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DECONSTRUCTING
DIRTY DANCING

“...our Baby’s gonna change the world”

An Introduction to *Dirty Dancing*

The synopsis of *Dirty Dancing* (1987) is simple. In the summer of 1963, the Houseman family takes a vacation to the tranquil Kellerman resort in the Catskill Mountains, where the youngest daughter, the bookish but beautiful Frances ‘Baby’ Houseman, falls for the resort’s roguish dance instructor, Johnny Castle. Their admiration for each other is tested as their different social backgrounds and class expectations clash. However, by being in each other’s company they each learn and grow to become better people. *Dirty Dancing* is the very definition of a cultural – and, one might add, surprise – phenomenon. *Dirty Dancing* couldn’t rely on the film critics to send the masses to the box office. American film critic Roger Ebert, in a one star review, called *Dirty Dancing* a “tired and relentlessly predictable story of love between kids from different backgrounds.”¹ So instead the film was propelled by word of mouth from the enthusiastic audience responses. *Dirty Dancing* demonstrated to the film industry how much power the movie-going public had to make or break a film at the box office.

Looking at the cultural trends of 1987, the year of the film’s release, and in a wider perspective the decade as a whole, the most successful films were predominantly male-orientated action flicks. The hit films of that year were the Arnold Schwarzenegger-starring *Predator* and *The Running Man*, and also action movies such as *Lethal Weapon* and *RoboCop*. These films were gruesome allegories to machismo and aggression that fuelled the American jingoism of Ronald Reagan’s administration. A film that featured a likable, complex, and sympathetic female heroine, one who took ownership of her sexuality in a non-aggressive manner, was extremely rare. The Eighties was a decade in which the conservative family values of Reagan saw the gains of the women’s movement of the Sixties and Seventies as a negative,

corrupting force. In some respects the momentum gained was reversed by the negative portrayal of women in film, television, and other media. This conservative interpretation of women's rights, or perhaps more correctly, a backlash against those rights, was reflected in Hollywood films in which "women were set against women; women's anger at their social circumstances was depoliticized and displayed as personal depression instead; and women's lives were framed as morality tales in which the 'good mother' wins and the independent woman gets punished."² One of the biggest box-office hits of 1987 was *Fatal Attraction*, a film in which a casual fling between New York attorney Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) and book editor Alexandra Forrest (Glenn Close) leads to Forrest stalking Gallagher and his wife and eventually climaxes in a violent showdown in which Forrest is killed by the 'good mother', in this case Gallagher's wife. The term 'bunny boiler' descends directly from Alexandra Forrest's sadistic act of boiling Gallagher's pet bunny rabbit.³ This was the perceived image of wealthy, successful, independent women in the Eighties, and Hollywood was determined to silence them. In retaliation *Dirty Dancing's* screenwriter and co-producer, Eleanor Bergstein, had a far more righteous agenda. Bergstein "promoted herself and her films as a liberal counterattack"⁴ to the perceived negativity of female characters by the media. She incorporated strong, independent, and sympathetic women into the narratives of her films (*It's My Turn* – 1980) and her books (*Advancing Paul Newman* – 1973).

The criteria of *Dirty Dancing's* production, being a small independent and also "a period piece...geared primarily toward a young female audience,"⁵ made the film a sleeper hit at the box office, but the longevity the film has acquired has very much been a "happy accident that took even those responsible for it by surprise rather than a product of meticulous franchise design."⁶ Let us take a look at the facts: a box-office taking of \$10 million by the film's tenth day on screen; \$170 million worldwide from a production budget of just \$6 million; the film still to this day rakes up a million DVD sales per year.⁷ The soundtrack's satisfying mix of yearning early Sixties ballads ('In the Still of the Night' – The Five Satins; 'Cry to Me' – Solomon Burke), wild rock 'n' roll ('Do You Love Me' – The Contours) and Eighties power ballads ('She's Like the Wind' – Patrick Swayze, 'Hungry Eyes' – Eric Carmen) is the ninth bestselling album of all time and is the third bestselling movie soundtrack (after *Saturday Night Fever* and *The Bodyguard*).⁸

Eleanor Bergstein based the story on the vacations she and her family used to take to the Catskill Mountains when she was a teenager: "Almost

everything in the movie comes from my life, but that's not [my exact life] directly in the movie...I am a doctor's daughter from Brooklyn who has an older sister, and I was a teenage Mambo queen. I went dirty dancing in high school and have trophies...[and] I was a girl who wanted to change the world."⁹

Vestron Pictures, the studio that produced the film, was "a theatrical production and distribution organization that branched out from the home video market in the mid 1980's"¹⁰ and with this branching out began to make "relatively low budget films that, after a brief theatrical release, would be exploited further by its core business, the home video division."¹¹ Despite the huge success of *Dirty Dancing*, Vestron struggled to produce another successful film. The only one that came close was the 1988 Jeff Goldblum and Jim Carrey vehicle *Earth Girls Are Easy*. Vestron was declared bankrupt in the early 1990s. *Dirty Dancing's* legal rights shifted to other companies who failed to capitalize on the film's major success. The original fanfare created by the film was hard to replicate because of this transition from studio to studio, so "potential plans to further exploit *Dirty Dancing* in the market had to be abandoned and later resigned."¹² The film did spawn an unsuccessful 1988 television spin-off that lasted for only 11 episodes. It also failed to include any cast members from the original film.¹³ A straight-to-DVD prequel/remake, *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004), set in Cuba just prior to the Revolution of 1959, was also a critical and commercial failure. The film was an exact replica of the original narrative, a well-to-do girl who falls for a down-at-heel boy, and also utilized the Cuban rhythm-dancing techniques that were employed in the original film. Patrick Swayze made a brief cameo appearance, confusingly not as his character Johnny Castle, but as an unnamed dance instructor. To the core audience, *Dirty Dancing* is a singular entity.

