The Hallmark Corporation has churned out nearly 150 made-for-cable TV Christmas movies over the past two decades. The political orientation of the films is deeply conservative: the big city is always a place of evil, while small towns in rural America are the only locations where the true meaning of Christmas can be discovered. Given the country's contemporary political divide, the films might as well equate Republicans with Santa Claus, ever so much healthier than the holiday Democratic Party-poopers.

With the exception of actresses known as the “Queens of Christmas,” the films mostly feature actors who vaguely look like more famous movie stars. The scripts are literally cookie-cutters. All of the films feature the most banal of Christmas clichés: baking said cookies, trimming the tree with an angel on top, assembling gingerbread houses, ice skating, having snowball fights, kissing under the mistletoe, among dozens more.

Given the demands of the Hallmark Channel’s marketing of the films as light-hearted, inspirational dramas, the scripts are incredibly tightly constrained. And yet, each film has to be distinctive at the same time: some are about owners of dogs and cats meeting cute just before Christmas, others feature competitions over cookie recipes, creating ice sculptures, and dressing department store windows.

In the classical Hollywood cinema, such production formulae were governed by the economic principle of the standardization and differentiation of product. In the 1930s, Universal wanted audience members to keep coming to see their horror movies (first Tod Browning’s Dracula in February 1931, then James Whale’s Frankenstein in November of that same year). This allowed the studio an economy of scale such that they could use the same sets, crew, cast, and dozens of other cost saving strategies. Boris Karloff appeared in Murders in the Rue Morgue in February 1932, and then again in The Mummy in December of that same year. By keeping the actor under contract, the studio could deploy his talents whenever they were needed for a new film.

Standardization maximizes profits and minimizes costs. On the other hand, movie-goers would not want to keep seeing Dracula over and over again. Innovation is required to make each new product appear different. Marketing campaigns rely on these alterations: The studio could position 1935’s Werewolf of London as far scarier than 1933’s The Invisible Man. This is what Andre Bazin called “the genius of the system”: studio-based filmmaking actually demands innovation despite its obviously crass formulaic economic scaffolding.

Startlingly, the Hallmark Christmas movies rely on the production mechanisms of the Classical Hollywood Cinema. Let’s call this new production factory, “The Classical Holiday Cinema.” Despite the endlessly repeated clichés, there is a great deal of plot modulation, innovations within sub-genres that result in not only watchable, but highly enjoyable bursts of creativity.

One example is what we might call the workplace competition film in which a man and a woman vie for corporate success, but then learn the true meaning of Christmas (hereafter, the TMOC) as they come to care about each other. These characters fall in love, sealed with a chaste kiss at the close, a formulaic requirement that projects matrimonial happiness into a future that lies beyond the Christmas season.
The most interesting example of the workplace competition sub-genre of the Hallmark Christmas movie is *Window Wonderland* (2013). A man and a woman who work at a department store are given the chance for a promotion for constructing the best display window to capture the holiday spirit. By the end of the film, their love for each other overcomes their ability to play capitalism’s games. Fritz Lang’s film noir masterpiece, *The Woman in the Window* (1944) the Hallmark film is not, and yet if you would have told me *Window Wonderland* would make me cry, I would have scoffed. And yet, cry I did, and still do five years hence.

During the holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day, Hallmark dominates basic cable television ratings, particularly with the treasured female demographic. The Queens of Christmas, actresses to whom the network returns annually, drive this success. The most lucrative for the network is Candace Cameron Bure, a former child actress who played D.J. Tanner on the sitcom, *Full House* (ABC, 1987-1995).
Featuring Bure, *Christmas Under Wraps* (2014) earned the highest rating for any Hallmark Christmas movie ever. A big city doctor named Lauren (the now 40-something Bure) ends up in Garland, a small town in Alaska. She falls in love with a local guy, whose father turns out to be Santa Claus (Brian Doyle-Murray).

