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# The Politics of Independence: *The China Syndrome* (1979), Hollywood Liberals and Antinuclear Campaigning

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***Abstract:*** *This article draws, among other things, on press clippings files and scripts found in various archives to reconstruct the complex production history, the marketing and the critical reception of the nuclear thriller* The China Syndrome *(1979). It shows that with this project, several politically motivated filmmakers, most notably Jane Fonda, who starred in the film and whose company IPC Films produced it, managed to inject their antinuclear stance into Hollywood entertainment. Helped by the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant two weeks into the film's release,* The China Syndrome *gained a high profile in public debates about nuclear energy in the U.S. Jane Fonda, together with her then husband Tom Hayden, a founding member of the 1960s "New Left" who had entered mainstream politics in the California Democratic Party by the late 1970s, complemented her involvement in the film with activities aimed at grass roots mobilisation against nuclear power.*

If the 1979 Columbia release *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979) is remembered today, it is mainly because of an astonishing coincidence. This thriller about an almost catastrophic accident at a nuclear power plant was released just twelve days before eerily similar events began to unfold at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Harrisburg in Pennsylvania on 28 March 1979, resulting in, as the cover of J. Samuel Walker's authoritative account of the event calls it, "the worst accident in the history of commercial nuclear power in the United States" (Walker). In light of this coincidence, it is easy to overlook the fact that even before the Three Mile Island accident, *The China Syndrome* had been a success with critics and audiences, and, what is more, it had been designed to serve the progressive political agendas of various people involved in its long, drawn-out production history. The most prominent of these was the film's star Jane Fonda, whose company IPC had produced the film.

*The China Syndrome* came halfway through a period of unprecedented commercial and critical success for Fonda in Hollywood which lasted from 1977 to 1981; during this period she appeared in ten films, half of which were IPC productions, and all of which were released by the major studios (Krämer 105–7). This period had been preceded by five years in which Fonda had largely withdrawn from mainstream Hollywood filmmaking and had arguably become better known as a political activist than as a movie star. Her public profile had by no means been diminished during her withdrawal from Hollywood; indeed she was listed as one of the most admired women in the U.S. in various surveys from 1973 onwards (Krämer 111).

Upon her return to Hollywood, Fonda was able to exert considerable control over the films she appeared in, both through her star power and through running her own production company, and she used this control to further her political objectives. In doing so, she worked

closely with her husband Tom Hayden, one of the founding fathers of the 1960s "New Left". At the same time that Fonda relaunched her mainstream Hollywood career in 1976, Hayden completed his transition from 1960s radicalism to mainstream party politics by running for the U.S. Senate from California. Despite generous funding from Fonda, he lost in the Democratic primary, yet managed to form a grass-roots organisation called the Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED), which became influential in California's Democratic Party (Talbot and Zheutlin 138–41).

When, in the wake of the successful release of *The China Syndrome* and of the Three Mile Island accident, Fonda and Hayden toured the U.S., speaking at rallies against nuclear energy, their broader objective was to argue for public control of big corporations, which was the cornerstone of CED's programme. The couple also promoted gender equality as a crucial aspect of a just social, political and economic order. Indeed, one year after the release of *The China Syndrome*, Hayden concluded his book *The American Future: New Visions Beyond Old Frontiers* by describing the antinuclear movement and the women's movement as centrepieces in the political mobilisation of Americans: "At the outset of the seventies a nuclear future was assumed inevitable. Now, after postcards and marches, petitions, teach-ins, and civil disobedience, solar has come into its own as a viable alternative and the cry 'No Nukes' echoes on Wall Street. Perhaps even more significant has been the steady expansion of a woman's movement seeking not only equal rights but also a redefinition of American values" (Hayden 286). For Hayden and Fonda, *The China Syndrome*, which combined its antinuclear message with feminist concerns, served as an important element in what from today's perspective was an astonishingly successful, albeit only temporary, mobilisation of Americans for progressive causes.