Dirty Dancing's two lead actors, Jennifer Grey and Patrick Swayze, already had simmering careers prior to the film, but the best known actor to appear at the time was seasoned Broadway actor Jerry Orbach, who had a minor, yet significant, role as Frances' father, the liberal and socially aware Dr. Jake Houseman. Jennifer Grey had had supporting roles in films such as *Red Dawn* (1984, also starring Swayze) and was Ferris Bueller's nagging sister Jeanie in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). Patrick Swayze had appeared alongside Rob Lowe, Matt Dillon and Tom Cruise in Francis Ford Coppola's teenage gang film *The Outsiders* (1984). He also had a prominent role in the three-part TV mini-series *North and South* (1985, '86, '94). However, it was

Dirty Dancing that defined their careers and sealed their fate as icons of their era. It pigeonholed them with characters they would struggle to shake off for the rest of their film careers. Swayze perhaps fared better than Grey. His career soared in the early Nineties with box-office smashes like *Ghost* (1990) and *Point Break* (1991). He also starred in independent films such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), and *Donnie Darko* (2001). Despite a Golden Globe nomination, and being a greatly talented actress, Grey failed to follow up on *Dirty Dancing*'s success. However, a more bizarre factor in Grey's decline as a leading actress was the two rhinoplasty procedures that changed her distinctive nose and made her virtually unrecognizable to the public and even close associates. Grey stated that she "went in the operating theatre a celebrity – and came out anonymous."¹⁴ Her career was greatly affected by this series of operations. Though Grey did reemerge two decades after *Dirty Dancing*'s success with her appearance and eventual victory (with dance partner Derek Hough) on the televised dance competition *Dancing with the Stars* (2005–) in 2011.

It has been the original embodiment of *Dirty Dancing* that has maintained the momentum for this long. No substitute has been good enough in the eyes of *Dirty Dancing*'s devoted audience. The film's twentieth anniversary prompted a fresh re-release of the film, featuring additional footage, deleted scenes and commentaries from the cast and crew. A revised and robust soundtrack, featuring all the familiar ditties, was also reissued. Perhaps the biggest success fashioned from the original film was *Dirty Dancing: The Classic Story on Stage*, adapted from screen to stage by the film's screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein. The musical spent five years on the West End stage before becoming a touring event that has seen sell-out performances the world over. Arguably, the musical was perhaps the first time an audience could collectively experience the joy of *Dirty Dancing*, and witness Frances' triumph in real time.

I felt compelled to write this book after the publication of my first book *U.ESS.AY: Politics and Humanity in American Film* (Zero Books), which featured the essay 'Nobody Puts America in the Corner: *Dirty Dancing* and the End of Innocence'. In that essay I had tied Frances' own loss of personal and sexual innocence to that of America's loss of innocence in the 1960s. This was a decade that was "ushered in with a growing sense of possibility for political change," and that brought about great social upheaval and active movements towards racial and gender equality. Yet the decade ended on a sour note in which "myths underlying the foreign policy of containment (in Vietnam), the belief that domestic affluence ensured social peace, and the

basic optimism that had dominated American life and spirit since World War II were buried forever.”¹⁵ Despite the progress in internal social policies, a rot was setting in.

Dirty Dancing has been labeled as the “*Star Wars* for girls,”¹⁶ an escapist female fantasy film. The similarities are certainly embedded. Frances, like Luke Skywalker, battles her father in order to become a meaningful adult; she overcomes her own inabilities and drawbacks. Luke learns to use ‘the force’, Frances learns to dance. Both these goals seem at first unattainable, and require serious devotion, yet they prove to their elders that they have the ability. *Dirty Dancing* could also easily be described, along with many other films, as a boyfriend’s burden. Over the course of three decades, innumerable males have slumped down on couches, arms folded, brows furrowed, and eyes in a state of continuous rolling, as they are subjected yet again to Frances and Johnny’s love story. All these men are fully aware that they are taking one for the collective team. All accepting of the fact that the balance of brawn and elegance portrayed by Patrick Swayze is unobtainable in reality. Over the course of continuous viewings, and as I became older and more comfortable with my triumphs and failings as a male, I began to understand and appreciate the film as much more than a naff romance or a tacky musical. There are many subtexts within *Dirty Dancing* that betray the simplistic narrative and add a deep complexity to the film. *Dirty Dancing* has some serious social themes working under its flaying skirt: class politics; the failings of liberalism in Sixties America and beyond; abortion; courting and sex out of wedlock; the collapse of the family unit; and all this set against a generational shift that was imminent in 1963, the year the film takes place. Take away the euphoric *Dancing*, and all that is left is dingy and *Dirty*, a melodrama of hopeless teenage angst, and something that we now must explore.