

1976

Movies and Cultural Contradictions

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In its bicentennial year, the United States was wracked by disillusionment and mistrust of the government. The Watergate scandal and the evacuation of Vietnam were still fresh in everyone's mind. Forced to deal with these traumatic events, combined with a lethargic economy (8.5 percent unemployment, energy shortages and OPEC price hikes of 5 to 10 percent, high inflation (8.7 percent and rising), and the decline of the U.S. dollar on international currency exchanges, the American national psyche suffered from a climate of despair and, in the phrase made famous by new California governor Jerry Brown the previous year, "lowered expectations." President Gerald R. Ford's WIN (Whip Inflation Now) buttons--did nothing bolster consumer/investor confidence and were widely perceived to be a public relations gimmick to paper over structural difficulties in the financial system. Intractable problems were apparent: stagflation, political paranoia, collective anxiety, widespread alienation, economic privation, inner-city decay, racism, and violence. The federal government's "misery index," a combination of the unemployment rate and the rate of inflation, peaked at 17 percent. In short, there was a widespread perception that the foundations of the American Dream had been shattered by years of decline and frustration.

Despite these negative economic and social indicators in the material world, the nation went ahead with a major feel-good diversion, the bicentennial celebration that featured the greatest maritime spectacle in American history: "Operation Sail," a parade of sixteen "Tall Ships," fifty-three warships, and more than two hundred smaller sailing vessels in New York harbor. Seven million people lined the shore, along with President Ford, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and a host of international dignitaries, including Prince Rainier and Princess Grace (*née* Kelly) of Monaco. The spectacular fireworks display was choreographed by Walt Disney Attractions and, as the radio simulcast of patriotic tunes noted, "was brought to you by Macy's." Crass commercial considerations of

this sort were highly prominent throughout the festivities, in sharp contrast to the privations or America's revolutionary founders in 1776.

The political landscape was also different than two hundred years earlier, although two schools of thought still remained prominent, The Federalists and Democratic-Republicans of the early days of the nation had morphed into the conservative Republicans and the liberal Democrats of the bicentennial year. However, neither Gerald Ford--the "accidental" president who succeeded Richard M. Nixon after Nixon resigned in disgrace over the Watergate scandal prior to his anticipated impeachment--nor Jimmy Carter--Ford's little-known centrist Democratic challenger--were the equivalent of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, or the other founders of the republic, but that was the choice offered to voters. Indeed, the closeness of the November presidential election (Carter, 50 percent; Ford, 48 percent) suggested the deep divisions in the nation. In many ways, the same ideological choice on the ballot was proffered to audiences of American films. The ideological themes (and styles) of the most popular films, as well as those most acclaimed by the critical establishment and the Motion Picture Academy, likewise reflected a growing national instability, a vestige of the Vietnam War and Watergate periods.

Three of the top seven best-selling nonfiction books were about the Watergate scandal: Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's *The Final Days*, a sequel or sorts to their *All the President's Men*; convicted Watergate conspirator Charles Colson's *Born Again*; and John Dean's *Blind Ambition: The White House Years*. The success of Alex Haley's *Roots* suggested that racial tensions were easing despite events that indicated the nation was still racially divided. Finally, although not a commercial best-seller, another highly influential book appeared this year: Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, whose thesis was that U.S. society was splintering. In fact, Bell's hook contains twenty-two references to America as "unstable," as epitomized by the "'American climacteric,' a critical change of life" in the nation (213). On the international scene, Vietnam became unified, with its capital established in Hanoi and Saigon renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Both Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai died, leading to a power struggle for control of the People's Republic of China. The incoming pragmatists purged hard-line Maoists, and many Mao loyalists, such as the Gang of Four (including Mao's widow, Ch'ing Ch'ing (a former film star), were imprisoned,

Perhaps because of the uncertain times and the excitement surrounding the bicentennial, the arts returned to traditional and familiar modes of expression, thus eclipsing the long run of the more experimental, political, and modernist aesthetic in painting, sculpture, architecture, photography,

and music. As in past times of uncertainty, many "new" works harkened back to prior styles, such as realism, while incorporating a postmodernist pastiche of intertextual references to older themes and forms, especially those with upbeat themes of national renewal (or at least survival). Indeed, many commentators, including Glenn Man and David Cook, date the demise of the short-lived "Hollywood Renaissance" to 1976. Rather than continue to explore the European art cinema's themes and techniques, many American films relied on formulaic patterns--so much so that many movies were remakes of earlier hits and classic productions or adaptations of successful books. Examples include *King Kong*, *A Star Is Born*, *All the President's Men*, *Carrie*, *The Seven Percent Solution*, *The Omen*, and the ultimate pastiche movie, *That's Entertainment, Part II*, which consisted exclusively of clips from Golden Age Hollywood musicals.

Even movies that were not specifically remakes or adaptations were often derived from an earlier ur-text. For instance, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* was essentially a neo-noir retelling of John Ford's classic western *The Searchers* (1954) set in a cesspool modern metropolis, Arthur Hiller's *Silver Streak* and Brian DePalma's *Obsession* relied so much on Hitchcockian themes and techniques that one expected the Master of Suspense himself to make one of his patented cameo appearances (*Obsession* even used a passionate Bernard Herrmann musical score to accentuate the Hitchcockian overtones). Peter Bogdanovich's *Nickelodeon* told of the early days of Hollywood silent filmmaking, when the nation and the motion picture industry were far less jaded. Similarly, in homage to the silent film era, Mel Brooks's *Silent Movie* contained no spoken dialogue except for Marcel Marceau's "Non!" Although not a literal remake, John Avildsen's *Rocky* became emblematic of the retrenchment of creativity by sampling all the clichés of the boxing genre (and the Cinderella narrative)--and rose to the top of the box office ladder.

Only a few films by major New Hollywood directors challenged the return to normalcy by actively (and self-reflexively) interrogating the content and form of the Hollywood genre picture. One notable example was Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, an overtly self-referential satire on entertainment and American values in the guise of a western. Likewise, Arthur Penn's *Missouri Breaks* attempted to deconstruct the western, while Martin Ritt's *The Front* recreated McCarthy-era paranoia in the movie and television industries. Other inventive films included Hal Ashby's *Bound for Glory*, based on the autobiography of folksinger Woody Guthrie, who rode the rails across Depression-era America and discovered his voice of protest, and Elia Kazan's *The Last Tycoon*, which harkened back to F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished last novel and legendary 1930s movie executive Irving Thalberg

to comment on the current stale of Hollywood movie making. Even the science-fiction genre was postmodernized in Michael Anderson's *Logan's Run*, in which the generation gap was transmogrified into a twenty-third-century society where everyone over the age of thirty has to undergo "renewal" (in reality, death).

As David Cook has noted, "That all aesthetically experimental, socially conscious *cinéma d'auteur* could exist simultaneously with a burgeoning and rapacious blockbuster mentality was extraordinary" (*Lost*, xvii). The movie industry itself underwent considerable change with the use of saturation booking and heavily targeted advertising. The blockbuster era was in full swing. Among the hallmarks of that trend was the use of bankable stars whose screen personas and professional reputations ensured box office success, or at least were a hedge against casting risk. The *International Motion Picture Almanac* listed nine such "profitability actors" (and one child star, Tatum O'Neal): Robert Redford, Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, Clint Eastwood, Mel Brooks, Burt Reynolds, Al Pacino, Tatum O'Neal, Woody Allen, and Charles Bronson (Cook, *Lost*, 339).

