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The Depiction of the Working Class in American Films of the Counterculture Era

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THE DEPICTION OF THE WORKING
CLASS IN AMERICAN FILMS OF THE
COUNTERCULTURE ERA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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The Depiction of the Working Class in American Films of the Counterculture Era explores the rendering of the working class by Hollywood between 1967 and 1982. This dissertation discusses how this unique and volatile epoch was interpreted by Hollywood, and how the roles of working-class characters evolved with the shifting economic and political landscapes. The dissertation also demonstrates that although Hollywood temporarily experimented with some new models and narratives as it encouraged fresh creative talent in the early 1970s in a period known as the Hollywood Renaissance, the film industry never strayed too far from its roots. As the country moved back to the right in the early 1970s, Hollywood quickly returned to a more classic and conservative cinema. As this work demonstrates, this return was best reflected in the rendering of the working class.

In addition to exploring how working-class characters evolved with the times, this dissertation also explores how film informed the working class view of itself. For example, the work discusses how a film like *Rocky* (1976) reinforced and perpetuated some working-class views at a time when the working class felt threatened by change.

The dissertation begins by exploring the history of the working class in American film. Then, by drawing on the works of film scholars and cultural critics, it explores Hollywood's creation of the binary of the working class vs. the counterculture that emerged in the late 1960s. This binary, while generally successful at the box office, also helped to

perpetuate the real division between the working class and counterculture, a division that continues as the culture wars rage on in the 21st Century.

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INTRODUCTION

THE WORKING CLASS IN AMERICAN FILM:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIRST 70 YEARS

In the mid- and late 1960s, it was not uncommon to walk down the street of any major city of America and witness a verbal confrontation between protesters and a member of the working class. This scene became so common, in fact, that the two groups would often react reflexively towards each other, barely taking the time to make eye contact. Subjects of protest ranged from the Civil Rights Movement to nuclear disarmament to the war in Vietnam to the women's rights movement, but they all elicited the same response from some passersby. Morris Dickstein describes just such a scene in his book about the sixties, *Gates of Eden*. He writes, "The social abyss between protesters and hard-hats gave their relationship a purely abstract, mythmaking character" (257). He recounts one particular exchange in New York during the late 1960s that illustrates this phenomenon: "A group of craggy, burly longshoremen on their way to work began heckling some of the protesters with comments like 'Get washed, hippies!' and 'Take a bath!' A typical moment, except that in this case the immediate objects of their scorn were some impeccably groomed suburban matrons" (257). This caricature of members of the counterculture was not contained to the streets, either. As Peter Braunstein writes in *Imagine Nation*, to California Governor Ronald Reagan in 1967 a "hippie," the most recognizable member of the counterculture, was someone "who dressed like Tarzan, has hair like Jane, and smells like Cheetah" (6).

As those words from Ronald Reagan imply, these regular confrontations did not exclusively involve the working class, although Reagan's words were designed to mobilize

opposition to the counterculture and to curry favor with the working class. There were surely times when a man in a gray flannel suit or a woman dressed in the latest Givenchy tossed an insult at the protesters. But highly publicized incidents like two that took place in New York City on May 8, 1970, when “hardhats” attacked youthful war protesters, and again on May 12, 1970, when “helmeted workers, carrying American flags, shouted pro-war . . . slogans” at war protesters and called for the resignation of New York Mayor John Lindsay (Bigart 1), turned the media spotlight towards the working class. When Hollywood later installed the counterculture as protagonists in a series of films in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this was the image of the working class that most often made it to the screen.

One such scene takes place in *Midnight Cowboy*, which won the Oscar for best film of 1969. In the film about two small-time street hustlers, the two lead characters, Rico “Ratso” Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman) and Joe Buck (Jon Voight), are briskly walking through the streets of New York as Ratso, who has just met Joe in a bar, is trying to convince the budding male hustler to let him represent him. They then encounter a small group of protesters carrying signs that call for nuclear disarmament marching in a loop on the sidewalk. As Ratso elbows his way through the crowd, he brushes aside one of the placard-carrying protesters and brusquely says, “Get outta here. Fuckin’ creep. Go to work.”

Although the entire incident plays out in just a few seconds, this fleeting confrontation says much about the perception of the relationship between the counterculture and the working class in the late 1960s in America, a time when working-class sons were dying in a war 6,000 miles away while protesters, often the sons and daughters of the privileged, crowded city streets and commandeered college campuses to express their displeasure with their government. This scene is particularly telling because it shows that

even two men on the margins of society, men who have emerged from the working class but are no longer part of the working-class culture, carry with them the same distaste for the counterculture as the hardhats that Dickstein and Bigart write about.ⁱ It was this binary—the counterculture vs. the working class—that made headlines and sold newspapers in the late 1960s, and it was this binary that came to dominate films of the counterculture era as Hollywood attempted to attract youth audiences to its films.

This dissertation will explore the treatment of the working class in Hollywood cinema during the brief explosion of youth-oriented films in the late 1960s and will then trace how the depiction of the working class changed as Hollywood returned to more traditional narratives and forms in the 1970s. This period ran roughly between 1967 and 1982, the year of the summer of love, until the first years of the Reagan presidency. I have chosen not to end the era with the election of Reagan because films that were in production during the final years of the Carter Administration did not reach the screen until the early 1980s. In the following pages, I will look at how Hollywood’s portrayal of the working class during this epoch helped to not only shape the way other people look at the working class, but also how the working class looks at itself. In doing so, I will also explore one overriding theme that is repeated in films throughout the era, whether they valorize the counterculture or the working class—the theme of community. It is this desire for community that inspired counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and it is the mourning of the loss of a more “traditional” community by members of the working and middle classes, and their desire to return to more “simple” times, that led to working-class movements in the mid-1970s. In both cases, these movements found a willing partner in Hollywood, which saw an opportunity to exploit the changing mood of the nation and bring audiences back to theaters in search of community.

But as we will also see, particularly as the epoch matures, Hollywood did not stray too far from its roots. It continued to rely on the cinematic trope of the rugged individualist in presenting its narratives of the search for community.

I have chosen this epoch because it represents a period of great change in American cinema and in America itself. Between 1967 and 1982 the nation moved first to the left and then back hard to the right, and with these changes in direction came changes in the depiction of the working class in Hollywood cinema. As I will show in the first part of this work, in films of the late 1960s the working class took a back seat to the counterculture, sometimes being ignored, often marginalized or ridiculed, and too often demonized as the foils for counterculture characters. In subsequent chapters I will show that as the country turned to the right during the 1970s with an economic downturn, the continuing war in Vietnam, an oil embargo, and Watergate adding to the nation's woes, depictions of the working class evolved. Demonized at the beginning of the decade in a film like *Joe* (1970), the working class found itself valorized in mid-decade by *Rocky* (1976) and even romanticized to a degree in later films like *Breaking Away* (1979) and *Four Friends* (1981).