In this article, I first discuss the film's production history, before moving on to its marketing, reception and aftermath.[1] The article is based on two types of archival sources: scripts and clippings files. Although some scripts for Hollywood movies are published or made available on the Internet, the majority are only available in archival collections. The examination of several script versions for the same film allows us to reconstruct the development of a project; this development often takes dramatic turns, in particular in rare cases, such as the one examined in this article, where two separate projects are merged into one. It is worth noting that film scholars usually focus on the analysis of the finished film rather than the process of its production, while biographers often reconstruct the development of a particular project only on the basis of retrospective interviews; given the temporal distance to the reported events and each interviewee's limited and biased perspective, such interviews can be quite unreliable (Andersen 266–7; Bosworth ch. 32). For this article, I examined three script versions from 1976, 1977 and 1978 for *The China Syndrome* in the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills (Cook and Gray; Bridges; Gray, Cook and Bridges).

The second type of archival material this article draws on is clippings files. Most of the major public archives in the U.S. have, for many decades, compiled press clippings under a wide range of headings (usually including film titles and names). While some of the material collected in these files can also be found through searches in publicly accessible or commercial databases and digital archives, the further back in time we go, the more we are likely to find clippings in these files—such as articles from highly specialised magazines or small, local newspapers—which can not otherwise be easily found. For this article, I examined the files on Jane Fonda and on *The China Syndrome* as well as a compilation of reviews of the film at the Performing Arts Research Center of the New York Public Library

and the file on *The China Syndrome* at the German Film Institute (Deutsches Institut für Filmkunde; the German Film Institute's press clippings files are now housed at the Deutsche Bibliothek in Frankfurt am Main).

Based on this archival research, I show, first of all, that the people involved in *The China Syndrome* were able to use the financial resources, distribution networks and marketing muscle of the major studios for their own political (as well as financial) purposes, and, secondly, that, judging by this example, working in Hollywood is perfectly compatible with forms of political activism that draw on movie celebrity but are otherwise completely removed from the influence of the major studios. In other words, I want to suggest that Fonda and her collaborators maintained what we might call their "political independence" at the very heart of Hollywood.

**The Making of a Nuclear Thriller**

In April 1976, the *New York Times* announced: "Jane Fonda is back from the war" (Wilson 1). In an interview with the paper, Fonda revealed that, after several years in which she had focused on her political activism (most famously in the antiwar movement), she was now once again heavily involved in Hollywood movies. These included a heist comedy about, in Fonda's words, "a false American dream" (*Fun with Dick and Jane*, Ted Kotcheff, 1977), a historical drama about the political awakening of the writer Lillian Hellman (*Julia*, Fred Zinnemann, 1977), "a love story about a Vietnam veteran married to a conservative woman" (*Coming Home*, Hal Ashby, 1978), and "a mystery about a woman who works in a plutonium refining plant who gets murdered when she exposes a cover-up", which eventually was to turn into *The China Syndrome* (19).

The article highlighted the fact that Fonda had every intention of exerting as much control as possible over these projects, by producing some of them through her own company, and by demanding script changes on the others, for example the removal of material that "she found offensive to women, homosexuals, and ethnic groups" (19). More generally, Fonda declared: "I won't make pictures that portray women as shallow, passive and manipulated by sex" (19). Given the subject matter of Fonda's forthcoming films and her explicitly feminist stance towards filmmaking as well as her campaigning for Tom Hayden, who was then running in the California primaries for the Democratic nomination for elections to the U.S. senate, the *New York Times* concluded: "it is difficult to separate Jane Fonda the actress from Jane Fonda the political activist" (19).

