The Impure Cinema: New Hollywood 1967-1976

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> So you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie.[1]

The title of this book suggests a certain cultural pessimism. It talks about a Golden Age and a closed chapter of history: *The Last Great American Picture Show*. Generally, demarcations of this sort are hard to justify and are more of a hindrance to an open engagement with films. They tend to originate in the romantic notion that cultural history unfolds in discrete episodes ("narratives"), and they often reflect the formative influences of the author. If you have come of age as a cinema-goer during the heyday of New Hollywood cinema – sometime between Bonnie and Clyde and Taxi Driver – you've probably experienced the main brands of post-1970s American cinema by necessity as less rich, less intelligent, less political, as retrograde.

My own first experiences of the cinema stand in contrast to this account – even if, in the end, they led to similar conclusions. I started to go the movies regularly at the end of the Seventies. *Star Wars*, which I saw six or seven times during 1977/78, propelled this habit. It's a film that fairly exactly marks the point at which public discourse and popular cinema in the United States underwent a crucial shift in emphasis. Towards the end of the Seventies, the increasingly complex narrative negotiation of (both fictional and very real) contradictions and conflicts started to recede behind the phantasms of a neoconservative discourse of re-mythologisation, re-evangelisation and re-militarisation, gradually disappearing from view altogether in the course of the Reaganite era. So in a sense my first cinema was already "post-classical"[2] and post-modern – a cinema of hyper-genres, often accompanied by an ironic affirmation of shop-worn myths and relying more on textures, surfaces, aural-

visual effects and on "somatic" audience responses. Films such as Star Wars, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Superman – The Movie, Alien, The Empire Strikes Back or Raiders of the Lost Ark strove to be seen repeatedly, their exhilarating physical effects had to be felt over and over again in the cinema (it was the last pre-VCR era).

Parallel to these experiences, however, I retrospectively began to explore the cinema of the Sixties and early Seventies – propelled by my first contact with very different and irritating Hollywood movies like Apocalypse Now and Raging Bull. Around 1980/81, the "Star-Kino", a repertory house in Vienna, offered the opportunity to view within the space of a few months The Godfather (both parts one after another), Mean Streets, Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore, Taxi Driver, the complete works of Sam Peckinpah, Easy Rider, The Long Goodbye, Nashville, Zabriskie Point, Alice's Restaurant, Little Big Man, Klute, All the President's Men and Shampoo. There was a stark and inspiring contrast between these works (and their viewing context: a small, dingy suburban repertory theatre) and, on the other hand, the new spectacular films (usually shown in the "Gartenbau-Kino", an 800-seat picture palace on the Ringstrasse in Vienna, practically designed for intoxicating "feelie" effects). This contrast has grown larger over time, so much so that it now seems reasonable to speak in terms of fundamentally different temporal and aesthetic zones.

The mixture of styles and subject matter that, for simplicity's sake, shall be called "New Hollywood" here, could of course still be located in films made after 1977 (in the early Eighties, for instance, Blade Runner represented the fragile intersection of the two halves of my film world).[3] And even during the past fifteen years many of the (few) important American films still had their reference points – in terms of personnel, aesthetics, subject matter or attitude – in the culture of the Seventies: The Thin Red Line, Short Cuts, L.A. Confidential and Bulworth; the work of Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader, John Sayles and Clint Eastwood;[4] Jackie Brown, George Washington and My Own Private Idaho; the work of Richard Linklater, Paul Thomas Anderson and Wes Anderson (as well as the much-maligned, but fascinating films of Sean Penn); Drugstore Cowboy, Another Day in Paradise and Jesus' Son; The Ice Storm, Velvet Goldmine, Almost Famous ... and last but not least, Texasville and The Two Jakes, two extremely rich – if sadly under-praised – sequels and reinterpretations of classics from the New Hollywood era (The Last Picture Show and Chinatown).

On the other hand, the American "Indie" movement of the 1980s and 1990s, widely regarded as a new alternative to the major studios' increasingly conservative production and distribution policies, seems to have exhausted itself – at least as a viable cultural-political movement – and split into multiple direc-

Ben Johnson in The Last Picture Show

tions. Often connected to a niche consciousness, the standard-bearers of independent cinema consequently helped to establish a niche market, which could then easily be appropriated or inhaled by the mainstream industry. The important "Indie" companies of the Eighties and Nineties are today part of or closely associated with major studios. In addition, the studios themselves have set up their own labels to cater to the (formerly) "independent" market. In Late Capitalism, the so-called alternatives almost always turn out to be mere variations of one and the same economic logic.