This study will be presented in four chapters, followed by an Epilogue. Because I will be explicating the evolution of the treatment of the working class in film during this era, I will present the films, for the most part, in chronological order, with each chapter representing a specific period within the epoch. Four basic tools will be provided to the reader in this Introduction. First, each chapter and its general contents will be outlined; second, a clear definition of the term "working class," as used here, will be offered; third, a brief history of the treatment of the working class in film from the Silent Era until the 1960s will be provided; and, finally, two influential films of 1967, *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and*

Clyde, which preceded the youth-film explosion later in the decade, will be examined. These two films, released within three months of each other, will be studied as films about the working class that spoke directly to youth audiences. I have chosen to discuss these films here for two primary reasons: One, they explore working-class protagonists who, in one form or another, serve as surrogates for the alienated youth of the 1960s; and, two, they preceded the spate of counterculture/youth films that immediately followed *Easy Rider* (1969), which will be discussed in Chapter 1, and they served to identify a ticket-buying youth audience for Hollywood.

Organization of Chapters

In Chapter 1 we look at films of the late 1960s and early 1970s and explore the treatment of the working class as counterculture foils. The primary film explored in this chapter is *Easy Rider* (1969), a film some call the most influential of its time. When *Easy Rider* burst on the screen in the summer of 1969, the counterculture had already reached its high-water mark, cresting even before it was finally eulogized by Hunter Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1971. Its impact on the film industry was immediate as it inspired a series of counterculture/youth films that often highlighted the counterculture experience. The film also set the tone for the depiction of the working class in the counterculture/youth films that followed. One of these films was *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), a counterculture film based on a song by Arlo Guthrie that tells the real-life story of Arlo's refusal for induction into the U.S. Army. This film takes a more complex look at the relationship between the counterculture and the working class, with the title character providing a bridge of sorts between the two cultures. Although the film still offers some

stereotypical renderings of the working class and privileges the counterculture, it represents a somewhat more balanced view of the two groups.

Medium Cool (1969) follows *Alice's Restaurant* and incorporates real footage from the 1969 Democratic Convention and the riots in Chicago. Not a counterculture/youth film in the vein of *The Strawberry Statement* (1970) or *Zabriskie Point* (1970)—its protagonist is a professional news cameraman and not a member of the counterculture—it examines the relationships between the counterculture and the working class as well as the effect of the media on both.

The final film discussed in Chapter 1 is *Billy Jack* (1971 and 1973), a film about a Vietnam War veteran of mixed Native American and Caucasian blood who returns to the reservation after the war to find that its peaceful progressive school is the target of racist and economic attacks by the region's richest man and his working-class minions. In many ways the film was an anomaly—it was the only counterculture film that followed *Easy Rider* that achieved significant success at the box office; it was a traditional film despite its strong leftist leanings; and as an independent film it showed Hollywood how to distribute a film in the new marketplace. Most importantly for our purposes, however, it presents an ambivalent view of the working class, demonizing it in large part, but also valorizing individuals (Billy Jack himself among them) within the class. In doing so, it brought an end to the counterculture/youth era of film.

In Chapter 2 we look at films released between the early and mid-1970s and explore Hollywood's changing attitude towards the working class. Three of these films present a sympathetic look at working-class characters who are struggling to find their way in the 1970s, while the fourth provides a bridge between the counterculture films and the films that

privilege the working class in the 1970s. The films that provide a sympathetic look at the working class are *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Scarecrow* (1973), and *The Last Detail* (1973). Unlike the working-class antagonists of the counterculture/youth films of 1969 and 1970, these working-class characters serve as protagonists. The first film we explore in Chapter 2, *Joe* (1970), is more problematic. One of the few films of the era with a working-class protagonist, it demonizes both the working class and the counterculture in an effort to explore, some would say exploit, the differences between the two groups.

Joe is a complicated film that star Peter Boyle initially saw as “a call for the end to violence—both in Vietnam and at home” (Lev, *American Films* 24), and others saw as a film that “adapted *Easy Rider*’s peace-loving hippie vs. murderous redneck formula to the urban rust belt” (Cook, *History of the American Cinema* 167). *Joe* shows the darkest side of the relationship between the working class and the counterculture. In doing so, it also illustrates the merger of the working class and middle class that would define the nation’s move to the right in the 1970s. This “merger” would reappear in a more positive light in *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), which is explored in Chapter 4.

Dirty Harry came to the screen the same year as *Billy Jack*, but the films appealed to different audiences despite the similarities between the title characters. Both men resort to vigilante tactics and violence in response to impotent legal systems, and both fight to preserve their communities. But while *Billy Jack* was lauded by members of the Left because of its privileging of the counterculture, represented by Native Americans and operators of an alternative school, *Dirty Harry* became a favorite of the Right because its title character takes on the “counterculture.”ⁱⁱ The film about a vigilante police officer who feels constrained by the constitutional rights of suspects particularly resonated with members of the working class

who were already feeling squeezed by the economic downturn, the continuation of the war, and all those “rights” people were demanding. As a working-class hero, Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) does what a lot of people in the audience of the time felt needed to be done—he confronts the counterculture and the permissive society that he believes it gave birth to. The film exploits working-class anger with the counterculture by offering a dirty, devious, long-haired, peace sign-wearing murderer named Scorpio as Harry’s antagonist.

Scarecrow is what some would call a “small film” about two men, played by Al Pacino and Gene Hackman, who are thrown together on the road as they both try to find a “home” of sorts. Hackman’s character is searching for a future in Pittsburgh, where he hopes to open a car wash, and Pacino’s character is searching for a life and family that he has lost touch with in the San Francisco area. This “buddy picture” explores the lives of two working-class misfits as they try to adapt to a changing world. Although beautifully filmed by noted cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, the film is “small” in that it provides an intimate look at the lives of two men on the margins of society. *The Last Detail* is another buddy/road film that tells the tale of two “lifers” in the Navy who must transport a young sailor from Norfolk, Virginia, to a Boston brig because of his conviction related to a minor theft. The film offers humor and pathos, but it primarily evokes sympathy for the lifers and their prisoner, all members of the working class who see the service as one of the few options available to the working-class man. In both of these films the men have found, or are searching for, community, something to ground them and to provide larger meaning to their individual lives.