Newspaper reports later that year similarly emphasised her politics as much as, and in some cases even more than, her return to mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. For example, noting that, despite Fonda's support, Tom Hayden had failed to receive the Democratic nomination, in November the *New York Sunday News* speculated about her own political ambitions: "Many acquaintances believe that Jane secretly would like to be a Senator herself" (Lardine 6). Fonda denied this, saying that she wanted to use her special talent as "a good actress" to make movies that "have something to say" (6). Prominent among the topics she had something to say about was the impact of the women's movement on American society and, in particular, on Hollywood, where, paradoxically, she argued, it had led to a "dearth of juicy female film roles" (6). According to Fonda, "old stereotypes are no longer valid. Most screenwriters realize this, but don't know what to replace them with" (6). This implied that Fonda herself would have to work closely with writers in the development of

suitable roles.[2] A second topic that Fonda was very vocal about was the shortcomings of the American political "system". She told the *New York Sunday News*: "The big corporations have taken over the government and the economy. They are destroying democracy in this country" (6).

It is easy to see that this critique of big corporations as well as Fonda's demand for "juicy female film roles" were underpinning the nuclear-themed project she had outlined to the *New York Times* in April. Although neither Fonda nor the *New York Times* spelled it out, the story outline she presented—featuring a female employee at a plutonium refining plant, revelations of a cover-up and her death—clearly referenced the real-life case of Karen Silkwood. Silkwood was a key figure in the movement against nuclear energy, because in 1974 she had become what sociologist Jerome Price calls the movement's first "martyr" (Price 104). Silkwood had been a worker and union activist at a plutonium reprocessing plant. After having been exposed to intense radiation at work and, mysteriously, in her home, she died in a car accident while driving to a meeting with a *New York Times* reporter and a union official to whom she wanted to deliver material questioning the plant's safety (Rashke).

Over the next few years, both the women's movement, through the National Organization of Women, and antinuclear campaigners, through Ralph Nader's Citizens Movement to Stop Nuclear Power, took up Silkwood's cause, demanding official investigations, bringing law suits against her employer, and, more generally, publicising her story in the media (Price 104–8). By 1976 Silkwood had thus become a well-known and highly politicised figure, which made her an ideal subject for a politically motivated Hollywood movie.

Fonda's interest in the Silkwood story is an example of the intimate connection between her film work and her—as well as her husband's—political work. The income she intended to generate from the mainstream Hollywood films her company IPC produced and from her work as an actress in films made by other companies was to be used to finance the operations of Hayden's Campaign for Economic Democracy (Krämer 108). At the same time, both her IPC and her non-IPC films were selected so as to deal with key themes on CED's agenda, and campaign activities were sometimes tied in with the release of Fonda's movies.

The "Founding Statement of the Campaign for Economic Democracy" adopted by a meeting of Californian activists in February 1977 opens with a terrifying vision of the environmental and human costs of the "pursuit of individual wealth, status and power"—low-quality food, paved-over land, mass unemployment, high prices, pollution, widespread cancer.[3] The organisation's main objective is defined as "letting the public have a real voice in economic decisions, by controlling giant corporations by directing investment to productive and human ends" (Hayden 304). The founding statement explicitly mentions corporate powers aiming to prevent the public regulation of nuclear energy. It then lists fourth among the organisation's main "Principles" "An *energy policy* stressing solar energy and conservation". In eighth place comes: "A real *equality of opportunity* ... for minorities and women" (308; emphasis in original).

In line with CED's agenda, most of Fonda's films of this period—ranging from the 1977 comedy *Fun with Dick and Jane* to the thriller *Rollover* (Alan J. Pakula, 1981)—have markedly anticorporate themes, critically portraying illegal business practices as well as the

legal exploitation of employees and also, more generally, the commercialisation of every sphere of human life and the damaging impact of all this on the natural and built environment (Krämer 108). In addition, the majority of the ten films Fonda released between 1977 and 1981 deal centrally with gender issues, and in most of them Fonda plays a somewhat conventional female character who undergoes a form of political awakening and subsequently changes her life. Thus, housewives learn to go beyond traditional gender roles and attitudes in *Fun with Dick and Jane* and in the Vietnam drama *Coming Home*, while working women develop a new political consciousness regarding foreign affairs, sexism in the workplace and/or corporate malfeasance in *Julia*, the contemporary Western *The Electric Horseman* (Sydney Pollack, 1979) and the office comedy *Nine to Five* (Colin Higgins, 1980).

