



A AMERICAN
FILMS OF THE
70s
CONFLICTING
VISIONS

PETER LEV

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Conflicting Visions

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Peter Lev

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Preface

This book is an interpretive history of American films of the 1970s. It argues that the films of the period constitute a dialogue or debate about the nature and the prospects of American society. The dialogue passes through both aesthetics and ideology; these two concepts ultimately merge in what I call, for lack of a better term, an artistic “vision.” In Part One of the book, I present films which express conflicting positions on the question of social change. Should American society move toward openness, diversity, and egalitarianism, welcoming such new developments as the counterculture and the anti-Vietnam War movement? Or should America change by refusing to change, by stressing paternalistic authority and traditional morality? I follow this debate through a dozen years and several genres or cycles. Part Two of the book broadens the dualistic argument of Part One by examining some of the specific issues explored by the films of the 1970s: the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, the status of teenagers, African American culture, the women’s movement. The dialogue here emphasizes pluralism; it becomes more a clamor of competing voices than a dialectical exchange.

Further, within specific constituencies there is a range of positions and a range of accommodations to Hollywood convention. The final chapter of this section restores a dialogue between liberal (or progressive) and conservative; it synthesizes issues of sex, race, and gender with an ideological interpretation of three science fiction films.

My book has been loosely influenced by the Russian literary critic/historian Mikhail Bakhtin, from whom I borrow both the concept of dialogism and a skeptical attitude toward literary canons. Dialogism, for Bakhtin, is the idea that the novel as literary genre is a complex amalgam of overlapping and competing languages (historical, class-based, group-based, specifically artistic). The heterogeneity of the novel is such that authorship becomes almost irrelevant—except that the author blends the different languages.¹ I present a dialogue of competing styles and meanings between films, between film and literary source, and within films (using, at times, production history to explain a divergence between collaborators). As to the canon, Bakhtin wrote literary histories far more wide ranging than the standard texts and anthologies. For example, he traced the origins of the novel back thousands of years, to Greek and especially Roman texts.² I have more modestly added exploitation films (*Joe, Superfly*), rarely discussed works (*Shampoo, Starting Over*), a Euro-American hybrid (*Last Tango in Paris*), and low-budget independent films (*Killer of Sheep, Hester Street*) to the emerging list of “essential” 1970s films (e.g., *Chinatown, Jaws, Nashville, Star Wars*).

American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions is clearly not a comprehensive history of film in the 1970s. It discusses in detail about forty films, which were chosen primarily to illustrate and support the book’s argument. Diversity, quality, personal taste, and limits of access were secondary criteria. I regret the omission of many fine films, especially *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver*. They were left out because they added relatively little to the discussion in Part One. In general, I believe that no film history can be either comprehensive or objective. There are occasions which call for a survey approach (many films, a few sentences on each), but the more in-depth approach essayed here is a better way to get at the multiple branchings and connections of film history.

I have taken some liberties with the concept of “decade.” The book starts in 1969, with *Easy Rider*, because this is the year when the social movements

of the late 1960s most strongly impacted Hollywood. Many of the films of the early 1970s, and even the later 1970s, can be seen as responses to this moment of radical challenge. The book also extends into the early 1980s, with *The Big Chill* (1983), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), because artistic movements and styles do not abruptly end at the turn of the calendar. My subject is still, roughly, the films of the 1970s.

As an aid to those readers with only a hazy awareness of the social and political events of the period, I have included a brief time line of American history for the years 1968–1983. This time line may be found at the back of the book, between the conclusion and the filmography.

Writing a book is a long journey. I would like to thank the following individuals and institutions who helped me along the way. Your expertise, enthusiasm, and good counsel are very much appreciated:

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“NOBODY

KNOWS

ANYTHING”

Introduction

Screenwriter and novelist William Goldman, writing in 1982, suggests that the first rule of Hollywood is “Nobody Knows Anything.”¹ Goldman explains that film industry producers and executives do not know in advance which film will be a box office success and which film will be a failure. Blockbuster movies such as *The Godfather* were written off as inevitable failures during production, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was turned down by all the Hollywood studios except Paramount. Any number of big-budget productions have done no business, whereas low-budget sleepers such as *Easy Rider*, *American Graffiti*, *Rocky*, and *Porky’s* have done phenomenally well. Nobody knows anything.