With the mid-1970s came a series of films that valorized the working class, often by celebrating the American dream and providing upbeat endings. This affirmation of the

American Dream contrasts with the films of the early 1970s, most of which ended badly for the protagonists, whether working class, middle class, or affluent. As Sylvester Stallone said at the time of *Rocky's* release in 1976, "I believe the country as a whole is beginning to break out of this . . . anti-everything syndrome . . . this nihilistic, Hemingwayistic attitude that everything in the end must wither and die" (qtd. in Leab 265). Chapter 3 explores how some of these films helped to redefine the working class. While all of these films do not have fairy-tale endings, they all provide a generally positive rendering of the working class as they explore the angst of working people and their efforts to build and rebuild community. These films include *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), a film about a newly widowed mother of a teenage son who must fend for herself; *Hard Times* (1975), a modern-day western set in the Great Depression; *Jaws* (1975), a blockbuster film about a working-class everyman who must save a community from its own greed and reinstate the patriarch; *Rocky* (1976), a film that signals the emergence of the ethnic working-class hero; and *Blue Collar* (1978), a film that returns to the anti-labor themes of films like *On the Waterfront* (1954) while masquerading as a pro-worker and racially enlightened film.

In this chapter we explore how each of these films played a role in redefining the working class in the mid-1970s and how each explored the establishment or re-establishment of community. For example, although *Hard Times* is set in the Great Depression and offers a traditional Hollywood narrative, it serves as a precursor to *Rocky* and other films of the mid-1970s that explore the working-class ethnic and the loss of community. Here the protagonist, a traveling bare-knuckles fighter, demonstrates the American trait of rugged individualism while forging a new community with his "manager" and cut man. Although he leaves in the end, literally walking off into the night, he leaves behind a newly reconstituted community.

Finally, Chapter 4 looks at films that reflect America as the end of the counterculture era approaches and the Reagan revolution takes hold. Each of these films offers a look at how the issues of the 1960s and early 1970s impacted the working class, either at the time or later. The theme of community runs through each of the films. *The Deer Hunter* (1978), for example, explores the impact of the Vietnam War on the working class in a Pennsylvania steel town as the community is disrupted by the loss of native sons to the war and the crippling of others. In *Breaking Away* (1978), the effects of the economic downturn are felt by four working class youths who must constitute a new community out of their dying community. *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980) explores what happens when former members of the 1960s counterculture gather a decade later to rekindle old friendships and to reconstitute or at least relive the days of counterculture community. Finally, *Four Friends* (1981) offers a look at how the 1960s impacted the lives and dreams of three young men and one young woman from the steel town of East Chicago, Indiana. While nostalgia for disappearing communities is represented in some form in each of these films, it is clear that none of the communities will ever be reconstituted in their old form. Each of the films demonstrates the influence of the move to the right in America and the effects of the times on the working class. But one theme is consistent throughout. In each film the collective is stronger than the individual, even when the ultimate goal is to “break away” from one community to forge another. Although the films offer, for the most part, a more traditional solution to the rebuilding of community—highlighting family, home, and conservative values—they also offer some hope for a more progressive future as at least some of the protagonists manage to “break away” from their pasts.

Throughout much of the counterculture era, filmmakers pitted the counterculture against the working class. In the early days, the counterculture was privileged in most instances; in the middle and later years, the working class was privileged. While this dialectic often worked to bring audiences to the movie houses, it also created a binary of working class vs. counterculture. As we will see, by concentrating on this binary the filmmakers often failed to shine a light on the system that created the binary, the economic and political system that took America to war and that failed to respond adequately to the social, cultural, and political changes in the nation. Although we see attempts to build or rebuild community in films throughout the era, most of the time that effort eschews collective action in favor of a more tribal approach.

The Working Class: A Definition

The definition of “working class” is highly contested because, as many sociologists say, Americans generally consider America a classless society. As Steven J. Ross notes in the Preface to *Working Class Hollywood*, “Americans today do not like talking about ‘class’ and when they do, they like to think of themselves and their nation as ‘middle class’” (xi). Lionel Trilling, for example, insisted that American culture has always been democratic and singular, despite the unequal distribution of capital: “Despite a brief attempt to insist on the opposite view, the conflict between capital and labor has been a contest for the possession of the goods of a single way of life, and not a cultural study” (qtd. in Rhodes 12). Others like Ross say that Americans have a rich working class history that pre-dates the change from a producer to a consumer society in the early part of the last century. “Not until the early

decades of the twentieth century did large numbers of people talk about themselves as consumers who belonged to a broadly defined middle class,” he says (xi).

Even abroad it was assumed during the 19th century that the American worker would eventually organize as a proletariat in defiance of bourgeois rule. As Mike Davis notes in *Prisoners of the American Dream*, “at one time or another” Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky all considered the American working class an “immature” version of its European counterparts. When the American working class still did not rise up in spontaneous revolution after the Russian Revolution of 1917 to protest capitalist exploitation, it was determined that a number of unique conditions existed in the United States that retarded the growth of class consciousness, including the “frontier, continuous immigration, the attraction of agrarian-democratic ideologies bound up with petty-bourgeois property, the international hegemony of American capital, and so on.” These factors all resulted in a belief in American exceptionalism, the feeling that conditions in America and Americans themselves made this country different than any other and thus not as susceptible to class conflict. But Marxists continued to believe that when these “conjunctural” thus “transient” conditions dissipated, when the United States lost its lead in world industrial productivity, immigration was restricted, and the frontier was closed, class would come to the forefront. According to Davis, “Then more profound and permanent historical determinants arising out of the very structure of the capitalist mode of production would become decisive” (4). But, as Davis explains, the American system survived even during the “cataclysmic” Great Depression through the hegemony of the political system. The workers who, based on international models, should have risen in protest against international capitalism instead were brought under the umbrella of the New Deal in the 1930s (5). Davis doesn’t deny the

existence of class in America, but he does recognize why a “class consciousness” has not taken hold in America as it has in Western Europe. He states it this way:

The American working class . . . lacking any broad array of collective institutions or any totalizing agent of class consciousness (that is, a class party), has been increasingly integrated into American capitalism through the *negativities* of its internal stratification, its privatization in consumption, and its disorganization *vis-à-vis* political and trade-union bureaucracies. (8, italics in original)

In fact, the ability to consume will be a component of my definition of class because this ability defined the concept of class in films of the counterculture era and also often characterized the response of the characters to the epoch. Also, as Davis notes, this concept of American exceptionalism and, as we will discuss further, the idea of the rugged individualist, helped to define what it meant to be an American. While these concepts were on prominent display in films throughout the studio era, they remained prominent in film during the counterculture period. The rugged individualist in particular was evident in many popular films of the time, from *Billy Jack* to *Dirty Harry*, and from *Jaws* to *Rocky*. But as we will see in the following chapters, even the rugged individualists in these films were often serving a larger role in either protecting community or forging new ones.