Peter Lev's *American Films of the 70s* has a subtitle that summarizes Hollywood cinema in 1976: *Conflicting Visions*. That dialectical description could perhaps apply to any era in U.S. film history, but the term seems particularly apposite for the bicentennial year. Downbeat films about personal alienation, public corruption, and paranoia, best exemplified by *Taxi Driver* and *Network*, vied for audiences with upbeat movies about personal achievement and feel-good emotions, such as *Rocky* and *Bound for Glory*. Others, such as the middle-of-the-road *All the President's Men*, both castigated the corruption of the political process and applauded that system's ability to rejuvenate itself. These five movies constitute what Fredric Jameson has called a "national allegory" (87) that simultaneously conceal and reveal the nation's split-sensibility to itself and to the rest of the world. Yet they are not isolated examples. Also noteworthy in this regard are *Marathon Man*, *The Seven Percent Solution*, *King Kong*, *A Star Is Born*, *The Shootist*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *The Enforcer*, *The Bad News Bears*, and *Cannonball*, as well as the documentaries *Harlan County, USA*, *Underground*, *Hollywood on Trial*, *Number Our Days*, and *Union Maids*. This chapter, however, focuses mainly on the live movies that, taken together, epitomize the bifurcated American zeitgeist.

America on the Ropes: Rocky

In this extremely popular but predictable film, world heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers), an obvious Muhammad

Ali surrogate, decides to give an unknown boxer a break when his scheduled opponent bows out of a bout at the last minute. As part of this clever publicity stunt, a down-and-out, out-of-shape journeyman club fighter, the dim-wined "Italian Stallion" Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), is chosen to be that lucky man. Religious themes and images abound, as well as various aspects of an All-American Horatio Alger story. This low-budget sleeper relied on patriotic appeal, religious sentiment, class antagonisms, sub-merged racism, and ambivalent male chauvinism to attract the highest U.S. box office receipts of the year--\$57 million--and the highest worldwide grosses of the year--\$225 million--all on a budget of only \$1.1 million.

The film opens with a view of a fresco of Jesus Christ holding a Eucharist and a chalice (the Holy Grail of the championship? the martyrdom of Rocky?), then zooms out to show Rocky boxing in faded trunks beneath the religious icon. In the procession to the ring prior to the concluding match, Apollo Creed wears a George Washington outfit--complete with white wig, Uncle Sam hat, and shiny red, white, and blue silk trunks--and Creed's image has now replaced that of Christ in the arena. Before that final main event, though, Rocky is shown waving an American flag and, instead of Jesus, a gigantic U.S. flag looks down at the ring. Also, before the big match, Rocky kneels in a bathroom and prays--a scene that was used in the film's trailer. Once in the ring, the camera retreats to a Godlike perch to observe the monumental struggle between "good" and "black." These religious motifs are accentuated in that most of the film takes place during the Christmas season (with Rocky as the new savior) and the Balboa-Creed match is held on New Year's Day, a Roman Catholic holy day: the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. Thus, Rocky's chance to prove his masculinity is associated with the birth of Christ and the ancient religious rite of manhood.

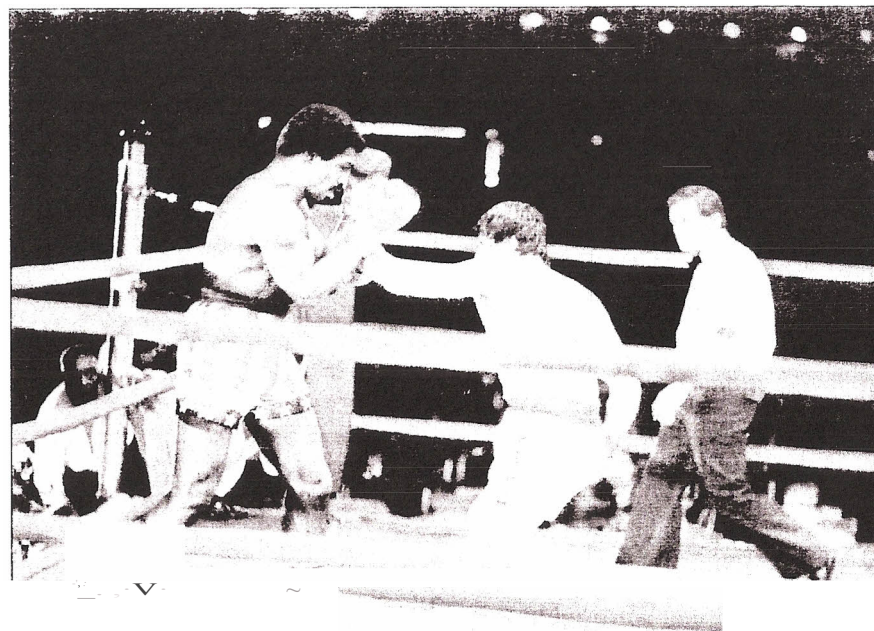
The title match turns into a bloody fifteen-round slugfest in which both men are repeatedly pummeled and knocked to the canvas, although Rocky obviously gets the worst of it--his swollen face is a gory mess of cuts, welts, and bruises. But he keeps coming back, and even gestures with his gloves to a disbelieving champion to return to the fray and punish him some more. When the final bell sounds, Rocky is still standing, having "gone the distance" against his far superior opponent. As the judge's decision (in favor of Apollo Creed) is announced, Balboa's main concern seems to be to locate his love interest, Adrian (Talia Shire), in the packed arena, where he loudly squeals out her name. When she finally arrives, and they embrace, the crowd roars, "having proven himself (and his white manhood), the underdog boxer and his girlfriend can now constitute the couple in the presence of American society.

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Rocky is a classic rags-to-riches myth, with the obstacle a rich Black man and Black Power. The film was based on an actual heavyweight championship bout in which an unknown white boxer, Chuck Wepner, the "Bayonne Bleeder," knocked down and almost "went the distance" with the legendary Muhammad Ali, who supported Black unity and lost his world title because of his opposition to the Vietnam War. For those who felt that affirmative action policies and the athletic accomplishments of African Americans went against the grain of traditional values, Rocky Balboa, the "great white hope," represented an avatar of the racial divide in America. Even though Rocky is not overtly racist—he has great respect for the brash and "uppity" Apollo Creed—the film's endorsement of self-reliant white individualism appealed to those disturbed by the "radical visions" (to use Glenn Man's book title) of the early counterculture. At its core, *Rocky* wallows in white lower-class resentment over Black economic gains in a time of recession. In fact, Rocky is forced to give up his longtime gym locker to an African American, Dipper—a metonymy for the fear felt by many whites that Blacks were taking their jobs. However, contrary to the situation in real-life America, in *Rocky*, the white guy is the underdog. A white bartender, watching Apollo Creed on TV, says, "All we got today are jig clowns." Rocky replies, "You call Apollo Creed a clown!" The Italian Stallion seems not to object to having the Black champion called a "jig."