Goldman’s formula can be historicized by dividing Hollywood sound film into three periods. In the first period, from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s, Hollywood executives did in fact know a few things. The film audience was more or less stable (especially in the first part of this period), and a well-developed system of stars and genres was in place. Further, the Hollywood major studios owned chains of first-run theaters, so every film from the

Hollywood majors could expect a carefully planned release. Executives and producers could be confident that a well-made film following established conventions would find at least a moderate audience. It is also worth mentioning that studio executives at this time were experienced showmen with an intuitive understanding of what would play for an audience. This intuitive sense can be represented by a story about Harry Cohn, the legendarily crude head of Columbia Pictures. Cohn supposedly said one day, “I know it’s a bad film if my ass itches. If my ass doesn’t itch, the film is OK.”²

Cohn’s seat-of-the-pants approach does suggest that he knew at least a little bit about which films would work. But in the 1960s and 1970s, the film audience shrank and fragmented, and the verities of the old studio system fell apart. Stars and genres were no longer enough to sell a picture. *The Sound of Music* (1965) was an enormous box office success, but its follow-up, *Star!* (1968; same genre, same star), was a resounding failure. Established writers, directors, and producers, many with track records stretching back for decades, were suddenly out of favor with a film audience now consisting primarily of young people. In desperation, major companies bypassed established talent to take a chance on younger producers, directors, and actors. Several important films were produced in this way: *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1968), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *The Last Picture Show* (1971). But the second wave of youth films, descendants of *Easy Rider* such as *Getting Straight* (1970), *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and *The Last Movie* (1971), were colossal failures. The 1970s were the true era of “Nobody knows anything,” a period of uncertainty and disarray in the Hollywood film industry.

By the time William Goldman was writing his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade* in 1982, a new set of rules and regularities was being established in American films. Stars were once again important, with the new actors introduced in the 1970s—Nicholson, De Niro, Pacino, Hoffman, Streisand, Streep—becoming the established talents of the 1980s. Businessmen, not showmen, were running the Hollywood companies, so emphasis was put on the assembling of “packages” (marketable stars and directors) plus such presold properties as sequels, comic books, and best-selling novels. The younger audience had stabilized and become at least reasonably predict-

able. Beginning with *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), Steven Spielberg and George Lucas had pioneered a return to simple, optimistic genre films. Finally, the film industry was beginning to stress advertising and market research as key elements in film planning. To summarize, in the 1980s film executives once again thought they knew a few things.

Those who value creativity and risk taking in the arts are strongly attracted to the “Nobody knows anything” period of the 1970s. The average quality of films may have been better at the height of the studio period (for example, in 1939); but for sheer diversity of aesthetic and ideological approaches, no period of American cinema surpasses the films of the 1970s. The example I gave above of films like *Easy Rider* and *Midnight Cowboy* leading to “second-generation” youth films such as *Getting Straight* and *Cisco Pike* is itself somewhat misleading, because it ignores all the other things that were going on in the period. The 1970s in film were not only the era of youth culture but also a period of antiwar satire, of right-wing vigilantism, of blaxploitation, of women’s liberation, of blatant sexism, of family values, of new family units. If nobody knows anything, then everything is permitted.

Creative moments in film history often take place in periods of social and political conflict. This generalization applies to German silent film during the Weimar Republic, to Italian neorealism after World War II, and arguably to the French New Wave of the late 1950s (the period of the Algerian War, and also of a controversial youth culture exemplified by the novels of Françoise Sagan). Creative periods in film also seem to coincide with film industry instability, as in Italian neorealism, the French New Wave, and possibly the German silent film (here the government-sponsored UFA studio did provide a few years of stability). Both sociopolitical controversy and a film industry in rapid flux were characteristic of American film in the 1970s.

The sociopolitical context of the late 1960s and early 1970s can be summarized as political and generational strife. Many movements of social change were underway: the civil rights movement, feminism, gay liberation, the environmental movement, the hippie generation. And the various attempts to block these movements, to “turn back the clock,” strongly influenced millions of Americans. The Vietnam War polarized the generations, especially since the young were subject to a military draft. In addition to

the war, Americans suffered a series of shocks: the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. (both in 1968), the oil price shock and resulting inflation, the Watergate scandal.