Some define working class in a traditional way, as David Halle does in *America's Working Man*. For Halle, the working class generally consists of well-paid, male, blue collar workers, primarily white, who predominantly live in the Northeast (and the industrial Midwest), are descendants of blue collar workers, and are likely to produce progeny who become blue collar workers. These workers have little job mobility, have jobs rather than

careers, are closely supervised by lower or upper-white collar bosses, and often must wear protective clothing or clothing that designates them as blue collar (294). While this is a strong, effective definition for Halle's study, it is a bit too narrow and restricting for the purposes of this dissertation.

For the purposes of this study, the working class not only represents the traditional blue collar worker who may toil in a factory or mill, or work in the union construction trade, but it also represents those who work in service and other lower-paid positions of no authority. It includes all who punch a clock or work in an environment where their work is closely supervised and regulated, but also includes others who survive from paycheck to paycheck in low-level white collar jobs. This member of the working class can be a bartender, a waitress, a steelworker, a cable TV installer, an auto-worker, a service employee, a car salesman, a low-paid teacher, or a domestic. The boxer, the Great Depression gangster, the young woman trying to escape a slum, the miner, the dockworker, the struggling veteran, and the street hustler also fit this working definition of working class, as does the aspiring dancer who works in a hardware store hoping to be discovered and the young man who chooses to reject the blue collar life of his father and enter the social service world. In short, they are generally defined by their potential as consumers, with one caveat—blue collar work automatically defines you as working class, even if you make significantly more than some low-level white collar workers. For example, a well-paid blue collar worker may earn as much as a “middle-class” white collar worker and live in the same housing development—but he/she would still be considered working class for the purposes of this study.

This study will also primarily, but not exclusively, explore the depiction of the white working class in film for two basic reasons. The white working class—or at least a

significant part of it—represented a significant segment of the working class that reacted negatively to the counterculture and many of the changes that took place in the 1960s. It is also the segment of the working class that Hollywood chose to depict in the role of antagonist to the counterculture. Also, one of the changes that eventually led to a backlash from the white working class was the Civil Rights Movement, which evolved into the Black Power movement in the late 1960s. While the Civil Rights Movement was tolerated in white working-class enclaves for the most part until it became a Black Power movement, working-class support for a more egalitarian society lost steam when the economy turned sour in the late 1960s. This reaction resulted in a counter-revolution of sorts, and while the split between the working class and the counterculture formed the basis for characterizations of the working class in films of the counterculture era, there was also a clear split between the white and black working-class communities. Thus, the counter-revolution and the resulting depiction of the white working class in film will make up the bulk of this study. As this study proceeds, we explore how this counter-revolution of sorts manifests itself in films of the mid- and late 1970s during the white ethnic revival spearheaded by *Rocky*.

Working-class women and their rendering in films of the era, and previous eras, will also be explored here. From brief looks at characters in earlier films like *Baby Face* (1933) and *Salt of the Earth* (1954) to more detailed looks at working class women like Alice Brock (Patricia Quinn) in *Alice's Restaurant*, Alice Hyatt (Ellen Burstyn) in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, Eileen (Verna Bloom) in *Medium Cool*, Adrian Pennino (Talia Shire) in *Rocky*, and Georgia (Jodi Thelen) in *Four Friends*, this study examines how the depiction of working-class women evolved to reflect the social and cultural environments of the time. As we will see, although the women's movement made inroads politically and socially, that

progress was not always reflected in the rendering of female characters in these films. *Salt of the Earth*, although not a studio film like the others listed here, is included in this study because its rare cinematic depiction of a successful strike made it a target of conservative forces.

Early Films

When most people think of American film, their first thoughts are of Hollywood, the movie-making, dream-weaving little burg located somewhere west of downtown Los Angeles and somewhere south of Oz. For more than 80 years, American cinema has been dominated by Hollywood and its major studios. Since the 1920s, nine studios have determined, for the most part, what American film audiences have seen in their local theaters. From their humble beginnings in the pre-World War I years to their conversion to multi-national corporations in the 1960s and beyond, studios with the familiar names of Paramount, Universal, MGM, RKO, Warner Brothers, United Artists, 20th Century Fox, and Columbia, with Disney arriving in the 1920s, have helped to shape how Americans and the rest of the world look at America. As businessmen, pioneering studio owners aimed for the broadest audience possible. In doing so, they created a system that cranked out “product” on an assembly line to feed a public that craved this new mass medium of film and in the process created a vertically structured business that allowed them to dominate production, distribution, and exhibition. Big business came to Hollywood in the 1920s and stayed, producing films for more than four decades that adhered to a strict Production Code and rarely strayed beyond the ideological boundaries carved out for it by capitalist businessmen, government operatives, and religious leaders. As we will see later, this capitalist approach to

film production clearly impacted how the relationship between the working class and the counterculture was treated on the screen.

The early days of film, as in any new medium, were dominated by a few men. In the United States, that man was Thomas Edison. In France, it was the Lumiere Brothers. Edison, America's first commercial filmmaker, produced short films that were exhibited at movie parlors through small viewing machines called kinetoscopes in the mid-1890s (Mast 15). At the time, Edison's short films dominated these movie houses, which were also his brainchild. These movie parlors quickly lost their appeal when Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York exhibited the first large-screen motion pictures in the United States on April 23, 1896 (Ross 16). This followed by four months the first full-screen projection of a motion picture in Paris, presented by Auguste and Louis Lumiere in December of 1895 (Mast 19). Nine years later the first nickelodeon was opened in Pittsburgh by Harry Davis and the "age of the modern movie theater began" (Ross 16). Nickelodeons began to crop up in cities across America, primarily in working-class neighborhoods. As Ross notes, "By 1913, every community with a population of five thousand had at least one movie theater and most averaged four" (16).

Edison, having failed to anticipate the full-screen phenomenon, found a new way to temporarily dominate the movie business. He created the Motion Pictures Patents Company, commonly known as "The Trust." As Ross notes, The Trust was formed in 1908 as Edison brought together eight other early filmmakers, one film importer, and Eastman Kodak "to join together in limiting the sale of film stock and production, distribution, and exhibition of movies solely to Trust members" (60). The Trust was later ruled a monopoly in federal court in 1915, but not until its film producers, including Vitagraph and Biograph, churned out

hundreds of films a year. But the demand for films became so high that even The Trust could not meet it, and smaller independents stepped in to fill the void. As Ross notes, movie audiences, now accustomed to moving pictures, began to demand better and longer films. It should be noted that until the mid-1910s, films were not the length we have become accustomed to. Many were 15-25 minutes long, some much shorter, necessitating several films to fill a bill. Ross writes, “With the industry churning out an annual average of four thousand films between 1911 and 1915, the greatest danger companies faced was running out of ideas for new projects” (43). This market for product also kept the door open for worker filmmakers to produce films that either dealt with the harsh realities of life in the working class or commented on the relationship between workers and capital in the United States.