A good part of the film's screen time is taken up with the fighter's rigorous training regimen and his preparation for the big bout: chasing a chicken around a yard to improve his legs, pounding a punching bag (and raw meat in a meatpacking house), skipping rope and doing one-armed push-ups, and running through the ethnic streets of Philadelphia in his filthy swear suit to the uplifting strains of Bill Conti's exuberant musical score. Under the tutelage of his flinty trainer Mickey (Burgess Meredith), Balboa eventually evolves into a well-conditioned athlete. After an elaborate training montage derailing Rocky's strenuous exertions, in a physical and mental apotheosis, he bounds up the steep steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art at sunrise and at the top jumps up, his arms raised in triumph (a sequence he could not complete earlier in the film). As he reaches that pinnacle, Conti's Oscar-nominated tune, "Gonna Fly Now," reaches its upbeat crescendo, a musical metaphor for the fighter's newfound power and masculine self-esteem.

The movie's love interest, the super-shy Adrian, who works in a pet store, is the antithesis of the feminist role models seen in countless American movies in which the narrative trajectory involved the female lead becoming more independent of male domination and less tied to the



Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), America's great white hope, goes the distance with heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) in *Rocky* (John Avildsen, United Artists). Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store.

domestic sphere. In contrast, *Rocky's* Adrian "escapes into domestic space" (Kernan 271). Just as Rocky's self-actualization is circumscribed by his class and ethnic determinants (he can only hope "to go the distance"), so Adrian's class and gender prohibit her from thinking much beyond her impassioned declaration "I'm not a loser!" or her idealization of the traditional heterosexual couple. Adrian's compulsive timidity and ugly-duckling persona are far from the empowered and gorgeous ideals presented in many feminist films. Instead, she fits two other classic female stereotypes: gawky wallflower and clinging vine. It is perfectly natural, then, for Mickey, Rocky's trainer, to say that "women weaken legs." It is also perfectly predictable that the usually inarticulate Rocky will find his voice, filled with paternalistic and sexist shibboleths, when counseling the local teenage "tramp" about developing a "bad rep."

Is Rocky Balboa an inspirational working-class hero, a blue-collar ethnic, a Joe Six-Pack, or a tore-runner of Reaganite entertainments that followed in the 1980s? If so, then this working-class pug has higher aspirations, as expressed in the names of his turtles—Cuff and Link (symbolizing the aristocracy)—or his goldfish—Moby Dick (the largest creature

in the world)—and that he has a poster of Rocky Marciano (the only undefeated heavyweight champion) on his wall. Peter Biskind described *Rocky* as “one of the first of the coming crop of post-New Hollywood feel-good films,” a throwback to the 1950s, and a forerunner of the movies of the 1980s with its “racist, Great White Hope” protagonist (*Easy Riders* 385). Although *Rocky*’s corny Capraesque optimism seemed to be out of sync with the counterculture, the times were apparently ripe for such a positive character and narrative, for the movie not only topped the box office in 1976-77 but also became the fifth highest grossing movie of all time

Screenwriter and star Sylvester Stallone commented on rill’ film’s success: “I believe the country is beginning to break out of this anti-everything syndrome” (Leab 251). Thus, the film’s narrative, characters, and box office receipts depended on its promotion of the status quo: the class system, racial antagonisms, and sexism. In short, although Rocky is a southpaw, he’s no “lefty.” In the end, Rocky “goes the distance” and thus valorizes All-American virtues in a cynical age. The irony is that to succeed he must hurt others (and be hurt himself), a metaphor for the iron laws of competitive capitalism. Rocky Balboa can only make it as an individual in an individualistic nation. He can rise above his *lumpenproletariat* class on his own, but he cannot rise with it (Shor 2). Solitude is emphasized here, not solidarity.

Although *Rocky* generally supports the status quo, it is not without its internal antinomies. Like the title and the protagonist’s name, the year was “rocky” in both senses of the term: the era was fraught with national and international uncertainties a, the country was emphasizing its “solid as a rock” credentials during the bicentennial. Although the film tacks to the right, the hero’s humble roots and hard work reveal dements of progressive possibilities that most of the narrative and characterizations belie.

America’s Underbelly: *Taxi Driver*

Martin Scorsese’s movie draws inspiration from the American postwar film noir cycle—replete with paranoid consciousness, metropolitan malaise, rain-soaked streets, neon lights, low-key lighting, subjective voiceover narrations, femmes fatales, and a haunting musical score by Bernard Herrmann. But *Taxi Driver* updates those post-World War II tropes into a more contemporary post-Vietnam War, post-Watergate context filled with political cynicism, urban decay, racism, street violence, feminism, and color cinematography. The film thus becomes a “neo-noir descended from the fifties B film noir of ‘psychotic action and suicidal impulse,’ but by way

of the French New Wave, John Cassavetes’s documentary realism, the metacinematic fantasies of Federico Fellini, and Michael Powell’s . . . Technicolor expressionism” (Biskind, *Easy Riders* 81).

The film’s divided sensibilities, its “calculated ambivalence,” may well be the result of the different perspectives of Calvinist screenwriter Paul Schrader and Italian American Catholic director Scorsese. This “aberrant” tendency may be why it took almost four years for the film, which was originally written in 1972, to be greenlighted by Columbia Pictures (Grist 124-25). The film’s stance on violence was much debated on its initial release and Scorsese even had to adjust the red coloration of the blood in the final scene to make it less graphic. But while *Taxi Driver* might appear to be celebrating violence (and vigilante violence at that) as a legitimate tool in society’s arsenal against the forces of darkness, the movie also displays an ironic stance vis-à-vis the title character’s psychotic propensities.