The Silkwood project fits the above formula. In her autobiography, Fonda reports that in the planned film she had intended to play a TV reporter who, despite the increasingly strong emphasis in local news on attractive presenters and entertaining stories, gets involved in Silkwood's case (Fonda, *My Life So Far*, 375–6). The planned film thus combined a critique of the media and nuclear industries with the stories of two women who go against the expectations and interests of their corporate employers. Screenwriter and former *Rolling Stone* reporter Joe Eszterhas, who was asked to work on the script, remembers that MGM executives were concerned about the project's apparently left-leaning politics and its propagandistic nature, whereas Fonda and Eszterhas argued that the film would emphasise the "human dimension", with the "message" coming "out of the facts" (Eszterhas 134).

In the end the project moved to Columbia, where executive Roz Heller suggested that it could be combined with another antinuclear movie concurrently in development at the studio (Fonda, *My Life So Far* 325–6; Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" 26; Rafferty, "Politicising Stardom" 172). The intriguing title of this second movie—"The China Syndrome"—referred to a term used by nuclear engineers and science writers to label the worst case scenario for an accident at a nuclear power plant, whereby the cooling system for the reactor core fails, the nuclear fuel rods melt, and the whole core burns into the ground, slowly tunnelling through, as it were, to China on the other side of the planet, while releasing huge amounts of radioactivity (Price 75).

The term "China Syndrome" had gained some currency in 1975 with the publication by Reader's Digest Press of John G. Fuller's *We Almost Lost Detroit*, an account of an accident in 1966 at the Fermi fast breeder reactor near Detroit; the book placed this accident in the context of a long line of nuclear incidents in the U.S. (Fuller 100–1). In addition to highlighting the "awesome possibility of the 'China Syndrome'" across several decades, Fuller's book took its near-apocalyptic title from a statement made by a nuclear engineer after the Fermi accident: "Let's face it, we almost lost Detroit" (231).

Referencing the whole history of real and imagined nuclear accidents, Columbia's "The China Syndrome" project had been initiated in 1973/74 by the former documentary filmmaker and political activist Mike Gray, who wanted to use this political thriller to bring his left-wing politics into mainstream filmmaking (Talbot and Zheutlin 309–15). After extensive research in nuclear power plants and among nuclear scientists and engineers, Gray cowrote a script that focuses on a trio of documentary filmmakers investigating an incident at a nuclear power plant and on the plant's supervisor who, after mastering a dangerous loss-of-coolant incident, gradually turns against his employers upon discovering shortcuts taken during the plant's construction; he takes the plant hostage, and inadvertently initiates a series of events that almost leads to a truly catastrophic incident (Cook and Gray).

Like Fonda and Eszterhas, Gray encountered concerns about his project's politics among the producers he initially approached, one of them writing in his rejection letter that he did not want to be associated with "this political sabotage of the nuclear power industry", while Gray insisted that it was first and foremost a realistic and entertaining thriller (Talbot and Zheutlin 316). In 1976, the project finally found a producer in actor Michael Douglas and also an impressive cast, including both Douglas himself and Jack Lemmon (317–21). Lemmon had good credentials as an antinuclear campaigner. The previous year, he had endorsed the objectives of the Committee for Nuclear Responsibility with an open letter in which he stated that the nuclear fuel cycle would give terrorists the opportunity "to make their own atom bombs. The moment they demonstrate their first explosion here, we can kiss our civil liberties goodbye" (Price 79). Lemmon had also campaigned for the California Nuclear Safeguards Initiative (Proposition 15), which was, however, defeated at the ballot box in June 1976 (99–100). In 1977, when the original "China Syndrome" project was merged with Fonda's Silkwood project at Columbia, Lemmon narrated the PBS documentary *Plutonium: An Element of Risk* (Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" 26).