![Figure 3.](https://example.com/image1)

*Lauren (Candace Cameron Bure) discovers her boyfriend is the son of Santa Claus (Brian Doyle-Murray) in *Christmas Under Wraps*.*

Bure has been appearing in Hallmark Christmas movies longer than any of the other Queens of Christmas: *Moonlight and Mistletoe* (2008) was her first foray. Since 2013, Bure has appeared in a movie every year. Some of them are standard formula entries. In *Let It Snow* (2013), an evil corporation sends her on a hostile takeover mission to buy up a mom-and-pop snow lodge. However, she falls in love with the owners’ son and learns the TMOC. In *A Christmas Detour* (2015), Bure’s character gets trapped with a man in a snowstorm in Buffalo; they fall in love while trying to get home to Connecticut.

However, Bure has also starred in some of the more inventive entries. In *Journey Back to Christmas* (2016), she plays a World War II nurse who time travels to the present to learn the TMOC. In *Switched for Christmas* (2017), Bure plays twin sisters bored with their humdrum lives. They decide to switch families until Christmas. Not only do they learn the TMOC, but like the “Job Switching” episode of *I Love Lucy*, they realize that what they had in the first place was the best of all.

This year’s Bure entry, *A Shoe Addict’s Christmas*, which premiered on November 25, 2018, does not disappoint. Despite being named Noelle, Bure’s character hates Christmas because she has to work in a department store during the holidays. In a capitalist reworking of Charles Dickens’ distinctly anti-capitalist, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), a guardian angel (Jean Smart) takes Noelle to visit Christmas past, present, and future, each transition effected by trying on a new pair of expensive, designer shoes.

![Figure 4.](https://example.com/image2)
Despite the Hallmark Channel’s centering of Bure in their televisual wonderland, the Queen of Christmas who most interests me is Alicia Witt, who has also appeared in a Hallmark Christmas movie in each of the past five years. However, whereas Bure’s history from the treacle of Full House glides smoothly into Hallmark’s sentimental Christmas ornament commercials, Witt emerges from the most unlikely of places, the world of David Lynch. From my hometown of Worcester, MA, I first remember a newspaper story in the Worcester Telegram and Gazette about a nine-year-old child actress, Alicia Roanne Witt selected by Lynch to play Alia in his film adaptation of Dune (1984). In her teenage years, Witt played Dr. Hayward’s daughter, Gersten on the original run of Twin Peaks (ABC, 1990-1991), briefly returning to the role in Twin Peaks: The Return in the summer of 2017.
In 2013, Witt appeared in two Christmas-related movies. In the first, Tyler Perry’s *A Madea Christmas*, Witt has a small role as the wife of an angry, abusive husband and father. She protects her son from the brunt of his rage, but Madea fixes things for good, as is her way.

Also in 2013, Witt appeared in the rival cable network, Lifetime’s holiday movie, *A Snow Globe Christmas* (2013). Witt plays Meg, a Christmas-hating TV executive visited by an angel who arranges for her to get knocked unconscious by a snow globe hitting her on the head. Meg wakes up within the snow globe’s dream world, in which she is married to Ted (Donald Faison), her college boyfriend; the couple have an ideal family including two beautiful children. Meg’s boyfriend from the real world, Eric appears as a cad, not only an unfaithful letch, but a capitalist villain bent on turning the idealized small town’s beautiful forest into a golf course.

Meg awakens from the snow globe fantasy, having learned the TMOC. She sends her beleaguered TV crew home to be with their families. Meg then finds Ted, and rekindles their relationship. Ten years later, Meg is living the life from the snow globe, fulfilled at Christmastime with Ted and their two children.
Witt’s star persona from the Surrealist world of David Lynch casts a strange pall around her performances in the Christmas movies. Because of Witt’s star persona, *A Snow Globe Christmas* seems like a cruel revocation of the Surrealistic parody of suburbia in the work of David Lynch. *Twin Peaks* is a typical Lynchian town, in which the superficial gloss of the place hides repressed worlds of murder and mayhem. Even Tyler Perry’s film merely hints at such dark places, but notably via Witt’s character as the fulcrum between the world Madea can control with her sassiness, and the dark netherworld where comedy dare not tread.

