



Silver screen's golden girls

Hollywood loves to focus on life among the desks and partitions of the modern office. But are secretaries in films as feisty as they used to be? Zenab Short reports

Even the most bright-eyed and bushy-tailed of office workers can find the nine-to-five a tad humdrum at times. However much an eager beaver you are, the less glam aspects of admin - the photocopying, the filing - can get a bit, well, routine.

Hollywood studios, on the other hand, positively revel in the creative opportunities that daily office life provides. Numerous commercially successful films are set among the desks and partitions of the modern workplace, including the Julia Roberts vehicle *Erin Brockovich* and *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, starring Whoopi Goldberg as a bank clerk. But the 1980s was definitely the golden age for office movies, reflecting the career-driven spirit of the age. Every week seemed to see yet another plucky heroine taking on her mean boss, and trouncing them, as in *Nine to Five* and *Working Girl*. Then fast forward to 2004, and *Bridget Jones*, where work is a mere bagatelle - an annoying interruption to her busy love life.

Why does the office get movie moguls' creative juices a-flowing? According to Professor Yvonne Tasker, senior lecturer in film studies at the University of East Anglia, it's because Hollywood bigwigs revel in the backstabbing that they imagine goes on in your average workplace. "Producers love to portray office staff as ambitious go-getters. The typical open-plan office looks good on screen, good for scenes of people spying on each other, and spreading gossip. The drama is in the competitive intrigue, followed by reconciliation."

Or perhaps it's simply a question of identification. "Most of the film's audience will also work in offices, so they will relate to the protagonists," says Dr Catherine Grant of the

University of Kent at Canterbury. "There are lots of people with lots of things happening in offices, all in the one space - making it a wonderfully cheap location."

The depiction of female office workers in movies really took off after the second world war. During the conflict, masses of women went to work to help secure victory. The postwar period saw them demanding the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and actresses like Jean Arthur reflected this, playing strong, individualistic characters.

By the 1950s, with women making up the bulk of audiences, and understanding them became an important factor in the success or failure of a film. The office classic *The Best of Everything*, made in 1959, told the story of four women's journey from out of the secretarial pool. "This was seen as a very progressive film at the time," says Leslie Felperin, film editor of the *Big Issue*. "One of the characters actually turns down a marriage proposal, because it would have stifled her career. Today's movies, though, are about escapism, about getting away from the office, not clawing your way even further into it, as she wanted to."

Dr Grant agrees that the office girls on film these days aren't as feisty as they used to be. "Katharine Hepburn portrayed them as eloquent and articulate in the 1940s and 50s. They were snappy, fast talkers, who fought their conflicts with witty repartee," she says. "Meanwhile, the biggest office character in modern times (Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*) won our sympathy because she was inarticulate, a bit dippy, and rather innocent. Similarly, we relate to *Bridget Jones*, for being loveable and non-threatening."

"There are no onscreen role models



Pour yourself a cup of ambition... Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*

PHOTOGRAPH: KOBAL

for women office workers now," claims film writer, Cherry Potter. "Unusually, *Working Girl* featured a woman boss and an ambitious secretary, who won the day. But in most office movies, women are just back-up figures to men." But Helen de Witt of the British Film Institute strikes a more optimistic note: "There has been a definite progression over the years in how empowered female characters are shown to be. For example, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, set in the 1920s, was about the poorly paid office girl whose only way out of her economic situation

'Today's movies are about escapism and getting away from the office'

was to marry the boss. But *Nine to Five*, in the 80s, featured three secretaries who ganged up against their sexist boss. Erin Brockovich was the legal secretary who triumphed in a huge environmental battle. These films are about women having options, and not being stuck in the classic supporting role."

So why aren't the big studios queuing up to make a *Working Girl* for the 21st century? Perhaps work as an end in itself is no longer the sexy theme it was during the big money yuppie culture of 20 years ago. Professor Tasker points out that "you don't actually see the women doing much work in romantic comedies like *How to Lose a Man in 10 Days*. It's because work is no longer seen as fulfilling enough. These women are not defined by it; instead, they want family, romance - traditional roles."

Bridget Jones reflects this absolutely.

"She is shown in the office only in relation to her sexual affairs," says Professor Ginette Vincendeau of the University of Warwick. "Work is just an excuse to have other people around to talk to about her sex life." By contrast, movie men are manfully grappling with good and evil. "Male characters face ethical dilemmas in movies, with the action centring on: where do you draw the line?" says Felperin.

Will Hollywood ever again portray office life as the ultimate happening place to be, where life's triumphs and tragedies are to be revelled in? Not according to Felperin. "I think that office culture is devalued at the moment. What's in vogue is the nobility of the retreat from work, about finding balance and harmony outside of the office. Movies today are about women turning their backs on work, and wanting to be wives and mothers instead."