Meanwhile, Fonda had begun to reestablish herself as a major box-office attraction with a series of often critically acclaimed hit movies (Krämer 106–7), while rarely failing to mention her past and present political activism in interviews with the press. Thus, in March 1978, she argued in *New Times* for "democratic control of large corporations" (Kotkin 59), and in a February 1979 interview with *Cue* magazine she labelled herself "an economic democrat", jokingly explaining: "That's halfway between a hard-nosed communist and a rack-ribbed Republican" (Kiernan 18).

Columbia's antinuclear movie resulting from the merger of Fonda's and Gray's projects, which finally went into production in February 1978 with a new script cowritten by the film's director James Bridges (Talbot and Zheutlin 321; Bridges; Gray, Cook and Bridges), balanced the critique of unregulated and ruthlessly self-interested corporations with a strong emphasis on the plight of women in a man's world. Fonda's role as a TV reporter in the Silkwood project had been inserted into the story of Gray's version of "The China Syndrome". Instead of a team of documentary filmmakers, now it is Fonda's reporter and her camera crew investigating an incident at a nuclear power plant. At the same time, the story of Lemmon's plant supervisor has certain parallels to that of Karen Silkwood. His investigation into the unsafe construction of his plant and his contacts with the media lead to the attempted murder, in a staged car accident, of a member of Fonda's TV crew who is on the way to deliver the plant supervisor's evidence to a public hearing.

Thus, *The China Syndrome* arose from two parallel film projects about the nuclear industry—Jane Fonda's project about Karen Silkwood and Mike Gray's about a nuclear accident. The former we have to reconstruct from comments made both at the time and much later by Fonda and one of her collaborators, whereas the latter can be examined through a 1976 script that has made its way into a public archive. Both stories centre on a process of investigation, carried out by a female reporter in Fonda's project, and by a group of male documentary filmmakers in Gray's, and also on the activities of a whistle-blower (Silkwood in one case, the plant supervisor in the other). These structural and thematic parallels made it possible to blend the two stories into one, most notably by replacing the documentary team with a female reporter and her camera crew. This blending is documented in two archived script versions from 1977 and 1978, which give us access to the precise shape of the project at the time when Fonda first started talking about *The China Syndrome* (rather than the

previous Silkwood project) to the press in autumn 1977, one and a half years before the film's release.

## The Marketing and Reception of *The China Syndrome*

When talking about *The China Syndrome* to the press, from the outset Fonda emphasised that in addition to nuclear issues the film would focus on women and the media. Thus, she told the *New York Sunday News* in November 1977: "I will play a fiery, red-headed ex-model who is hired ... [by] a local television station in order to up the ratings, a woman who gets involved in a nuclear situation" (Licata L27). In her interview with *Cue* magazine six weeks before *The China Syndrome*'s release on 16 March 1979, Fonda also foregrounded gender issues by talking about her relationship with the women's movement, about changing roles for women in Hollywood, and about the fact that the story of *The China Syndrome* centres on a woman's struggle, in the process of which "she grows immensely and becomes a person of heroic dimensions" (Kiernan 18).

Such interviews were accompanied by practical action. In 1978 Fonda herself did some investigative reporting on the appalling working conditions for the largely female employees of a textile factory, calling for a boycott of the company's products in an article for *Public Employee Press* (Fonda, "Jane Fonda Smuggled" 19). When publicising *The China Syndrome* in March 1979, Fonda was very explicit about the film's anticorporate agenda and its links to Hayden's Campaign for Economic Democracy. She told the *New York Post*: "Corporate control of the economy is by far the biggest problem [today], and one of the things *The China Syndrome* is dealing with" (Silverman 23).