At a cursory glance, the process of rejuvenation that the film industry enforced after 1967-68, and which resulted in a "New Hollywood", was a product of this same logic. Perhaps the crucial difference lay in the intensity of the social movements, changes, shocks and crises, which rocked American society in the Sixties and early Seventies, and moreover, in the intensity with which popular culture registered these shocks. During the Eighties and Nineties the real crises were certainly none the less intense, but the modalities of their narrative transformation into popular discourse had entirely shifted. Mainstream

and large sections of independent cinema had succumbed to the same modes of repression and displacement as indeed had public life.[5]

The symbiotic relationship which links politics and popular culture in the U.S. reached an unprecedented level with the glamorous pop-cult surrounding John F. Kennedy and his administration – and it certainly manifests itself in New Hollywood cinema, too. But in the case of these films, it is often not only a matter of themes and plots related to current events or of a transfer from political to cultural energies,[6] but essentially a matter of changing modes of perception. In mid-to-late Sixties public discourse, the discrepancy between "official" images and rhetoric and real world experiences (regarding the Vietnam War, for instance) became increasingly obvious, and this gap in turn called into question all conventional means of representation previously considered valid and true to life. As the liberal consensus in American society was coming unstuck, for a brief time the generally accepted "realism" of American television and Hollywood films seemed to be open to debate. American films had begun to acquire aesthetic means of encoding such doubts since the early 1960s, as numerous new cinematographic "movements" – in tandem with the new social movements – gained a foothold in the United States (primarily in New York):[7] "The expressive possibilities that became available – and in them semiology was always imbued with and surrounded by politics – may be summarised as being hinged between authenticity and irony."[8] Yet, when viewed in retrospect, the impression of a linear, almost logical development from a classical realist to a modernist and reflective cinema (which, at the time, was generally regarded as inevitable) is largely an illusion.

This book deals with a kind of cinema which in many ways pushed back the boundaries: politically, by raising taboo topics and views (in films ranging from Medium Cool to Chinatown); aesthetically, by striving to replace a seemingly transparent and natural norm of realist representation with self-reflexivity (from David Holzman's Diary to The Last Movie); and lastly, in economic terms, by trying to extricate itself from the traditional industrial film production process through the formation of groups and the cultivation of auteur personalities (from John Cassavetes and Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope to the BBS group which produced films like Drive, He Said or The King of Marvin Gardens for Columbia).

At the same time, it was a cinema that could not help internalising these boundaries. It allegorically staged the defeats and set-backs of this "time of renewal" and unconsciously placed itself in an untenable position: politically, by more or less failing – much as American society did – to develop an alternative way out of the crisis (as manifest in films from Easy Rider to All the President's Men);[9] aesthetically, by generally seeking to reconcile its "modernist" objectives with the demands of a readily accessible cinema of entertainment

Dustin Hoffman and Faye Dunaway in Little Big Man

(from Bonnie and Clyde to Taxi Driver); and economically, by entirely misunderstanding the willingness of a film industry – temporarily weakened by economic setbacks – to make concessions. There seemed to be no other way of resolving the dialectic between "autonomous" creativity and large investments (= expectations of profit) than by staging quasi-liberating catastrophes (from Zabriskie Point to Heaven's Gate). In many films of the New Hollywood era, these conflicts create a magnificent richness and enormous internal tensions and an incoherence, which lays bare their conditions of production and, consequently, the contradictions in American culture.[10] As Robin Wood has observed: "The films seem to crack open before our eyes."[11]

The different modes of negotiating or overcoming this untenable position can be roughly divided into two categories, as can indeed the various individual career changes. The entire film industry acclimatised to the newly "liberated" situation for a brief period, and almost every director, producer, writer, actor fell into line. The great (and adaptable) majority of those employed in the film industry experienced this period as one phase among many, as a stage which allowed them to behave in a more "radical" or "independent" manner

but which didn't adversely affect their ability to survive in the more conservative climate that lay ahead. A none too small minority, however, identified more deeply and concretely with the new opportunities of art and life; they exhausted their energies more rapidly (because the opposition was much greater, too) and had difficulty making the transition when all the "fun" was over.

If one were to name the typical actors of the New Hollywood era – apart from the obvious (male) names such as Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Gene Hackman, Robert De Niro, who emerged from this definitive phase in their careers with both bankability and credibility intact for decades to come, two "couples" spring to mind who epitomise two opposing poles of the time. Jane Fonda and Robert Redford: the "official" (and three times on-screen) couple – still popular today, firmly entrenched in the film industry and symbolically linked to the Sixties and Seventies. Karen Black and Warren Oates: an ideal but doubly "unofficial" couple (their liaison being purely based on my imagination; they did not share one moment of screentime) virtually forgotten today with audiences as well as the film industry, but very concretely and painfully associated with the Sixties and Seventies.