The studio system actually evolved from efforts by some of these independent producers, many of them Eastern European Jewish immigrants, to break the monopoly of The Trust. Even with film stock withheld and production, distribution, and exhibition monopolized, independent filmmakers continued to find ways to produce films. Some of these men—Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Adolph Zukor, Lewis Selznick, and Samuel Goldwyn (originally Samuel Goldfish)—rejected the “white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment” that ran big business and the Trust Studios and produced films that would be considered radical in nature compared to the films, both liberal and conservative, produced by The Trust (Ross 60). Ross notes that the large number of women employed in the creative end of the business also influenced the creation of films sympathetic to the working class and labor. This was a time, roughly between 1905 and 1925, when independent filmmaking was not only possible, but was actually competitive with studios. In these early years the structure of Hollywood was not pre-ordained. It was not until later when film studios began to feel

pressure from unions within its own industry, and when studio heads felt the need to expand their audience beyond the working class, that less political and often more conservative films emerged from the newly created studio system.

In the first two decades of commercial filmmaking, before the emergence of the studio system, the cost of producing the one, two, and three-reel films that were being exhibited was relatively inexpensive. As Ross writes, “In the years before American entry into World War I, the minimal demands of technological expertise, the constant need for more films, and the relatively modest costs of making movies (\$400 to \$1,000 a reel in most instances) allowed a wide variety of groups to participate in this still emerging industry” (35). Filmmakers came from all walks of life, and because of that, every class was represented on the screen.

Film at this time was truly egalitarian despite concerns expressed by some in the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School that film was a tool of capitalism. In fact, not everyone in the Frankfurt School was convinced of the evil of the “culture industry” as defined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). Walter Benjamin, writing in 1936, saw possibilities in film that Adorno and Horkheimer did not. Benjamin saw an opportunity for the new technology in the age of mechanical reproduction to create democratic art forms that would empower the average person. Adorno and Horkheimer, however, believed that film was part of a “culture industry” that was greatly influenced by the real sources of economic power in the nation. They write, “The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry” (1226). Benjamin, on the other hand, believed that film empowered the individual viewer as a critic; it opened the world to the masses who felt trapped in “our taverns and metropolitan streets, our offices and

furnished rooms” (1181); it allowed the masses to see themselves in newsreels and, in Russia, on film as people playing themselves on screen (1178); and it allowed the viewer to see the world in a new way through devices like close-ups and slow motion (1181). “The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses,” Benjamin writes (1181). While Adorno, writing in 1947, feared the power of the studio system and the culture industry, Benjamin was much more sanguine about the new art form. The first two decades of commercial film support his position. During this period, filmmakers emerged independently and from labor organizations, private institutions, corporations, and other independent associations to produce films from a variety of viewpoints. Ross valorizes Benjamin’s views while refuting the more negative Frankfurt School critiques of mass culture, particularly Adorno’s. He writes, “Contrary to the claims of Frankfurt School theorists and a number of neo-Marxian film scholars, there was no single bourgeoisie imposing a single “capitalist” vision upon the public. The film industry was certainly a capitalist business, but not all capitalists were alike” (59). Ross’s point is arguable. Ross acknowledges that Adorno’s views were based on his experiences in Nazi Germany and the use made of film and other mass media by Hitler. Also, Ross and John Bodnar (*Blue Collar Hollywood*) both acknowledge that while the U.S. government did not have the same access to or control of the culture industry as Hitler did, it is clear that the government used its influence and power to stifle anti-capitalist views and to control the message of Hollywood films during both world wars and beyond. It is equally clear that while Benjamin’s optimistic view of the culture industry was borne out in its early days when filmmaking was less expensive and film going was more accessible to the masses, it is just as

clear that the cost of film and production rose to a level that precluded participation in commercial filmmaking by virtually anyone outside the studio system.ⁱⁱⁱ

One fact is clear, however. The working class was well represented on the screen in the early days of cinema for several reasons: film production was relatively inexpensive; the vast majority of the film audience was from the working class; union activists and socialists recognized an opportunity to use film to further their causes through the use of the new medium; and the major studios had not yet found a way to dominate production, distribution, and exhibition. As Ross writes, organizations as diverse as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the Ford Motor Company, the Women's Political Union, and the National Association of Manufacturers saw film as an inexpensive and valuable tool for them to get their messages out to the people. But, as Ross notes, it was the worker filmmakers who were the most persistent:

As early as 1907, workers, radicals, and labor organizations were making movies that challenged the dominant ideology of individualism and portrayed collective action—whether in the form of unionism or socialist politics—as the most effective way to improve the lives of citizens. Over the next two decades, labor and the left forged an oppositional cinema that used film as a medium of hope to educate, entertain, and mobilize millions of Americans. (7)

He adds, “Filmmakers were more concerned with portraying the hardships of working-class life during the silent era than at any subsequent time in the industry’s history” (7).

During this time, hundreds of working-class heroes were projected onto screens in local theaters, most often located in working-class neighborhoods, as working-class filmmakers sought to get their message of collective action out to the public in an

entertaining way. At the same time, conservative capitalist films promoting the concept of individualism were being produced and exhibited by other forces like Ford and the Association of Manufacturers. For a decade or more, these competing ideologies went head-to-head in local film houses in an effort to win the hearts and minds of filmgoers.

In actuality, the working class was prominent in film before The Trust period. Many of Edison's and the Lumieres' early films record regular people in their everyday activities. In *The Fish Market* (1903), for example, Edison's camera captures common people shopping at a New York City outdoor fish market on a sunny afternoon. In *What Happened on 23rd Street* (1901), Edwin S. Porter, working for Edison, employs direct cinema to record the everyday activity along the avenue, working in a brief shot of two actors, one a woman who walks over a sidewalk grate and has her skirt lifted to her knees, ala Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). In France, Louis and Auguste Lumiere were even more apt to capture everyday activities. In one of their early films, *Exiting the Factory* (1895), they capture workers leaving a factory owned by their father. In *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895), they film a train pulling into a station and passengers disembarking. The short film was so real that some in the audience reacted in fear to the approaching train, having never witnessed such an event on film (Mast 19).

As time passed and audiences became more sophisticated, films evolved from the capturing of everyday activities to the scripting and shooting of narrative films. But even then, in the early days of film, the subjects were often working people and the lives they led. There were many reasons for this, as we will discuss shortly, but one of the main reasons was that the audience, particularly in America, was working class. In its earliest days, as Ross notes, film was designed to entertain the masses, and "class was a central theme in silent

films” (xii). Only later, when the audience expanded and the movie houses became movie palaces, did the production and exhibition of films change dramatically.