Advertising for the film revealed that its story revolved around an accident at a nuclear power plant, while also emphasising the mystery and threat surrounding the film's title, and the need for people, such as the character Fonda played in the movie, to make tough choices about their lives. Television trailers centred on the line "The China Syndrome. Today, only a handful of people know what it means—and they're scared" (qtd. in Harmetz C15). The first print ad showed a ball of fire with the words: "The China Syndrome. It's not about China. It's about choices. Between honesty and ambition, career and conscience, responsibility and profit" (Harmetz C15; Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" 30–1). The film's marketing thus mobilised the apocalyptic dimension of antinuclear discourse in the 1970s and implicitly asked prospective viewers to think about important decisions to be made regarding the country's political and economic order (decisions about "responsibility and profit"), and about their own, personal lives (decisions about, among other things, material well-being and morality). The close linkage suggested here between the personal and the political echoed one of the key claims of the women's movement—namely that the personal *is* political—as did Fonda's role in the film, and her whole public life outside of it.[4] Consequently, *The China Syndrome* was marketed as both an antinuclear and a feminist movie, and also as a warning of imminent apocalyptic events. In the film two lines of dialogue evoked such events; spoken with great authority, these lines warned viewers that the accident at the fictional nuclear power plant could have devastated much of Southern California, or, more generally, "an area the size of Pennsylvania".

Between 28 March 1979, only twelve days after *The China Syndrome* had opened in more than 600 American movie theatres (Walker 2; Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" 61), and 1 April 1979, such apocalyptic events seemed to become a reality in—of all places—

Pennsylvania. The initial problem at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant was similar to that portrayed at the beginning of *The China Syndrome*: loss of coolant for the reactor core leading to severe overheating of the fuel rods. After this had been brought under control, a second problem emerged (as it also did in *The China Syndrome*). On Three Mile Island a potentially explosive hydrogen bubble built up in the reactor, an issue that was not fully resolved until 1 April.

American television and press reports about Three Mile Island drew extensively on *The China Syndrome*, using the film's title, story and imagery to illustrate and explain developments at the nuclear power plant and to explore their implications ("Pa. Crisis a Powerful Trailer" 126; Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" ch. 3). This led the *New York Post* to declare on 30 March: "many citizens will go to the movies for their information about nuclear safety. Jane Fonda … is at last shaping national policy. The public believes her more than [Energy Secretary] James Schlesinger" (McGrory 28).

The constant references to *The China Syndrome* in reporting about Three Mile Island had a contradictory effect on the film's marketing and success. On the one hand, reporting about Three Mile Island generated large amounts of free publicity for the movie and thus helped its box office performance. Indeed, at the beginning of April a headline in *Variety* declared: "Pa. Crisis [is] a Powerful Trailer For *China Syndrome*" (1). On the other hand, the article following this headline noted: "the picture had demonstrated its profit legs well before last week's headlines" (126). The film had already been very successful *before* the accident, partly because it was seen to be highly topical even without its real-life counterpart. This is illustrated by the fact that only two days after the film's release, the *New York Times* had reported on divergent expert testimony about the film's technological and scientific accuracy; while disagreeing about the issue of accuracy, "[a]ll [experts] recognized that *The China Syndrome* reaches the screen at a critical time in the brief history of man's attempt to harness nuclear power for peaceful purposes" (Burnham D1). Indeed, after the accident, Columbia felt the need to tone down its marketing activities for *The China Syndrome* so as not to be accused of exploiting a serious crisis (Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" 46).

As far as the film's initial reviews are concerned, it is noticeable that *The China Syndrome* was mostly judged to be a highly competent, even excellent, genre piece. At the same time, critics disagreed about the effectiveness and accuracy of its treatment of nuclear issues. For example, the headline of the review in *Time* magazine read: "An Atom-Powered Thriller" (Schickel 54). *Newsweek* declared the film to be "a class-act thriller, a fiendishly efficient example of emotional manipulation … a potent blend of tract and trash" (Ansen 103). *Women's Wear Daily* called *The China Syndrome* "a suspense movie" that "trivializes the issues" and had no "lasting credibility" (Kissel 26). And according to the *New York Times*, it was a "smashingly effective, very stylish suspense melodrama" which was "less about the laws of physics than about public and private ethics" (Canby C16). The *New York Daily News* described it as "a thriller of such incredible force and such terrifying ramifications that it leaves one absolutely shattered"; it was an "unmistakable warning of the possible risks to human life of nuclear energy" (Carroll 5). And the review in the *New York Post* was titled: "A Thriller to Make You 'Think, Feel and Take Sides'"; according to this review, it was an "arresting film statement of a national and world problem" (Winsten 33).

