the most optimistic' or 'we think that they can do a good job based on these historical precedents' ... We're going to try it in those markets first, and then we would, and then if they were successful then you roll it out in another sequence of markets. If they weren't successful, you wouldn't spend any more in other markets and you could claw back your losses. Once it was in release it was up to the territory team to push it as hard as they could to make sure they keep it playing on the screen for as long as they can, negotiating with exhibition. Typically most of your marketing is spent up front anyway with a little bit of sustaining marketing that you would build into the campaign, but once it's in release you're trying to get as much as you can out of it.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly, establishing commercial success in the theatrical market bore a direct relation to the prospects of Universal's international sister companies, Universal Pictures International Home Video, Universal International Television Distribution and Universal Networks International. 'There are very few examples of a failed theatrical movie that went on to be a success in other windows,' Cripps explains: 'In your first window to the consumer, you have to make sure that is a success or everything else suffers . . . every movie is its own brand, and you're having to establish that brand every time you go to the marketplace.'<sup>18</sup> As Cripps goes on to point out, however, once the theatrical release strategy began to unfold UIP was ideally placed to negotiate favourable terms with exhibitors:

There were only seven Hollywood studios and UIP represented three of them. So, if you were an exhibitor, the one company you probably didn't want to get off-side was UIP, or whoever happened to have the best line up of films coming out. But inevitably, what made UIP work so incredibly well was that the movie business is a very cyclical business. So, when Paramount's having a great year, sometimes, Universal wasn't having such a good year. UIP could balance that out and they had a pretty strong slate of films year-in and year-out even though one of the component parts may not be having its best film year ever. If you're an exhibitor you knew, inevitably, 40 per cent of your hit movies were going to come from UIP. UIP was very careful, I would stress, not to abuse it ... but that implied leverage meant that you were probably going to get your films played, you were going to get your trailers played, and you're going to get paid on time.<sup>19</sup>

Working Title's slate of 24 films found its audience largely in the international market which accounted for \$1.62 billion (68.2 per cent) of worldwide gross theatrical revenue as opposed



to the domestic market which contributed £758.38 million (31.8 per cent). Within the consolidated international figure, the UK accounted for a substantial \$433.3 million (18.1 per cent) of the worldwide gross. When the ‘culturally British’ films within the main slate are considered alone, however, the international and UK revenue components were proportionally yet more pronounced at 73.4 per cent (\$1.29 billion) and 21.2 per cent (\$374.2 million) respectively. Within this subsection, the romantic comedy, comedy and comedy drama were Working Title’s greatest commercial successes. Four romantic comedies – *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Love Actually* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004) – each grossed substantially over \$200 million and collectively over \$1 billion worldwide. Two other comedies, *About a Boy* (2002) and *Johnny English* (2003), each grossed over \$100 million, and further films outside the comedy genre, *Nanny McPhee* and *Pride & Prejudice*, achieved the same feat. In contrast, Working Title’s non-culturally British (and typically American) main slate fared comparatively poorly, grossing \$628.3 million, of which \$292.1 million (46.5 per cent) was domestic revenue, \$336.2 million (53.5 per cent) was international revenue and \$59.1 million (9.4 per cent) was UK revenue. Significantly, only one film within this category, *The Interpreter* (2005), exceeded \$100 million worldwide.

Unsurprisingly, the overall commercial success of WT2 films was limited when compared to Working Title’s slate but showed even more success proportionally in the international and UK markets. The entire slate grossed \$185.6 million worldwide, of which \$35.6 million (19.2 per cent) was domestic revenue, \$150 million (80.8 per cent) was international revenue and \$62 million (33.4 per cent) was UK revenue. This trend was, however, distorted by a number of UK only releases (*The Calcium Kid* (2004), *Mickybo and Me* (2004)) or international only releases (*Long Time Dead* (2002), *My Little Eye* (2002), *Ali G Indahouse* (2002)). The outstanding success of the WT2 slate was *Billy Elliot* which grossed \$109.2 million worldwide, followed by *Shaun of the Dead* at \$30 million and *Ali G Indahouse* at \$23.3 million. This was supported with relative success in the horror genre with *Long Time Dead* and *My Little Eye* taking \$13.1 million and \$6.8 million respectively. The rest of the company’s output, however, failed to reach \$2 million at the box office. Assessing the worldwide market for Working Title’s films, Fellner explains:

We’re making international films as opposed to making domestic centric films. American film producers, predominantly, [make domestic centric films]. It’s just because of who they are and where they’re based and because of who we are and where we’re based. I believe that in a multiplex in Europe, if there are two good films and one has a slightly European sensibility and one has an American sensibility – and they’re both good – I think people will choose the European one and in America the opposite

... You try to make everybody feel that they're getting what they want. Ultimately, in America, it's very, very hard to make them feel like they're getting what they want because what they really want is what they really want, and that's American films. They don't want foreign films. Even though our films are made in English, they're perceived as foreign films.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly, the international market for Hollywood films began to overtake the domestic market by increasingly meaningful margins in the same period and thus began to more closely resemble the market profile that Working Title's films had realised since the 1990s. Between 2000 and 2006, the international gross theatrical revenue of the major studios rose sharply from \$8.26 billion to \$16.3 billion, while domestic gross revenue grew modestly from \$7.66 billion to \$9.14 billion. The resulting swing in market share saw international rise from 52 to 64 per cent of the worldwide revenue while domestic fell from 48 to 36 per cent (MPAA 2007). This situation was one among several factors which prompted the reorganisation of Universal's international distribution and marketing infrastructure. In September 2005 Universal and Paramount announced the partial break-up of UIP with the company's fifteen larger territories divided between the two studios and UIP remaining as a joint venture in 20 smaller territories (McNary 2005: 1).