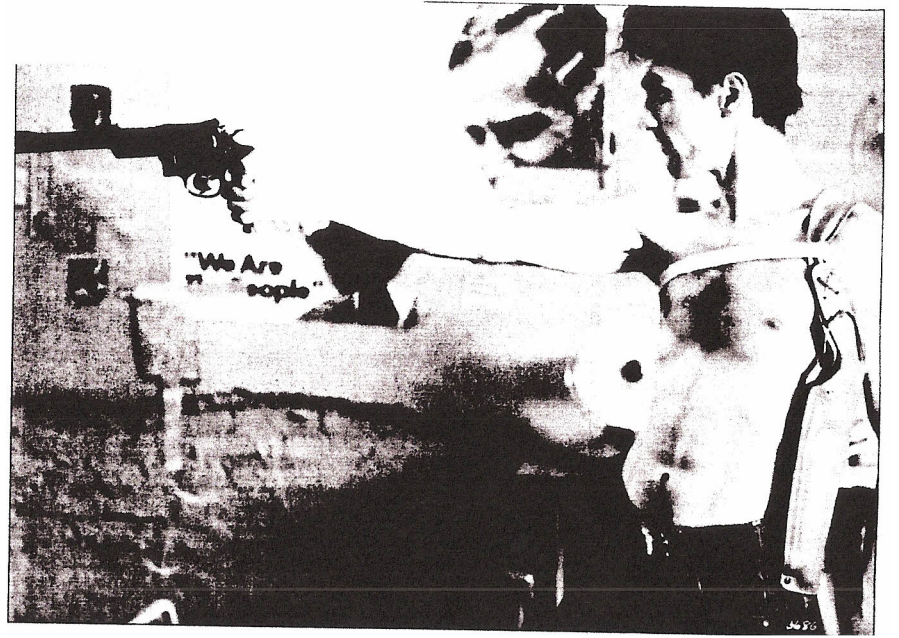
Campaign volunteer Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) compares the taxi driver protagonist-Vietnam veteran-turned-vigilante Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) to the lyrics of a Kris Kristofferson song: “a prophet and a pusher, partly truth, partly fiction: a walking contradiction.” Likewise, the movie’s rampant violence, poverty, teenage prostitution, political assassination, and racism suggest a disturbing national dilemma. This chaotic atmosphere may be why Robin Wood referred to this postmodernist film as an “incoherent text” (41-62). According to screenwriter Schrader, Travis Bickle was modeled after would-be assassin Arthur Bremer, who shot and paralyzed Alabama governor (and presidential candidate) George Wallace in 1972. Bickle’s voiceover provides a running racist rant; he aims hostile glares at Black men at every opportunity, kicks over a TV set that shows an interracial couple dancing, and even kills a Black stick-up man in a New York bodega. These acts, combined with Scorsese’s cameo as a racist passenger who spews the “n” word and makes derogatory remarks about women (“Did you ever see what [a .44 Magnum] can do to a woman’s pussy?”), define the racial and sexist zeitgeist of the bicentennial year. Like Bickle, American society had been buffeted by losses and failures—both foreign and domestic—and *Taxi Driver* contains images (and a paranoid protagonist) that alternatively project that national despair and impotence along with frustrated individual violent outbursts.

Yet none of this context explains why Travis, who is so angered by the “scum” and “filth” all around him, plans to assassinate the one public figure, the cliché-spouting liberal presidential candidate Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris), who has promised to clean up the mess. Is it because, after the revelation of Richard Nixon’s Watergate tapes, no politician could be trusted?

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Or is it because Travis wants to attract the attention of Betsy, the Palatine campaign worker who rejected him? And why does Travis switch targets and kill the pimp, Sport (Harvey Keitel), who sports the long hair and head-band of an Apache brave when Travis appears with a doppelgänger-like Mohawk hairdo? If he is planning an assassination, why does he wear that Mohawk haircut, which would only call attention to himself? Is he simply a psychopath? Or are all these incidents evidence of a signifying system of paradoxical/polysemic tropes in the film's discourse? Most important, is Bickle's final killing spree heroic (as the press reads it) or psychotic (the result of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)?² As an alienated monad surrounded by the corruption of a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America, Travis aspires to play the part of the old-fashioned western hero (with an Indian hairdo) who wants to save "his lady fair," twelve-year-old hooker Iris (Jodie Foster). But the film suggests that genuine heroism is no longer possible in the post-Vietnam, postmodern era; Travis can only be an ambiguous dark and dubious *anti*-hero, like Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers*, trained by the military (as was former U.S. Marine Lee Harvey Oswald) to "search and destroy."

Aesthetically, *Taxi Driver* is a nightmarish inferno, with colorful vapors emerging from manhole covers and Herrmann's haunting neo-noirish musical score enveloping the proceedings. Scorsese's camera fetishizes and fragments Bickle's taxicab by showing isolated metonymies of its body--the side-view mirror, windshield, tires, and rearview mirror. Since much of *Taxi Driver* is shot from Travis's distorted insomniac perspective, this fragmentation can be seen to reflect his disintegrating mind and spirit. In the justly famous scene in which Bickle visually confronts his own image in a mirror with an icy stare while aiming a gun at himself ("You talkin' to me?"), his personal paranoia and self-loathing tendencies come to the fore. Yet if Bickle is some sort of representative of post-Vietnam U.S. society, then the fact that he glares at himself--and the audience--in this chilling scene suggests that *America's* national psyche is likewise filled with suspicion and self-hatred. Similarly, on his first casual date with Betsy, lunch in a coffee shop off Columbus Circle, the two are positioned on opposite ends of the screen, with a background column separating them even more. The clutter of plates, silverware, and a napkin holder on the table further emphasizes their alienation, along with the hectic traffic and the huge phallic monument to Columbus (the "discoverer" of America) in the background of the mise-en-scène. Later, on their first real date, Bickle reveals his growing sociopathology by taking Betsy to a pornographic movie theater: she is so offended that she storms off in a taxicab.



Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) displays his personal paranoia and self-loathing in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, Columbia). Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store.

Rather than emphasize the personal psychosis of the protagonist, a more politically radical filmmaker might have focused more on the "tremendous inequalities of wealth ... on display in large cities like New York" (Ryan and Kellner 89). Although it is often difficult to make explicit connections between a film and its possible effects on a society, *Taxi Driver* offers an example of a movie that had a singular influence on the political sphere. A young man named John Hinckley watched the film several times and then in 1981 attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in order to impress the real-life Jodie Foster. In this case, life imitated art in a macabre way.

Taxi Driver also has a sustained religious subtext. Travis calls himself "Gods lonely man" and an "avenging angel." In truth, he is a martyr-hero-monster who descends into an urban hell. Betsy is also described as "like an angel out of this filthy mess," when, in reality, she is, "a figure of almost total vacuity," a mindless mediocrity who at the end of the movie becomes a disembodied head floating in Travis's rearview mirror (Wood 46). After being a whore, Iris miraculously becomes a virgin again when she is returned to the bosom of her family, a trajectory foreshadowed by her candle-filled room, which resembles a church or religious shrine. In addition, a

high-angle, directly overhead shot (a Godlike point of view) looking down on Travis is used toward the end of *Taxi Driver*, after the climactic shootout, when the camera retreats to a detached and objective position to contemplate the carnage in the whorehouse. Travis's Christ-like martyrdom, which is at odds with his proclivity for random violence, is suggested by his stigmata wounds hut complicated by his role in initiating the bloodbath. That "firefight" conclusion is straight out of TV coverage of Vietnam, with nods to film noir and the western. In fact, all of Travis's voiceover narrations sound like confessionals--a disembodied voice speaking to an unseen listener. Similarly, the burning of his hand, his ascetic rituals, and his other obsessive routines are part and parcel of the Catholic creed, as well as Travis's own masochistic desire to sacrifice his own life to save Iris through purgation and purification.

Taxi Driver earned a paltry \$12.6 million in domestic receipts, a signal that the mass audience no longer wanted troubling and paranoid films that dissed and dissected the American Dream. The time of ridiculing that dream was passing. Vietnam, Watergate, and other national social issues were fading from the popular memory--as both the studios and audiences began seeking idealized illusions to replace them.

Mediated America: *Network*

Given the popularity of TV reality shows of the early twenty-first century, *Network*'s cynical, over-the-top depiction of bizarre network programming practices is only slightly exaggerated. The commodification of television fiction, and even of TV news, was just beginning during this year, and screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky and director Sidney Lumet portrayed the tabloidization of newscasts and the overemphasis placed on Nielsen ratings, even for news shows, that had begun to infect TV journalism. On first viewing, *Network* may appear to be a caustic commentary about the growing power of global media conglomerates and the increasing trend toward multinational corporate capitalization. However, that critique is tempered by two important structural factors: the film's characters and narrative situations are exaggerated beyond the realm of plausibility, and, as in *Taxi Driver*, its most trenchant analysis is filtered through the mind and raving diatribes of a near-psychotic, in this case the suicidal Howard Beale (Peter Finch), anchorman of UBS television's evening news.