Meanwhile, the film industry was enduring shock and controversy of its own. The end of the Production Code meant a new license for Hollywood films, resulting in *Midnight Cowboy*, an X-rated film, winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1969. Young talents got the chance to direct feature films, while established veterans such as Vincente Minnelli and Billy Wilder struggled in the new, anything-goes environment. The box office dropped off sharply in 1968–1969, leading to talk of a “film recession.” David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson report that the major studios lost \$500 million between 1969 and 1972.³ In response, movies became more violent (*The Wild Bunch*, *A Clockwork Orange*) as well as more sexual (*Last Tango in Paris*). Despite these rapid changes, no producer could predict the film audience’s mood. According to Robert Sklar, “of the scores of movies released every year, only a handful captured the attention of the public.”⁴ Nobody knows anything.

One could argue that the film audience of the 1970s, made up primarily of teenagers and young adults, pushed the American film industry to over-emphasize the impact of the hippie generation and the antiwar movement. But even in these circumstances, the cinema of the counterculture was balanced by numerous action movies propounding conservative social values. If the early 1970s were the period of youth culture on film, they were also the period of right-wing cop films starring Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson. These films feature a lot of action, a lot of anger, and a studied indifference to the rights of minority groups and other social outsiders. So, an overview of the early 1970s would have to see a split in the social and cultural values presented by American films, rather than focusing on an experimental and socially critical “New Hollywood.” This split corresponds closely to the political divisions in the country around 1970: “Hawks” vs. “Doves,” the “Generation Gap,” and so on.⁵

However, no binary opposition completely describes the range of American films in the 1970s—or, for that matter, in any decade. Cinema creators and cinema audiences have a wide variety of interests, a point which often eludes systematizing critics. This point can be illustrated in a couple of dif-

ferent ways: first, by analyzing the range of American films made in one year; and second, by discussing a few specific films in some detail.

Consider the American feature films made in 1975. From one perspective, this was a year of transition between the rebellious films of the Hollywood Renaissance circa 1970 and the optimistic genre films to come. The more political and experimental films of 1975 are marked by a certain exhaustion (e.g., *Nashville*, *Shampoo*, and *Night Moves*), whereas the new trend is anticipated by the overwhelming success of *Jaws*. Indeed, *Jaws* is an excellent prototype of the late 1970s and early 1980s blockbuster—simple story, masterful technique. *Jaws* shies away from controversial issues to present an elemental, mythic story. One can add that Steven Spielberg was much younger than the directors of *Nashville*, *Shampoo*, and *Night Moves*, so that we might be describing a changing of the guard. The New Hollywood of 1970 was already struggling, already being replaced by the “Movie Brats” of 1975.

But what does this progression omit? What other American movies were appearing in 1975? Well, the old Hollywood of the 1940s and 1950s was still around, represented by such films as *The Hindenburg*, directed by Robert Wise, and *Rooster Cogburn*, directed by Stuart Millar and starring John Wayne and Katherine Hepburn.⁶ Charles Bronson appeared in *Hard Times* and *Breakheart Pass*; Clint Eastwood starred in *The Eiger Sanction*. G-rated films such as *Benji* and *Adventures of the Wilderness Family* did well at the box office. Films on women’s roles included *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, *Crazy Mama* (an interesting Roger Corman film), *Smile*, and *The Stepford Wives*. Neil Simon adapted two of his own plays for the screen, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* and *The Sunshine Boys*. Star vehicles stretched from *Funny Lady* (Barbra Streisand) to three Burt Reynolds pictures. Afro-American films included the blaxploitation *Cleopatra Jones and the Temple of Gold* and the *American Graffiti*-influenced *Cooley High*. Independent features covered a tremendous range, including Joan Micklin Silver’s *Hester Street*, James Ivory’s *The Wild Party*, John Waters’s *Female Trouble*, Russ Meyer’s *Supervixens*, and also James Collier’s *The Hiding Place*, a film financed by the Reverend Billy Graham’s organization.

The Academy Award winner for the year, *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, deserves special attention. On the one hand, this can be seen as a

New Hollywood, socially critical film. *Nurse Ratched* represents the Establishment, the combination of Big Government and Big Business which supported the Vietnam War and steadfastly blocked social change. Jack Nicholson, who plays the rebellious McMurphy, is an icon of the new cinema of the 1970s. On the other hand, the film is quite conventional in technique and completely accessible on the literal level. It is absorbing as a simple story with no metaphoric or allegorical dimension. And if one wants an allegory, *Cuckoo's Nest* could be read as a broadly humanist fable attached to no specific period. It could even be called a simple (though not necessarily optimistic) genre film—with the genre being the fight against tyranny.

