## **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.<sup>2</sup> 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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