Films of the pre-World War I era often addressed issues specific to the working class. In fact, many early films by worker filmmakers were designed to move the masses while entertaining them. These early films promoted collective action by the working class against the oppressive bourgeoisie and the elite—the capitalists in stark Marxist terms—and were known to rouse audiences. (Films of the counterculture era, as we will see, also roused audiences. But as noted earlier, films of this later era did not call for collective action against a perceived oppressor—they pitted the working class against the counterculture, leaving the capitalists unscathed in the skirmish.) Film viewing in the early years of cinema was an interactive activity, with audience members regularly conversing, yelling, and generally responding to what was projected onto the screen. Films about working class issues and events, as Ross notes, often stirred filmgoers to action, “much to the delight” of worker filmmakers. “Connecticut mill workers went out on strike in 1916 after watching strike scenes in *The Blacklist*. . . . Recently converted socialists testified that radical films such as *From Dusk to Dawn* (1913) and *The Jungle* (1914) inspired them to join the movement” (8). This effect on workers, of course, frightened local and state authorities and federal officials, and federal authorities tried to limit the exhibition of “radical films” (9). As Ross writes, critics also voiced concerns about the potential dangers of movies: “The politicization of neighborhood houses, the frequent appearance of oppositional values on the screen and in the theater, and the markedly working-class composition of movie audiences raised fears that the new medium would intensify class divisions” (28).

Working-class reactions to films about inequities in the economic system not only roused fears in critics, but they also created a backlash that, along with the rising cost of filmmaking, led to the silencing of many dissident voices heard in early film. As Ross writes:

Between 1900 and 1930, when the class character of movies was still being formed, worker filmmakers fought with movie industry personnel, federal agencies, and local and state censors to define the kinds of images and political subjects audiences would be allowed to see. . . . [T]he victors got to set the ideological visions of class relations that would dominate American cinema for the next seventy years. (xv)

Those victors were the studios and their magnates, and the dominant ideological vision that triumphed was one of classic liberalism, the privileging of individual freedom, ingenuity, and initiative in a capitalist society. Or, to put it in terms used by John Bodnar, in renderings of the working class the concepts of “liberalism” and “illiberalism,” which he defines as the efforts of some to deny others the rights to shape a political and economic life—in essence to deny them the rights that classic liberalism would give them—won out over the depiction of democracy and collective action in films from the 1930s on. As we will see, this pattern continued in the counterculture era, particularly in its middle years when counterculture values were often portrayed as un-American.

A key turning point in the depiction of the working class on screen came when exhibitors and movie production companies began to build movie palaces in the downtown areas of major cities, led by the first one in New York in 1914, the Strand (Ross 31). While films had primarily been geared toward a working-class audience in the early years—nickelodeons and local theater houses were built in working class and ethnic

neighborhoods—these new movie palaces were designed to bring film to everyone. As Ross notes, the movie palaces provided amenities that were not available in the working-class theaters, including ushers, roomy seating, washroom attendants, and other customer-friendly services not available in the small, cramped working-class theaters. “Playing to people’s dreams of upward mobility, industry leaders built exotic movie palaces in ‘safe’ neighborhoods and provided luxurious amenities that allowed moviegoers to think they were middle class—at least for a few hours,” Ross writes (9).

Although the neighborhood theaters did not disappear, they did not do the same business they once did, particularly on weekends when the palaces were the place to take a date and to hobnob with the middle and upper classes. Unlike the neighborhood theaters, which catered to the local crowd, often a particular ethnic crowd, and did not carry the best first-run films, the movie palaces became the place where all classes came to watch the latest Hollywood had to offer. Admission to the palaces cost more than it did in the local theaters, but the quality of the films and the amenities still made the movie palaces a bargain. Ross writes:

Clerks, lawyers, waitresses, teachers, stenographers, plumbers, doctors, and factory workers enjoyed the same opulence and grand treatment accorded to movie stars, politicians and aristocrats. Neighborhood theaters still continued to serve their largely working-class clientele. But the exhibitors who built luxury movie palaces during the 1920s expanded the class composition of the audience and ushered in what many heralded as a new age of democratic fantasy. (174-175)

By expanding the audience of films to the middle classes, and by providing an opulent venue in which working-class people could enjoy film, these new movie palaces, according to Chip Rhodes in *Structures of the Jazz Age*, “made film the most inclusive (nationally) of all the mass cultural media, with radio coming in a close second” (115). He adds, “The customers were made to feel that they belonged amid such splendor—an interesting mixture of class desire and denial of class realities” (115). Rhodes notes that Hollywood films of the 1920s combined class desire and the “reformulation” of the idea of American exceptionalism: “The movies attracted audiences of both classes caught up in these two desires, the working class and the bourgeoisie, by making individuals wish to be ‘somebody big’” (115).

The early 1920s witnessed an America and American culture in flux. The end of World War I brought with it changes in the economy and changes in the way people viewed themselves. Mass culture in the new consumer society, however, addressed all members of society and helped to blur the lines between classes. Rhodes notes that when America changed from a “producer-oriented, crafts-dominated economy to a consumer-oriented, mass production economy” after the war, “mass culture became the dominant ideological determinant of individual behavior” (111), a position consistent with Frankfurt School pessimism. He adds, “In producing subjects able and willing to consume, not merely work, mass culture became an indispensable instrument of disciplining the mass of the population in the ways of life of the new productive mode” (111).

The classes also became blurred, and Hollywood took notice. More and more people were going from traditional working-class jobs to low-level white collar jobs, with many of the new low-level white collar workers coming from the working class. “It was unclear whether the mushrooming numbers of low-level white collar and service sector employees

were working class or middle class,” Ross writes. Hollywood recognized in this new burgeoning middle class an opportunity to provide entertainment that would be less overtly political and class-oriented and more geared towards a general audience. One of the ways they managed to do this was through the coercive practice of block booking, which required exhibitors to exhibit a studio’s second-rate films along with their better films, limiting the screens for competition. Unlike the pre-war films of the teens, which often pitted the capitalist against the working-class, the new Hollywood attempted to provide films that “promoted conservative visions of class harmony; films that shifted attention away from the problems of the workplace and toward the pleasures of the new consumer society” (9). As Ross notes, studio heads like Adolph Zukor, Jesse Lasky, William Fox and others created a Hollywood that was now “less a place than a new way of doing business” (9).

That is not to say that only one vision of the working class was presented in films from 1930 on. The working class remained an important subject in the sound era. Films sympathetic to the working class and its members were common in the 1930s as the Great Depression claimed its victims, an era that lasted until America’s involvement in World War II changed the tone of Hollywood. Although these films were not always flattering to the working class, they generally fell in line with the American concept of individualism—they were usually liberal in the classic sense of the word. But that does not mean that the films did not expose a disturbing underbelly in the nation. According to Bodnar, “strong support existed for both liberal individualism and a just community” in the films of the 1930s. He likens this dualism to “political cross-dressing.” He continues:

If the content of these films and the reactions they provoked are any indication, political cross-dressing was central to the representation of mass

culture even during the reality of the Great Depression. Doctrinaire radicals on the left who hoped for working-class insurgency and moral reformers on the right who hoped to create model citizens ignored this point at their own peril.