The *Cuckoo's Nest* example illustrates my second point: that beyond the complexity of interpreting a large group of films of a particular era, individual films can present a complex set of ideas. *Cuckoo's Nest* can be interpreted as a response to a specific political moment and a specific kind of oppression. It can also be enjoyed as a myth or fable about repression in general. I would suggest that the considerable popularity of *Cuckoo's Nest* resulted from its tendency to generalize, and thus to attract a broad spectrum of viewers.

To further examine the heterogeneity of the period and the complexity of meanings within individual films, let us consider *American Graffiti* and *Chinatown*. *American Graffiti*, a surprise hit in 1973, is a prime example of what Paul Monaco calls the movement toward nostalgia in American films of the 1970s. Nostalgia, per Monaco, is “memory without pain,” and therefore a strategy for evading the tumultuous social conflicts of the early 1970s.⁷ *American Graffiti's* setting and approach certainly fit this formulation, as it takes place in a small, peaceful California town in 1962—before John Kennedy's assassination, before the Vietnam War, before the counterculture. And the film's multiple protagonists are very much concerned with their own problems, with private life, rather than with pressing social issues.

Despite this conservative, backward-looking agenda, *American Graffiti* can also be seen as part of the anarchic, wildly innovative American film renaissance of the 1970s. It seems to have created a new paradigm for the teenage comedy or “teenpic.” Structural conceits of *American Graffiti*, including the ensemble cast, the compression of time, the rock music score, and the view of teenagers as an autonomous subculture, have been copied and refined by dozens of films. Further, this last point, the autonomy of

teens, is at least potentially a basis for criticism of the adult world. The joy and the egalitarianism in George Lucas's teen world are sadly lacking in the world of adults. Of course, one could reply that the autonomy of teens is more a marketing strategy than a true freedom. But Lucas's creation on film of a teenaged culture separate from the adult world clearly has at least some of its roots in the antiestablishment youth culture of about 1970.

If nostalgia is memory without pain, then *Chinatown* (1974) is memory with the pain. In this film, Jack Nicholson wears a spiffy white suit, Faye Dunaway is a fashion plate, and Los Angeles in the 1930s looks sunny, clean, and stylish. But all of the film's secrets are terrifying, and they ultimately plunge the spectator into the abysmal depths of human nature. *Chinatown's* trajectory is modeled by the scene in which director Roman Polanski, in a cameo role as a cheap hood, slashes Nicholson's nose and dirties the detective's calm, unlined face. In just such a way will *Chinatown* destroy the surface calm of Los Angeles. Following the conventions of the mystery genre, the character played by Nicholson uncovers evidence of man's baser nature. But reversing those same conventions, in *Chinatown* the John Huston character, the monster of capitalism gone wrong, definitively wins the day.

Chinatown is the best of the mid-1970s films mourning the death of the 1960s dream. All of the movements of social reform have amounted to very little; our lives are run in unseen ways by the barons of capitalism. Government is thoroughly corrupt; the water scandal in the film, based on historical events in Southern California, is a metaphor for such things as the OPEC oil cartel, the Agnew bribery case, and the Watergate break-in and cover-up. *Chinatown* goes so far as to preach the virtues of passivity, for by meddling in things he doesn't understand, the Nicholson character brings about the death of his beloved. The film's signature line echoes in our ears: "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown."

But let us return for a moment to the surface of the film. Consider those elegant costumes, and the Faye Dunaway character's gorgeous Colonial Revival mansion. Add to this the message of passivity, and there is something strangely comforting about Robert Towne and Polanski's re-creation of the Thirties. Nothing can be done, so why not enjoy the sensual memories of times past? There is a nostalgic and escapist element to *Chinatown* after all, and in this regard it is something like *American Graffiti*. This second level of criticism is not meant to nullify *Chinatown's* status as a film of incisive

social criticism. Instead, it points to contradictory levels of meaning in a very complex film.

I would argue that *Chinatown*-style complexity is characteristic of a number of American films of the 1970s, and of considerably fewer films in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1970s on film is marked by several distinct and sometimes contradictory currents, currents which can be analyzed both in overview and within individual films. This flow of conflicting ideas is what makes the seventies extraordinary. For me, the era of “Nobody knows anything” is the most exciting and most experimental period of the American feature film.

Whither goest thou, America,

in thy shiny car in the night?

–Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*



Part

1

Movies read or interpret the cultures in which they

exist, just a beat behind the present tense of events.

–Helene Keyssar, *Robert Altman's America*

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