Thus, even before the Three Mile Island accident, many reviewers—as well as other commentators—took *The China Syndrome* seriously as a valid contribution to an important public debate (Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption" ch. 2). Indeed, film reviews appearing

*after* the accident were quite similar to the earlier responses to the film. For example, referencing Three Mile Island, the *Christian Science Monitor* described *The China Syndrome* as "an intelligent thriller" with "a strong anti-nuclear slant" (Sterritt 18), and the *Saturday Review* declared that it was "a sharp political thriller" about the dangers of nuclear energy, noting that the Three Mile Island incident "suggests that the dangers are not altogether imaginary" (Schlesinger 40).

Although there were some negative reviews, by and large the critical response to the film was very positive. Indeed, by the beginning of the next year, *The China Syndrome* was celebrated as one of the best films of 1979. It was listed as one of the year's top twenty movies by the *New York Times*, while the National Board of Review declared it to be one of the ten best English-language films of the year (Steinberg 175, 285). It was nominated for four Academy Awards, and won an award for "Best-Written Drama Written Directly for the Screen" from the Writers Guild of America (Steinberg 256, 316). While this performance looks quite impressive, it did not stand out from the critical accolades won by most of Fonda's other movies at that time. In addition to its critical success, the film was one of the twenty highest grossing films of 1979 in the U.S., a performance once again quite typical for Fonda's productions during this period; the film was a respectable but by no means an outstanding commercial success (Krämer 106).

Despite the boost given to the film by the Three Mile Island incident, then, its critical and commercial success was not above the level one could have expected from any Jane Fonda movie of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is important to note, however, that, more so than with her other films, Fonda followed the release of *The China Syndrome* with extensive campaigning related to the issues the film addressed. A few days after the Three Mile Island incident, Fonda spoke at an antinuclear rally—where she "avoided specific mention of *China Syndrome*" so as not to turn her political activism into promotional activity for her movie ("Pa. Crisis a Powerful Trailer" 126).

Then, in September 1979, Fonda and Tom Hayden used what, according to *Time* magazine, was "the biggest antinuclear rally in U.S. History" in Battery Park, New York, as "the launching pad for another crusade: their drive to publicize Hayden's anti–Big Business Campaign for Economic Democracy" ("Tom and Jane vs. Big Business" 18). The couple embarked on a whirlwind tour of 52 cities around the country to talk to news media, and to speak at mass rallies, about the need to control large corporations, for which, *Time* wrote, "[t]heir prime example is nuclear power" (18). Not surprisingly, their first stop after Battery Park was the city of Harrisburg next to Three Mile Island. The magazine reported that "[a]lmost everywhere the pair won ovations from overflow crowds. For the most part, the audiences accepted the Fonda-Hayden message about nuclear power uncritically" (18). Yet once again, talk about the dangers of nuclear power and corporate dominance was complemented with a concern for the special role of women. According to *Time*, in Boston "Fonda delighted more than 1,000 women office workers by telling them that she is making a movie about 'a secretary wanting to murder her boss'" (18). This eventually became *Nine To Five* (1980), the biggest hit of Fonda's career up to this point (Krämer 106).