Many of Beale's tirades still apply to twenty-first-century America: the dumbing-down of hard news into "infotainment" ("Television is not the truth! Television is a goddamn amusement park!"), the commercializa-

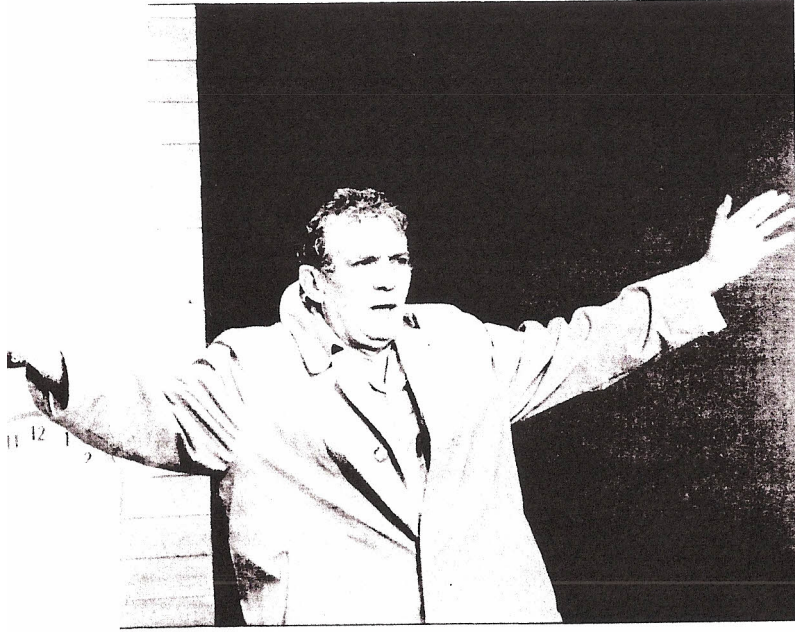
tion and sensationalization of news ("You ought to get a hell of a rating out of [my on-air suicide]. Fifty share, easy"), the shaping of public opinion by biased TV reports ("The only truth you know is what you get over this tube," "This tube is the most awesome goddamn propaganda force in the whole godless world"), and the critiques of society in general, including the profit motives of worldwide capital. That said, *Network* is as enmeshed in the "bullshit" of life as the characters and TV nation it depicts.

The film's most famous catchphrase--"I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any longer!" articulates "popular rage," but it is not a program for changing the system. Thus, the film's patina of hard-hitting opposition to the status quo is compromised by Beale's failure to offer a solution. As he puts it: "I don't want you to protest: I don't want you to riot; I don't want you to write your congressman, because I wouldn't know what to tell you to write, I don't know what to do about the depression, the inflation, the Russians, or the crime in the streets. All I know is that first you've got to get mad!" Even the film's stab at a Marxist analysis of the late-capitalist era of global hegemony is compromised because it is presented through the thundering rants (as well as the ecclesiastic lighting) of Arthur Jensen (Ned Beatty), CEO of UBS's parent company, the Communications Corporation of America (CCA). The religious iconography in Jensen's boardroom, with its elongated conference table acting as an altar, takes on satanic implications, especially in conjunction with the chiaroscuro lighting and overall mise-en-scène. Later, the ironically named Diana (Faye Dunaway) addresses the UBS affiliates meeting wearing a white gown and spreads her arms wide in a triumphant, messianic gesture. Similarly, Beale, the "latter-day prophet," delivers his on-air jeremiads--"This tube is the Bible!"--in front of a stained-glass backdrop. Jensen's rant follows:

It is the international system of currency that determines the vitality of life on this planet That is the atomic and subatomic and galactic structure of things today! ... There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM and ITT, and AT&T, and DuPont. Dow, Union Carbide, and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today. The world is a business. ... There are no nations! There are no peoples! There are no Russians! There are no Arabs! There are no Third Worlds! There is no West! There is only one holistic system of systems: one vast, interwoven, interacting, and unvaried, multinational dominion of dollars!

Chayefsky's materialist message that economic determinants control human life is consistently undercut by Jensen's messianic intentions ("I have chosen you, Mr. Beale, to preach this evangel ... because you're on television, dummy") and the stentorian line deliveries of Ned Beatty. This

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Howard Beale (Peter Finch) exhorts his fans "not to take it anymore" in *Network* (Sidney Lumet, MGM). Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store.

has often been true of Hollywood message films that, in order to get produced, often need to leaven their strong political content with humor, which *mutatis mutandis* results in a dilution of the serious intent. This undercutting of important issues with outrageous comedy is evident in the portrayal of *Network's* African American "revolutionaries," who seem more interested in being seen on television and negotiating distribution points than in improving the lot of Black people. As these examples from the film illustrate, the use of irony and exaggeration in the dialogue weakens the credibility of the Black characters and undermines any meaningful commentary on the situation of African Americans:

Diana: Hi, Diana Christiansen, A racist lackey of the imperialist ruling circles.

Laureen: Laureen Hobbes. Badass commie nigger.

Mary Ann: You fuckin' fascist! Did you see the film we made at the San Remo jail breakout demonstrating the rising up of the seminal prisoner class infrastructure?!

Laureen: You can blow the seminal prisoner class infrastructure out your ass! You not knockin' down my goddamn distribution charges!

The final act of the movie, the on-air assassination of Howard Beale, is performed by members of the Ecumenical Liberation Army, a parody of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), the Black militant group that robbed banks and kidnapped newspaper heiress Patty Hearst in 1974. The real-life SLA incited perhaps the first modern U.S. media frenzy by manipulating the airwaves. In *Network*, the ultra-leftist Black group is more than willing to turn its media attention into a weekly primetime television series. One point in *Network's* favor is that its corporate higher-ups are, for the most part, the villains. Thus, UBS executive Frank Hackett (Robert Duvall) and Diana Christensen are the co-conspirators who plot the on-air assassination of Howard Beale. Of course, some of the network executives--most notably UBS president Edward George Ruddy (William Prince) and UBS news division president Max Schumacher (William Holden)--are principled, albeit weak, men who try to uphold journalistic ethics in an era of corporate greed. Ultimately, though, the corporate suits win out and Beale, who had tried to pierce the veil of capital for his own self-revelation ("I must make my witness!"), ends up not only deserted and defeated but dead for his efforts. We are left with a cautionary tale for any individual or social movement that attempts to penetrate the secrets of corporate America.