(53)

Films about working-class men who turn to crime or boxing to fight their way out of poverty, women who look to marry above their station to find economic stability, and Frank Capra characters who stand up for the “little man” against the corrupt and corrupting system were common on American screens. Contrary to the belief of some, Hollywood did not spend the 1930s feeding the American public pure fantasy. Social realism was also prominent on the screens of the decade, as was the plight of the working class. Shirley Temple may have been the biggest box office draw of the Great Depression years, but she had lots of competition. Iconic criminals played by James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Paul Muni also drew big crowds to theaters, as did the heroes of Capra’s tributes to the little man, often played by Gary Cooper and Jimmy Stewart, and the woman on the edge of society, played by Barbara Stanwyck, Mae West, Joan Crawford, and others.

During the early days of the “talkie” era, films like *Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1931), and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) showed the seedy side of America’s inner cities and the rise of a criminal element from the lower classes during the years of prohibition and depression. According to P. H. Melling, these films served two purposes—they allowed a working-class audience to identify with gangsters as they competed successfully with the upper classes, and they also provided an opportunity for the audience to participate in their punishment when they strayed too far from their roots. To Melling, although the gangster represented the American ideal of individualism to audiences,

a twisted Horatio Alger story, he also represented a rejection of the class from which he came:

The obligatory defeat of the gangster [required by the Code] emphasized the danger and futility of trying to rise above one's station and class, of seeking wealth and power in an increasingly closed society, of attempting to deviate too extravagantly from the existing laws and customs of the community. . . . The gangster's performance expressed a rejection not merely of those against whom he competed but of those very people from whom he had risen whose life lacked zest and a necessary agenda. (32)

Other films portrayed women from the lower classes who were caught in patriarchal, violent, and mean working-class societies with little hope for escape. Mobility was only found in attempts to marry out of one's class or through the use of feminine wiles. Along with depictions of the "fallen woman," the working class as a whole was often denigrated in these films, with the "blue-collar brute" serving as "an influential image in the representations of workingmen in the post-war [World War I] era" (Bodnar 28). This stereotypical rendering of the working-class woman, and man, is evident in the film *Baby Face* (1933), starring Barbara Stanwyck. In the film, she plays a young "fallen woman" who fails to extricate herself from what is portrayed onscreen as a "wretched family" in Erie, Pennsylvania. As Bodnar notes, the proletarian world is depicted as "mean" and "violent" and populated by blue collar men who are "beyond redemption" (27). The working class is something to escape, not something that can be changed. It is not a world, like Capra's, where the better angels of people can be appealed to and goodness prevails. As Bodnar notes, "Censors saw nothing wrong with depictions of working-class life as 'shabby' and as a site

people would want to flee rather than reform” (31). It was also a class that only strong individuals could leave behind. Rarely was collective action portrayed or valorized on the screen. Gangsters and boxers tried to fight their way out of poverty with their hands; “fallen women” tried to “get ahead through sex rather than violence” (Bodnar 27).

Even during this period, however, pro-labor and anti-capitalist films still occasionally made it to the screen, although not always in the same form in which they were conceived. In *Our Daily Bread* (1934), farmers come together in a collective to dig an irrigation ditch to benefit them all. As Bodnar notes, although the film downplays socialism and collective action in favor of a “big boss” who leads the group, endorsing conservative gender roles along the way, it still provides a “democracy . . . where citizens met obligations to other citizens” (21). *Black Fury* (1935), a film about western Pennsylvania miners, “represented a more frank confrontation with worker exploitation in industrial society and the culpability of industrialists for engendering working-class discontent” (21). In the film, the lead character, miner Joe Radek (Paul Muni), becomes a union militant—threatening to blow up a mine at one point—when a friend is killed by strike breakers and families are evicted from homes. As Bodnar notes, however, Joseph Breen, enforcer of the Production Code, pressured Warner Brothers to “soften the indictment of labor conditions” (22). But, although the film was criticized by the *Daily Worker*, which claimed Radek was portrayed as “slow-witted” and that the film concentrated on an individual rather than “organized action,” the film still provided a strong critique of working conditions in mines (Bodnar 24), while providing a positive depiction of working-class men and women. One compromise in the film, however, became an unfortunate trope for labor/capitalist films in succeeding decades. *Black Fury* places the blame for the workers’ “radical” actions on “outside agitators or labor racketeers,”

also implicitly providing justification for the company's response (Bodnar 23). This cinematic connection between labor racketeers and organized labor is repeated later in films like *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Blue Collar* (1978) and *F.I.S.T* (1978), as well as many films in-between. In these films the working class, or worker, is depicted as someone who can easily be led, duped, or intimidated by a charismatic leader. In all of these films the plight of the worker is blamed not on the captains of industry but on corrupt union officials who exploit their members or simply lead them astray. Any collective action is usually directed against the union rather than the capitalist system. The capitalist system remains, for the most part, untouched.

When a pro-working-class film that truly attacked the capitalist system was proposed, however, it ran head-on into opposition from the government, Joseph Breen and the Production Code, and conservative sources in and outside of the film industry. More importantly, its distribution was often disrupted. One such film was *Salt of the Earth* (1954), which depicted an actual successful strike of miners against a zinc company in New Mexico. Arriving at the tail end of the second Red Scare and the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings into Communist influence in Hollywood, the film and its director were directly targeted by conservative forces. *Salt of the Earth* made it to the screen despite having its production disrupted by conservative union leaders in Hollywood and despite being targeted by Congress because its director, Herbert Biberman, had been blacklisted for his earlier association with the Communist Party. Its distribution, however, was dramatically affected by its detractors. Conservative forces, including the American Legion, "worked tirelessly to disrupt the production process, and they forced enough theaters to reject showing the feature that it became a financial failure" (Bodnar 142).

As the 1930s wound down and America headed towards involvement in World War II, one classic Hollywood studio film did address the effects of the Great Depression on the masses, although not as forcefully as the novel upon which it was based. John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) concentrates more on the plight of a single family, the Joads, than on the idea of collective action that was more overt in John Steinbeck's novel. As Bodnar notes, although the Joad family, led by a strong matriarch, vows to "go on forever" because "we're the people," no collective action is implied or anticipated. "In this version an American family, under the leadership of its mother-head, promises to endure. . . . No indication is given, however, that they will ever mobilize for any sort of concerted political action or even try to escape their lowly existence," Bodnar writes (42). But, although collective action is not implied, the depiction of the working-class family here is positive. The Joads come across as a strong, loving, ethical family that will endure despite the failure of the system to provide for them. They are not shabby people living a shabby existence, but caring and proud people who recognize their plight and the plight of others around them. Although the film version of the Joad family is not as subversive, or even progressive, as Steinbeck's novel, it is still a strong representation of the good in the working class and represents another side of the working class not seen in the gangster and the "fallen woman" films that represented the proletariat in so many films of the early and mid-1930s.