## Conclusion

In recent years, scholars from both ends of the political spectrum have come to recognise Jane Fonda as one of the key political figures in 1970s America. As the titles of

three book-length studies indicate—*"Aid and Comfort": Jane Fonda in North Vietnam* (2002), *Jane Fonda's War: A Political Biography of an Antiwar Icon* (2005) and *Hanoi Jane: War, Sex and Fantasies of Betrayal* (2010)—the focus of such scholarly writing is on Fonda's political activism of the early 1970s (Holzer and Holzer; Hershberger; Lembcke). When thinking about Fonda as someone involved in independent filmmaking one might be tempted similarly to focus on the five years after her early film career had culminated in 1971 in the commercial and critical success of *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971), for which she won her first Best Actress Oscar. After 1971, Fonda not only concentrated much of her energy on political activism, but also withdrew from high profile Hollywood productions, instead mostly making films arising out of her political work. In addition to two minor studio releases (Warner Bros.' *Steelyard Blues* [Alan Meyerson, 1972], and Fox's *The Bluebird* [George Cukor, 1976]), Fonda appeared in the American International Pictures release *F.T.A.* (Francine Parker, 1972), a film version of the touring antiwar stage review entitled *Free the Army* which she had organised in 1971; Jean-Luc Godard's Brechtian strike movie *Tout Va Bien* (1973, released by New Yorker Films in the U.S.); Joseph Losey's British production of Ibsen's feminist classic *A Doll's House* (released in the U.S. by World in 1973); and the political documentary *Introduction to the Enemy* (Haskell Wexler, 1974), which she produced and distributed herself through IPC.

This is certainly an intriguing collection of politically motivated as well as independently made and distributed movies. However, in this article I have tried to show that it was in fact Fonda's return to high profile Hollywood movies after 1976 that allowed her to make the most effective use of films for the purpose of political mobilisation. Many of her films from 1977 to 1981—and none more so than *The China Syndrome*—were widely recognised as contributions to the public debate about important political issues; they reached vast audiences, generated income to be used for financing the Campaign for Economic Democracy, and could be tied in with CED's grassroots activities. This case study suggests, then, that by once again working closely with the major Hollywood studios Jane Fonda by no means gave up her previous independence. It also reminds us that critical discussions of (independent) cinema do not have to restrict themselves to considerations of *textual* politics; there are cases, even at the heart of Hollywood filmmaking, when movies are clearly associated with progressive *activist* and *party* politics.

Such associations exist at the level of production (here we can consider the political background and intentions of filmmakers as well as their private or working relationships with political professionals or organisations) and also at the level of marketing and reception. With regards to the latter, we can examine to what extent the political dimensions of a film are foregrounded in its advertising and in the publicity generated for it, and to what extent reviewers and other commentators in the press highlight a film's politics. Finally, there are cases in which a film becomes an important reference point in public debates about political issues, and also in political campaigning. In order to explore these associations, scholars need to go beyond film analysis, in particular by drawing on a range of primary print sources (including, among many others, script materials, correspondence, published interviews, press releases, advertisements, film reviews and press reports). Many of these sources can only be found in archives.

## Notes

[1] This essay is based on a conference paper titled "From Karen Silkwood to Three Mile Island: *The China Syndrome* (1979), Hollywood Liberals and Anti-Nuclear Campaigning", which was presented at the annual conference of the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association at Cardiff University in January 2008. The development of this paper profited from exchanges with James Rafferty, who kindly provided me with a copy of his unpublished 2006 MA dissertation on *The China Syndrome* (Rafferty, "Crisis and Consumption"). Certain aspects of his work on this film later became part of his 2010 PhD thesis on Jane Fonda (Rafferty, "Politicising Stardom" ch. 4). Rafferty's work is based on the examination of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, as is Wills's essay on *The China Syndrome* (Wills). I should also acknowledge Tony Shaw's very recent essay on *The China Syndrome* (Shaw), which was, however, published too late for me to take it into account during the writing of this article.

[2] That she did in fact do this can be demonstrated in the case of *Coming Home*. See Krämer 112–3.

[3] The statement is reprinted in Hayden 303–10; the quotation is on p. 303.

[4] On Fonda's feminism, see, for example, Rafferty, "Politicising Stardom" chs. 2–3; and Seidman.

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