Fonda and Redford, born in New York and Santa Monica, respectively, rose to prominence on the carefree side of Cold War Culture (which was belatedly memorialised in Barefoot in the Park), came of age during the incipient crisis of the mid-Sixties (The Chase) and, after several detours, continued down a path of social awareness (Downhill Racer, Tell Them Willie Boy's Here, They Shoot Horses, Don't They?) and antiwar protests. Acting as figureheads of the left, they enabled several analyses of social and screen stereotypes (The Candidate, Klute, Tout va bien), but stopped short of any decisive, radical step, mellowing into a kind of critical movie star liberalism (All the President's Men, Three Days of the Condor, Brubaker, Julia, Coming Home, The China Syndrome). They fostered the re-romanticisation of outsider myths (The Electric Horseman) and finally became more occupied with preserving their youth, disciplining the body, consulting on media industry matters and such pursuits as sport, nature, and various entrepreneurial ventures (where the strange intersection between neo-conservatism and political correctness, between Indecent Proposal and Quiz Show, is no longer an issue) – untouchable icons that transcend the film world.

Karen Black, born Ziegler in Park Ridge, Illinois, and Warren Oates from Depoy, Kentucky, came from different milieus. For them perfection was not the mother of all things, and they never strove to put well-rounded, triumphant characters on the screen. Instead, they played small, "marginal" types, gentle sufferers, hysterics and unpredictable psychos – never winking at the audience, feeling no need to rise above the intellectual horizon of their charac-

ters. They were content to capture the banality of the everyday that dominates most people's lives. Neither capable nor willing to acquire any kind of glamour, they were still in high demand and moderately successful for a number of years, because during these years – and the same holds for Fonda and Redford – the reality of America received as much recognition as its phantasms. They tended not to "dominate" the films they worked on but often collaborated with specific filmmakers for specific purposes. In Black's case, it was mainly for gloomy, "countercultural" purposes: Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper), Five Easy Pieces (Bob Rafelson), Drive, He Said (Jack Nicholson), Cisco Pike (Bill Norton), Born To Win (Ivan Passer), Nashville (Robert Altman). But even in the limp adaptation of The Day of the Locust her determined little Hollywood whore is the true centrepiece of the film. In the case of Oates, it was obsessed odd-balls and melancholic men of the West – in four films each for Sam Peckinpah and Monte Hellman,[12] as well as for other maverick directors like Peter Fonda (The Hired Hand), James Frawley (Kid Blue), Phil Kaufman (The White Dawn), Terrence Malick (Badlands), and Thomas McGuane (92 in the Shade). After 1976 Black and Oates were barely able to find suitable employment, their qualities soon becoming an obstacle and their insistence on truthfulness a genuine risk for a newly regenerated cinema of escapism or stodgy liberalism. Oates died in 1982 and Black mainly appeared in small European and trashy American movies from then on. Most poignantly, her only film with Robert Redford (The Great Gatsby) is considered to be one of the greatest disasters of the 1970s.

As should be apparent from such an account, the deep-seated contradictions in New Hollywood films still have the power to shape any critical engagement with this era, especially in Europe. There is a multitude of temptations to resolve the contradictions: by drawing strict lines between autonomous artistry and studio capitalism, or between "opportunistic" and "authentic" pairs of actors; by extricating individual films from their ambivalent contexts of production and displaying them as "pure", ideal artefacts; by distilling from films political intentions and messages which were often barely implied; by postulating a glorious age of new beginnings which was mostly experienced by those involved as a series of humiliations.

In a separate essay that follows I have put together some passages that focus on lesser known films and more muted undercurrents. They consist in large part of comments and statements culled from filmmakers, critics, together with excerpts from a written "conversation" that I conducted with Beverly Walker. Her published accounts of the era – both then and later on – were always highly stimulating. Since 1968, Walker has worked as a press agent, scriptwriter and in various production capacities on New Hollywood films – Zabriskie Point, Two-Lane Blacktop, American Graffiti among

many others. Her recollections and insights may help us appreciate and extend, rather than resolve, the multiple contradictions of this era.