In her transition to the world of Hallmark Christmas movies, Witt’s star persona brought the legacy of Lynch’s Surrealism with her. Also produced in 2013, *A Very Merry-Mix Up* presents even the idealized Hallmark town as a slightly disturbing place. Alice travels to meet her soon-to-be in-laws. She lands at the airport not having the correct address; her fiancé is supposed to join her after he’s done with work.

When Alice accidentally breaks her phone, she loses any ability to find her new family’s house. She acclimates to the new town, falling in love with a man who would have been her brother-in-law. While not the story of incest that *Twin Peaks* is, the residue of that dark tale leaves us to question just how merry the mix-up actually might be.

Witt’s more recent Hallmark films, increasingly shorn of Surrealism, continue to be among the most interesting films aired on the network. Her 2016 entry, *The Christmas List* is a virtual deconstruction of the Hallmark cinematic brand. She plays Isobel, a woman whose capitalism-obsessed boyfriend abandons her for work, leaving her alone to pursue her dream of an ideal Christmas in a small wintery town. She has brought a list of all the things she’s wanted to do at the holidays since childhood, but has been too busy to pursue as an adult. With the help of a local construction worker, she completes the clichéd Christmas activities—assembling a gingerbread house and going ice skating—saving one secret item on the list for last. When she realizes she is smitten with the local man, and not her big city boyfriend, Isobel has completed her list, to have fallen in love at Christmastime.

Witt’s 2017 entry continues the self-reflexive play with the genre from *The Christmas List*. *The Mistletoe Inn* is about the production of romance novels. Kim dreams of becoming such a writer, but is crushed when her boyfriend lands a book contract and then breaks up with her. To overcome the setback, she travels to a cozy inn in Vermont, the location of a writing seminar.

Kim is looking forward to meeting one of the top romance novelists in the business at the workshop. However, he is not scheduled to arrive until the end of the weekend. In the meantime, Kim meets Zeke, an apparently struggling writer with whom she has much conflict, masking their growing attraction to one another. At the end of the film, Kim declares her love for Zeke, who only then reveals himself as the successful writer for whom she has been waiting.

Even more than *The Christmas List*, *The Mistletoe Inn* simultaneously deconstructs the Hallmark production of romance while enthusiastically embracing it. The film encourages us to consider how plots are formulated to achieve emotional effects. But, at the same time, the film delivers the standard Hallmark Christmas movie clichés: lives must be reconstructed via encounters with quaint rural towns in which one finds one’s soul mate.
This year’s entry is as compelling as ever. In *Christmas on Honeysuckle Lane*, which premiered on November 24, 2018, Witt plays Emma, who returns to the house in the small town where she grew up. Her siblings have converged, determined to sell the homestead now that their parents have passed. But Emma discovers a hidden message left by her mother in her antique desk, encouraging her to re-evaluate her life and learn the TMOC.

The revelation of the secret which drove the ending of *The Mistletoe Inn*—the author’s control over the narrative—becomes embedded in the very *mise-en-scene* of the set of *Christmas on Honeysuckle Lane*. Through messages embedded in furniture, even the dead can pass on family traditions that seek to replicate conventional lives defined by the values on which the Hallmark corporation is built. The clichés of Christmas—finding true love, bringing families together, celebrating holidays ritualistically—enrich us even when the world around us seems most bleak. Of all the Hallmark films, the ones featuring Alicia Witt allow me most clearly to reflect upon their profound contradiction. The more clichéd the experience of Christmas becomes, the more desperate I am to grasp at it.

**Author Biography**

Walter Metz is a Professor in the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he teaches film, television, and literary history, theory, and criticism. He
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