On first viewing, *Network* also seems to comment on another social issue: the conflict between the young and the old, what was called "the generation gap." This is exemplified in the obligatory romantic relationship between Diana and the much-older Max Schumacher. At one point, Max states that difference directly: "I'm not sure she's capable of any real feelings. She's television generation. She learned life from Bugs Bunny." Although the real-life generation gap was between the youthful antiwar protesters and the older, more conservative citizenry, *Network* reverses those polarities by having the older man, Max, be the more antiauthoritarian, while Diana has a more entrepreneurial, bottom-line, and cutthroat corporate sensibility. She can hardly have "zipless" sex without talking about TV ratings, while Max suffers from marital guilt and pangs of conscience at every turn. The feminist movement was making great strides in America, yet Diana is portrayed as a coldhearted bitch. That she is depicted as a producer of late-capitalist media culture (Max tells her she is "television incarnate. Indifferent to suffering, insensitive to joy") may excuse the obvious gender stereotyping, or perhaps making Max's wife (Beatrice Straight) articulate, affectionate, and caring was deemed sufficient to show that not *all* women are amoral and lifeless. Nonetheless, the range of women portrayed in *Network* is limited by the social horizons of America and Hollywood. To summarize, although *Network* has an ostensibly critical

agenda--especially with regard to its depiction of the media--its contradictions, compromise, and comedy mitigate its power as a weapon of radical social protest. Further, its high box office figures for MGM testify to the popularity of nonthreatening cultural critique. Such internal incoherence is a hallmark of many American movies this year.

Reporting Corruption: *All the President's Men*

Alan Pakula's film appears to have a radical message. Its locus seems to be the abuses of power by the Nixon administration and its 1972 campaign organization as seen through the eyes of real-life *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman), as well as its editor Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards Jr.). However, by the time the film was released, President Nixon had already resigned and more than thirty White House and campaign officials had pleaded guilty or been convicted of various Watergate-related crimes. (The book upon which the film was based ended in January 1974, seven months before Nixon resigned.) The system seemed to work and American democracy was restored, even though Nixon's handpicked successor, Gerald Ford, pardoned the ex-president on September 8, 1974, and almost won the presidential election two years later.

Ultimately, *All the President's Men* is more about journalism than it is about politics. In fact, the tag line for the film was "The most devastating detective story of the century!" Such a marketing pitch established the movie as a generic product of the Hollywood factory system, rather than as a genuine exposé of the Nixon administration or the "legalized bribery" of the entire electoral process. The first shot of the film is of typewriter keys striking out the date: June 1, 1972. A loud sound track that exaggerates the percussive volleys of those keys so that they sound like gunshots accompanies that visual image. From the outset, the press' "weapons"--in this case, typewriters--are established as powerful and factual. Thus, even before they appear on screen, the hero figures, Woodward and Bernstein (sometimes called "Woodstein"), are destined through dogged persistence to reveal and right the system's corruption, even though they appear to be rank amateurs at the beginning.

There is no doubt that the real-life *Washington Post* reporters helped bring down the Nixon administration. However, the Watergate affair was more than a "third-rate burglary," as Nixon press secretary Ron Ziegler called it; it became a constitutional crisis that lingered over the nation long after indictments were handed down. White House officials had served prison time, and

Ford had pardoned Nixon. Like the Vietnam War and the political assassinations of the 1960s, Watergate was another blow to an already-scarred American psyche, a reminder of all that was wrong with the United States as the bicentennial year approached. As William J. Palmer put it, "Watergate become a further motive for alienation, suspicion, paranoia, distrust, and fear, all of which had been planted in the sixties to bear fruit in the seventies" (12). In *All the President's Men*, though, the Watergate scandal is presented as an unfortunate aberration, not a structural flaw of the political system. As Robin Wood avers, the movie "celebrate[s] the democratic system that can expose and rectify such anomalies" (144). This recuperation of decent, reassuring liberalism--as opposed to radical critique and systemic change--was part and parcel of the incoming Carter administration, which attempted to reassure the American public that corruption had been rooted out of presidential politics (Carter: "I will never lie to you"). Thus, *All the President's Men* is in the same league as *Rocky* and the other feel-good entertainments that dotted the landscape of Hollywood this year.

If truth be told, the reality of the Watergate affair is hardly covered in *All the President's Men*; instead, the film is a paean to investigative journalism, rather than an authentic critique of political corruption. As Palmer notes, "The audience ends up caring little about what Watergate meant or how it happened or what its effect on American society turned out to be. . . . The audience finds itself much more involved with how Woodward and Bernstein get their story" (108). As such, the movie reads more like a cinematic training manual for journalism school students than as a social document on Nixon's "dirty tricks." One of the lessons the film teaches is that newsmen can and do use little white lies (dirty tricks) to massage their sources; this perhaps underscores the scene in which Nixon campaign official Hugh Sloan says that he's a Republican and Woodward blurts out, "I am too," to establish rapport with a high-placed informant. The inner workings of the *Washington Post* (and of its now-famous newsroom) are reproduced in great detail, but the inner workings of the Nixon White House are not (Palmer 108). The Watergate story thus becomes a mere headline, rather than evidence of deep-seated political sleaze. One subtle exception occurs early in the movie. After the break-in, Woodward is awakened and ordered to attend the arraignment of the burglars. As he questions an attorney, we faintly hear in the background the word "prostitution," probably in reference to another case on the court's docket. In context, though, this reference becomes a subtle allusion to the prostitution of the legal system during the Nixon administration, which sold its soul to individual fat cats and corporate contributors.

In addition to being a film about news reporting, *All the President's Men* is a paean to the “buddy” film, in that Woodward and Bernstein “meet cute” (they did not like each other at first meeting and are often positioned at opposite sides of the screen) but come to care about each other as they work together and the narrative (and the threat level) progresses. The odd couple pairing of the meticulous Woodward and the impulsive Bernstein represents yet another antinomy in the American psyche: its stolid work ethic and its creative propensities. Deep Throat (Hal Holbrook)--so-named because of his intimate and thorough knowledge of the Nixon White House, his willingness to share secret information with the crusading journalists-- ,111(1 as an obvious pun on the popular porno flick--meets with Woodward in dark, deserted parking garages. The chiaroscuro lighting on Deep Throat's enigmatic face emphasizes the dangerous and furtive nature of these clandestine rendezvous. The lighting scheme of these scenes is in sharp contrast to the high-key, well-lit scenes in the *Washington Post* newsroom (which was meticulously recreated on a soundstage in Burbank, California), Deep Throat's injunction to Woodward--“Follow the money”--became a catchphrase of the era signifying a materialist methodology for uncovering official corruption (though it was coined by screenwriter William Goldman and not present in the Woodstein book),

Before receiving Deep Throat's advice, however, Woodward and Bernstein follow a paper trail involving books that Howard Hunt checked out at the White House library. That quest leads them to the Library of Congress, where we see a close-up of their hands sorting through hundreds of library index cards. The camera begins to zoom out slowly from directly above the reporters, accompanied by lap dissolves, eventually reaching a God's-eye view from inside the dome of the library. This directly overhead angle emphasizes the puny size and political insignificance of Woodstein at this early phase of their research. The final mise-en-scène of the shot resembles a circle with spokes radiating out from the center, approximating the geographical layout of the District of Columbia. This composition (along with the reporters' smallness in the frame) hints at their entrapment in the Washington system, but, in retrospect, the God's-eye perspective simultaneously suggests that their quest for the truth is blessed by a higher power.