By the start of 2006, Snider had left Universal to become Co-Chair and CEO of Dreamworks and was replaced by Universal Vice Chair, Marc Shmuger, and David Linde, the co-chair of Universal's 'specialty' sister studio, Focus Features. Significantly, Shmuger and Linde had respectively held responsibility for worldwide distribution and marketing at Universal and Focus and began to shift the strategic focus of the studio by increasingly linking production and marketing with a keen eye on expanding the international market. By January 2007, two new theatrical distribution companies, Universal Pictures International (UPI) and Paramount Pictures International (PPI), launched their own distribution and marketing subsidiaries in the territories in which they had conceded former UIP companies to one other (Hollinger, 2007). In the same month, Shmuger and Linde rewarded Bevan and Fellner with new seven-year contracts, suggesting that Working Title would maintain its exclusive relationship with Universal until at least 2014 (Thompson and Kemp 2007:1). As Universal's international production company par excellence, Working Title was ideally situated to take advantage of the studio's new international terrain.

## **Conclusion**

Working Title's transition from PFE to Universal is a narrative of both continuity and change. The company succeeded in maintaining its status as a subsidiary of a multinational media conglomerate and continued to negotiate the key stages of gatekeeping with its successive parent companies. The most significant changes for Working Title were related to the scale of its new parent company and the resources which it provided. On one hand, Working Title remained an important supplier of 'event' and 'portfolio' films, but was one among many production companies under contract to Universal. On the other, UIP and later UPI/UIP maintained direct distribution and marketing in 35 territories in the burgeoning international market, alongside Universal-owned distribution in the ancillary markets of home video and television. Thus the Hollywood studio had the potential to expose Working Title's films to a vast worldwide audience. Such factors once again point to Working Title's unique status as a British production company which is a component part of the contemporary Hollywood studio system and based both in London and Los Angeles.

The primary focus of this article has been to examine the processes and structures which link Working Title to Universal and thus shape the creative and commercial ecology in which the company operates. As the centralised filter which connects the key stages of gatekeeping – development, green-lighting and distribution – the so-called 'ten column' has a profound impact upon what is developed and produced and how it finds its audience. Significantly, the ten column is created by distribution and marketing personnel who respectively forecast revenue and produce marketing budgets for projects in development on a film-by-film, territory-by-territory and platform-by-platform basis. Inevitably, such forecasting evaluates the worldwide commercial prospects of films in development based upon the historical success or failure of comparable films. At one level such assessments are about form, particularly the market values ascribed to creative elements such as genre, production values and star actors. At another level they are about content, and the market values ascribed to certain representations of Britain and 'Britishness'.

The evidence for such claims is, of course, to be found in an assessment of Working Title's output. In the period under study, the comedy – and more specifically the romantic comedy – became by far the company's most frequently produced and commercially successful genres. In turn, scholarship about the Working Title rom-com in particular has highlighted the dominant versions of Britain and 'Britishness' (or more typically England and Englishness) which these films offer including, among other things, a preoccupation with white middle- and upper-class characters and idyllic metropolitan locations. Such representations are not, of course, the sole preserve of Working Title's films and have an extensive presence in Britain's

canonical literature, theatre and film. Ultimately, this version of the nation serves a similar function to genre, production values and stars insofar as it also constitutes a marker of audience recognition and, potentially, popular appeal. While the output of WT2 succeeded in offering more regionally and socially diverse representations of Britain alongside diminished production values and star appeal, most of these films did not succeed in securing a significant audience and the company was shuttered. Thus the versions of Britain and Britishness that persists in the media ecology of the Hollywood studio system are those which most closely conform to the dominant representations of the nation already in circulation. The audience for such ‘culturally British’ representations in Working Title’s output is, however, largely to be found in the composite ‘international’ marketplace, of which the UK is by some measure the largest national component. Rather than taking a ‘cultural detour’ through the American market, the rest of the world is arguably making an excursion into the British market, albeit aboard a Hollywood tour bus.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with the author, 14 March 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the author, 26 November 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with the author, 14 March 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, 20 September 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the author, 22 May 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author, 11 March 2014

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author, 13 July 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the author, 26 November 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with the author, 14 March 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, 12 August 2014 and subsequent email correspondence on 20 August 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> . It should be noted that the data about Working Title's production budgets is taken from the most comprehensive publicly available source, IMDB.com, but that the provenance of this data not otherwise verifiable.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the author, 6 August 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with the author, 6 May 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author, 23 February 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the author, 17 September 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the author, 23 August 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author, 14 March 2014.