In its original – and slightly different – German version, this book was part of a larger project initiated and financed by the VIENNALE, Vienna's International Film Festival. In the framework of its 1994 and 1995 editions the festival highlighted American narrative cinema of the Sixties and Seventies, staging two comprehensive retrospectives in close collaboration with the Austrian Cinematheque (Österreichisches Filmmuseum). In total, more than 160 films were screened. The first section was entitled *COOL – Pop, Politics, Hollywood 1960-68*. The second part went in search of *The Last Great American Picture Show. New Hollywood 1967-1976*. In both cases, publications were produced to join the film series.

I am indebted to many people without whom this book would not have been possible, especially of course to all the contributors for their inspiration, their commitment and their persistence; to Noel King, Thomas Elsaesser and the Amsterdam University Press who "picked it up" and facilitated its English-language edition and expansion; to Kent Jones (who, apart from his essay, supplied advice, practical help, a videotheque and good spirits in most generous doses) and to Beverly Walker (whose comments on my questions not only imparted first-hand experience but nipped in the bud any romanticisation of the topic). In addition, I am grateful for all manner of help and advice to Gerald Ayres, Margaret Bodde, Ed Dimendberg, Stefan Grissemann, Hans Hurch, Karin Jahn, Amy Kenyon, Peter Konlechner, Dagmar Küttner, Richard Linklater, Terrence Malick, Olaf Möller, Ralph Palka, Richard Pena, Arthur Penn, Reinhard Puntigam, Bert Rebhandl, Alexandra Seibel, Peter Spiegel and Alessandra Thiele. My heart goes out to Regina Schlagnitweit whose love of Warren Oates and Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia set the avalanche in motion.

Notes

1. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Philadelphia 1966, p. 128.
2. Cf. Drehli Robnik, "Das postklassische (Hollywood-)Kino," in: *Filmkunst*, 145 (1995), Vienna.
3. I recall similar sensations viewing Who'll Stop the Rain (1978, Karel Reisz), Fingers (1978, James Toback), Blue Collar (1978, Paul Schrader), Days of Heaven (1976/78, Terrence Malick), Saint Jack (1979, Peter Bogdanovich), Heaven's Gate (1980, Michael Cimino), Out of the Blue (1980, Dennis Hopper), Escape from New York (1981, John Carpenter), Blow Out (1981, Brian de Palma), Reds

(1981, Warren Beatty), True Confessions (1981, Ulu Grosbard), The King of Comedy (1983, Martin Scorsese), Breathless (1983, Jim McBride).

4. The screenplay for Unforgiven had been "on the shelf" for about 15 years. It belongs more to the tradition of dirty westerns ca. 1971 than to the cinema of 1992. Richard Harris's line of dialogue: "Well, I mean, why not shoot the president?," makes much more sense in a late Sixties, early Seventies context.
5. "There is an incredible atmosphere of coercion in Hollywood. I think it starts with the banks who loan money to the studios to make films, and is presided over by the studio executives who have to answer to the banks and to stockholders. Eventually everyone joins the caravan – agents & managers & attorneys, and writers, directors, producers. Fear controls and dominates and shapes everything. (...) Today's films are pervaded by paranoia and a sense of dread far worse than those of the Sixties/Seventies. At bottom, all these so called 'action' films are about the terrible things a man has to do just to stay alive! How do you think Stallone and Willis became stars? (...) I personally believe that American films are much more reflective of the insular, Boschian, duplicitous cut-throat environment of Hollywood than of the country or world as a whole." (Beverly Walker, letter to the author)
6. "It is not entirely farfetched to speculate that the political energies of the Sixties were cathartically channelled into the arts – and particularly the popular arts – of the Seventies." (Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance*, New York 1980, p. 1).
7. See also Jonathan Rosenbaum's essay in this volume.
8. David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema*, Princeton 1989, p. 27.
9. Cf. Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Princeton 1985, esp. p. 247-256.
10. Cf. Robin Wood, "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 70s," in: *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York 1986.
11. Ibid., p. 50. David E. James' perspective in *Allegories of Cinema* is a touch more pessimistic: "Admission into a commercial film of any social discontent that cannot be recuperated into final affirmation of the status quo, or the omission of accepted motifs (the woman-as-commodity, the Indian-as-savage, or the finally honest police system) sets that film into contradiction with the ideological and psychological preconditions of its function as entertainment, sets text against context. Marking the historically variable limits of the medium as capitalist industry, the boundary between possible and impossible industrial films is always process, constantly being readjusted to accommodate simultaneously the institutionalization of new social need and the industry's own need in each new film for that degree of transgression and novelty upon which constantly renewed consumption depends. (Indeed, one of the histories of Sixties cinema is that of Hollywood's discovery of a way of dealing profitably with contemporary politics.)", op. cit. p. 174.
12. See also Kent Jones's essay in this volume.