A similar high-angle shot appears much later in the film when, at the nadir of their quest, while under attack from the government and under fire for shabby journalism, the reporters drive a car out of the *Washington Post* parking lot. The camera is positioned high above them, the auto tiny in the frame. We follow the car as it turns onto a major thoroughfare and

notice that their vehicle is the only one moving right to left onscreen: all the other traffic moves left to right, the more natural movement of the eye. This movement “against the grain”--by the car and the camera--is a subtle visual clue that the pair's investigation has reversed direction.

In the end--even though, as Ben Bradlee says, “Nothing's riding on this--only the First Amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press, and maybe the future of the country”--Woodward and Bernstein prevail. At first, we see a deep-focus long shot of the *Post*'s bright, white newsroom, with Woodward typing away in the background; gradually, the camera zooms in on a TV set as Nixon's second inaugural ceremony begins. As if to bookend the opening shot, in the final images, Woodward's soft typing grows in volume on the sound track and begins to eclipse the thunderous twenty-one-gun salute for Nixon heard on the TV. Eventually, the furious clatter of a teletypewriter banging out incriminating headlines becomes the aural equivalent of the inaugural cannonade. (The exaggerated sound was created by layering the sounds of gunshots and whiplashes over the actual sounds of a typewriter, thus accentuating the film's theme of words as weapons, the pen as mightier than the sword [www.imdb.com]) Gradually, the percussive sounds of the pounding keyboard drown out the cannon's roar, until the final message appears: “August 9, 1974--Nixon Resigns,” suggesting that the power of a free press can overcome venality and dishonesty in government. The typed messages that conclude the film summarize the exposure, indictment, imprisonment, and resignation of “all the president's men” (and the president himself), thus bringing the linear narrative to an apotheosis of good triumphing over evil.

America Finds Its Voice: *Bound for Glory*

Woody Guthrie (David Carridine), legendary folksinger and troubadour extraordinaire, rides the roads across Depression-era America and discovers his authentic voice of protest, in between stints as a sign painter, faith healer, farm worker, and small-time singer. The film follows Guthrie from the harshness of the Dust Bowl (especially Pampa, Texas) in 1936 and forward on his travels through California; it ends as Guthrie lights out on the road again, this time for New York and some renown. Director Hal Ashby's mythic narrative structure epitomizes the picaresque quality of the American “road movie” genre, whose chief classical exemplar may be John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). In fact, Woody Guthrie hitches his way west along Route 66, the same road mythologized in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Bound for Glory begins with a written quotation from Guthrie: "Don't let anything get you plumb down," an injunction that suggests that no matter what hardships may befall the protagonist (or the nation) one must keep a positive outlook. The first image of the film shows a lone figure walking toward the camera on a dry, dusty, yet sunny Texas street; it is Guthrie, who is introduced as an individualist and is last seen as an individual. When he joins a group of men shooting the breeze about their woeful plights, he comments, "You folks sure are ... depressing." He had walked from that sunny first image into a shady area. Indeed, Carradine's first close-up shows him with hatchet lighting, a technique that bisects the face into a light zone and a shadowy area. In this case, the bifurcated lighting scheme suggests both Guthrie's awareness of the region's "depressing" economic realities and his optimistic nature. Soon enough, his hopefulness is tested by the constant nagging of his wife, Mary (Melinda Dillon), who harps about his lack of real work and his wasting time by singing. This negativity reaches its apex when a massive tornado moves into town, a dark cloud that envelops Pampa. This spectacular special-effects shot (and its aftermath) acts as a metaphor for the Great Depression and causes Guthrie to drawl, "Seems like things ain't goin' so good around here." Woody abandons his wife and children for California, leaving a note for Mary informing her of his plans.

Woody hitches a car ride, hops a freight train, and heads west, past scenic amber countryside. A harmonica solo of "This Land Is Your Land" is heard over these lovely images. Leftist cinematographer Haskell Wexler emphasizes both the lyrical beauty and the languid barrenness of the American countryside. This is especially true in a scene shot from the top of a boxcar as Guthrie and a Black hobo converse while the terrain glides past them. In fact, the negative of *Bound for Glory* was flashed with white light before shooting to achieve a desaturated pastel color scheme and softened shadows. This technique helped to create an old-fashioned, faded ambiance. The film was also the first commercial feature-length movie that used the Steadicam apparatus, a device that achieves smooth camera movements even when handheld (Cook, *Lost* 367-68; 374-79). The Steadicam's function, to smooth over wobbly movements (the pun on the Wobblies' labor movement is intentional), and the golden cinematography with soft shadows are analogous to the film's efforts to smooth over the harsh cultural contradictions in both Depression-era America and the contemporary social landscape through cinematic and musical aestheticization. Indeed, this conflict between the Old Left of the 1930s, represented by Guthrie and his musical paean to unionism, and the New Left of 1976, which made up

a substantial share of the minuscule target audience for *Bound for Glory*, may explain some of the movie's internal inconsistencies.

Despite the film's attention to natural beauty and special cinematography, social contradictions are evident everywhere that Guthrie travels: impoverished hobos fight among themselves, and, in one image, we see two trains moving in opposite directions during a boxcar brawl, a shot that has no narrative purpose except to suggest that the country and its itinerant workers are moving at cross-purposes. Thus, as a vagabond, Guthrie witnesses more than just America's scenic topography: he becomes aware of the hardships and plight of California's migrant farm workers and is radicalized in the process. Even the church is ineffectual in hard times; a pastor turns Woody away when he asks for work as a sign painter. At the California border, Guthrie is shocked to learn that one has to have \$50 to cross into the Golden State. Circumventing the border guards, he simply walks over an unpatrolled crossing. His personal resourcefulness, however, cannot solve all problems, even though by now he has acquired a Christ-like beard. He is offered a lift by a nomadic fruit picker, Luther Johnson (Randy Quaid), and thereby witnesses the injustices meted out in migrant labor camps, where pickers are paid four cents a bushel--when they are actually allowed to work. Woody concludes that "somethin' oughta be done about this." Johnson mentions the possibility of forming a union. In response, Guthrie pulls out his guitar rather than paint a picket sign.

Shortly thereafter, country music singer Ozark Bule (Ronny Cox) visits the camps and sings up a storm about organizing the agricultural workers. He also sings the anticlerical tune "Pie in the Sky When You Die," and a large crowd joins in. When Woody spends a night in an overcrowded migrant worker's camp he observes more oppression, this time as it is experienced by the unemployed at the hands of company goons. He learns the value of keeping up one's spirits by attending Bule's periodic songfests and hoedowns and eventually sings the title song, "Bound for Glory," as a solo. Allegorically, the train bound for glory is the engine of history, the positive end of the class struggle, yet the movie now follows the trajectory of a lone individualist. Indeed, the narrative turns away from the suffering and struggles of the itinerant farmers and becomes the biography of one musician. In fact, although he sings "I'm Stickin' to the Union" with great gusto, most of the rest of the film focuses on his solitary pursuits rather than his solidarity with fellow laborers. In due course, Ozark offers Woody a paid singing job in Los Angeles, where he works with his singing comrade. Eventually, he goes on a national tour. While on tour, Guthrie starts to sing

out on the radio about the plight of the nomadic pickers. Having developed a social conscience and a passion for politics, Woody can no longer turn out crowd-pleasing, syrupy tunes, a decision that upsets a new sponsor, who demands that he stop singing controversial material. After several warnings, Guthrie refuses to cooperate and is promptly fired.

During this period, his nagging wife rejoins him, and she urges him to go along with the station management. "I have no desire to sing to people who're drinkin' martinis and stuffin' themselves full of lamb chops," he responds. It is interesting to note that most of the women in the film stand in the way of the male protagonist, reiterating a common theme of many of the decade's important movies. Even when Woody lovingly kisses his wife in the doorway of their bedroom, the *mise-en-scène* is so cramped that it foreshadows their eventual breakup. Indeed, when he gets fired, Mary leaves him. His professional relationship with another folksinger, Memphis Sue, also keeps him down: her repertoire of songs consists of sweet and harmless love songs, not the "somethin' else" he wants to sing about. Finally, even Woody's high-class mistress, Pauline (Gail Strickland), puts him off for most of the narrative before finally conceding, "I'm really happy that I know you." Nonetheless, that encouraging dialogue is belied by the *mise-en-scène* in her bedroom, where she is positioned in the dominant screen-right foreground and he is isolated in a doorway on the weaker screen-left side of the frame.

Guthrie eventually hops a freight train and heads east, where there are "people and unions." This dialectic between the need for profitability versus political passion is, of course, an important tension in the motion picture industry, as well as for professional musicians. This conflict seems to be resolved on the side of passion during the movie's attenuated ending, which features numerous shots of Guthrie on top of a boxcar as he journeys across country, with a medley of his famous tunes (especially "This Land Is Your Land") sung by a variety of performers in the background. However, the film's narrative shift--from focusing on socioeconomic issues to highlighting an individual musician's rise to fame and "glory"--is emblematic of the cultural contradictions of many commercial American films, and of many other eras. Woody Guthrie's rugged individualism (he repeatedly refuses to accept charity) and against-all-odds success story is a classic Horatio Alger--or Rocky Balboa--tale of personal accomplishment in an era when a mass movement was needed to solve the nation's woes. Like Rocky Balboa, Woody Guthrie was able to rise above his class, but not with it.

Despite it all, progressive plot points and the protagonist's uncompromising musical stance, *Bound for Glory* does not include Guthrie's

truly radical songs; likewise, steadfastly reverential and safe, the film does not depict his more radical real-life activities either. Instead, his more folksy, hopeful, and joyful tunes such as "This Land Is Your Land" and "Bound for Glory" and colorful personal escapades with his wife and rich mistress are foregrounded. His renditions of songs on the more militant album, "Ballad of Saccho and Vanzetti" (1947), were not included (Booker 271). Despite its basically liberal viewpoint, the film emphasizes the predicament of farm laborers more than Guthrie's memoirs do. In its concern for those Depression-era workers, the film portrays not just the conditions in 1936, when the film takes place, but the sorry economic and social climate of forty years later, with stagflation, high unemployment, and the misery index.

Bound for Glory did not do well at the box office, perhaps as a result of its length (147 minutes) and meandering, episodic narrative. In retrospect, the film's lack of box office success may have been a harbinger that the age of the Hollywood protest movie was over (or at least on the wane). Ultimately, *Bound for Glory* is a mixed bag of a film, a cultural contradiction that appeased both the desire of mainstream audiences to hear respectable, popular, and folksy tunes and to watch a "just-folks" character succeed, and also the need of leftists for a working-class hagiography of the man who influenced latter-day protest singers Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, Joan Baez, and, of course, Arlo Guthrie--all of whom were popular when the film was made. In some ways, the very title *Bound for Glory* conveys a mixed message. On the one hand, "bound for glory" is an optimistic proclamation predicting triumph (and the title of one of Guthrie's most popular songs); on the other hand, "bound" also means constrained and suggests that "glory" is possible only in the future. Both significations are proffered in this compromised film.

Conclusion

In some general sense, films can be said to reflect the culture in which they are created and, likewise, they interact with that culture.³ As such, they are epiphenomenal manifestations of larger social circumstances. It must always be remembered, though, that the various arts often evince "unequal developments" in their relation to each other and to the larger public sphere. As a commercial enterprise, the Hollywood cinema requires significant "lead times" (often one to three years) in which to develop a script (or "property," as industry insiders call a screenplay), finance and cast it, shoot it, edit it, and market it. Thus, assessing the precise correlation between a given movie (or group of films) and its social hieroglyph can never be an exact science. Furthermore, American films are not just the products of their individual creators but of a larger cultural horizon, or soci-

ety as a whole. Movies are always commercial products produced, distributed, and exhibited by corporate conglomerates and, as such, reflect the practices and ideology of particular industrial regimes. At some historical conjunctures, the dominant ideology may be overt and monolithic, but, more often than not, the spirit of the times is represented by conflicting discourses. Even within a relatively homogeneous society, “gaps and fissures” may appear. It is through these “structural absences,” these lacks and incongruities, that the nature of the ideological system may be interrogated and revealed (Editorial Board 496).

In America's bicentennial year, most of Hollywood's box office and critical hits revealed contradictory, even dialectical, propensities. On the one hand, the themes, narratives, and characters of the year's movies often evinced cynicism about the body politic, a healthy skepticism about the future of the nation. On the other hand, those self-same themes, narratives, and characters frequently foregrounded an all-American optimism about how to solve the problems the country faced. Whether the actual social issues of the day were the focus of those texts (or present in their subtexts only), there was no ideological conformity, no allegiance to a fixed party line. Indeed, most of the major movies were *internally* contradictory--that is, they had both conservative and liberal elements, currents of racism and brotherhood, and characters who were sexual chauvinists and feminists. Although “you don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows,” as Bob Dylan said, the film critic's weathervane must be extremely sensitive to accurately ascertain the prevailing conditions when the cultural spirit of the times are “blowin' in the wind.”

NOTES

1. In 1964, Richard Hofstadter defined a “paranoid style in American politics.” By that he did not mean a clinical psychoanalytical diagnosis of any individuals but a pervasive pattern of paranoid projection. Although Hofstadter originally applied this categorization to right-wing fanatics (e.g., Senator Joseph McCarthy, the John Birch Society), by 1976 the left had also taken on the many of these paranoid attributes, because of the unanswered questions about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X; revelations about the Vietnam War contained in the Pentagon Papers; Watergate; and so on. For more on this, see Hofstadter 77-86.

2. The label “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (Sometimes called “Post-Vietnam Syndrome” [PVS]) was resented by most Vietnam veterans. It implied that many returning vets ended up strung out on violence because of their combat experience. For more on this subject, see Figley and Levantman.

3. From a methodological standpoint, it is important to note that the films under consideration here (and all the significant American movies of the year) do not so much represent 1976 America as they present certain of 1976 America's ways of signifying itself.

What is at stake here, then, is the films' production of ideology, not a homological comparison between the “real” United States of 1976 and the “always already” imaginary, “reel” U.S. proffered by Hollywood. In short, the contradictions in the films are not exactly the same as those of American society, precisely because it is ideology's task to mask and efface the contradictions between cinema and history itself. For more on this meta-methodological point, see Tomasulo, “Bicycle Thieves” 2-5.