In the years leading up to and including World War II, the nation and Hollywood rallied behind the war effort and set aside partisanship. In the real world, unions accepted lower wages and more and more women entered the workforce as men went off to war. In film, movies about a suffering working class became rare as the Office of War Information, established in 1942 to create and sustain enthusiasm for the war effort, encouraged the mass

media to praise the attributes of American society and uplift its citizenry. According to Bodnar, “In constant negotiations, the OWI and industry censors worked continuously to create stories and images that helped sustain positive pictures of Americans and their nation” (60). War films, for example, often contained “United Nations” casts, with virtually every ethnic group represented. This was one way that Hollywood could show that the melting pot of America, particularly its working-class fighting men, stood together in its stand against Fascism. Not only did films serve as soft propaganda for the war effort, but filmmakers like Frank Capra (the *Why We Fight* series) and John Ford went to work for the OWI to produce hard propaganda “documentary” films directed at the civilian audience. Films that dealt with the concerns of the “low-born” became rare, and “less was said” about social inequality as films turned in the direction of presenting “ideal types” who could serve as examples for the average citizen. As Bodnar notes, “Political culture during the war moved away from the ambiguity that was at the heart of mass cultural representations toward a world that was at times utopian” (56).

Two films about working-class heroes that presented this image were *Knute Rockne*, *All American* (1940) and *Sergeant York* (1941). Both provided idealized versions of the lives of two American working-class men at a time when Hollywood and the nation were looking for heroes. *Knute Rockne* espoused the classic liberal view that America is the home of opportunity and freedom for any individual willing to work. It is a film about working-class immigrants who strive to achieve the American Dream. As Bodnar writes:

Working people in this film, especially the Norwegian immigrant family named the Rocknes, were admirable individuals who were disinterested in joining unions or in making additional demands on the nation for more justice.

. . . They stood as reminders that liberal and democratic possibilities were still alive in the land of the free. (61)

Sergeant York, starring Gary Cooper, who had already come to fame in Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Meet John Doe* (1941) and was an icon of and to the common man, came to the screen just four months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The story of a real World War I hero, the film portrays York as a strong individual and family man who also has occasional bouts with heavy drinking. This frailty serves to humanize the character and provide a sense of realism to the film that otherwise would have been missing. As Bodnar notes, Warner Brothers insisted on portraying some of York's problems because they feared the film would otherwise be considered pure propaganda for the impending war (63). York's problems were personal, however, not social problems. Hollywood had moved away from social realism in the run-up to the war. At a time when all men were being called to defend their country and all women were being asked to support the effort at home, the realities of social injustice became a somewhat taboo subject in Hollywood. Rockne and York represented common men who rose to the challenge when they were called upon to serve—one as a charismatic football coach and shaper of men and the other as a reluctant warrior. Both served as inspiration for the common man who would support the war effort either on the front lines or at home. "Both films tended to frame the plight of the common man as the singular struggle of an individual to become a virtuous and patriotic citizen," Bodnar writes (64). As common men, Rockne and York were exemplary members of a working class that was now valorized—for purposes of national unity—instead of denigrated as it was in 1930s films like *Baby Face*. As we will see, this pattern resurfaced in the mid-1970s when

Hollywood valorized the working-class ethnic male in films like *Rocky* and *The Deer Hunter*, providing working-class “super-heroes” for the common man to emulate.

Although the trend in the 1940s, particularly before and during the war, was to preach unity, Bodnar writes that some films that shined a negative light on society still made it to the screen. *King’s Row* (1942) depicts a town in which social classes are divided; *Double Indemnity* (1944) shows a man and a woman conspiring to kill her husband for insurance money; *Tortilla Flat* (1942) provides a negative view of working-class Mexican Americans, presenting them as “shiftless and lazy vagrants” (67). Any film that portrayed a dysfunctional society or was overtly anti-worker or anti-capitalist was frowned upon by Joseph Breen’s office and the OWI, which were both sensitive to any representations that would show cracks in social unity. *Tortilla Flat*’s negative stereotypes raised concerns in Breen’s office and also aroused industry censors who feared the message would not serve the national purpose (or help box office in Latin America). But the implied messages of these films was more than countered by films like *Pittsburgh* (1942) and *Valley of Decision* (1945), which showed that “disparate classes could find common ground in America” (Bodnar 69). “The logic of wartime narratives discredited attitudes that promised to disrupt the massive effort to generate unity,” Bodnar writes. “In this cultural period personal desire, whether cast within the discourse of class relations or gender relations, was severely restrained and often castigated” (69).

Following the war, a number of films were made about returning soldiers. It was clear from the tone of these films that America was in the midst of a new crisis, a crisis of doubt about the future, a crisis precipitated by a Cold War and the psychological and physical scars of a real war that left the future of the very planet in doubt. Several of these films dealt with

the difficulties service men were having re-adjusting to civilian life. One of these was *Pride of the Marines* (1945), a film that “exposed the fears of the future that vets felt as they returned with physical and emotional scars” from the war and was praised by the *Daily Worker* as a film that was “truthful” about the problems of veterans (Bodnar 129). Another was *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which used a real veteran amputee (Harold Russell) to play a returning vet and dealt with women betraying men and veterans facing uncertain futures. Bodnar quotes a *Variety* review that exclaims “the people live” as well as other reviews that praised the realism of the film (129).

A number of noir films of the era also dealt with returning veterans, including *Dead Reckoning* (1947) with Humphrey Bogart as a returning Army captain who searches for and finds the killer of his Army buddy. When noir films did not deal with returning veterans, they still expressed the cynicism many in America were feeling after the war. Social realism returned in a big way in Hollywood as a more cynical audience sought more realistic films like *Body and Soul* (1947), a story about the brutality of the boxing world, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), which tells the tale of two lovers who conspire to kill the woman’s husband. But, as Bodnar notes, this version of reality often led to a negative depiction of the working class as well as a rendering of a world that was tough and mean:

The strain of pessimism generated by the war quickly merged with the ongoing tendency of American film to depict the world of the lower classes as unpredictable and vexing And, clearly, the origins of the “meanness” in their world and their own ambitions were seen as mostly environmental in many of the films of the immediate postwar period that treated the ordinary struggles of proletarians. (130)

The 1950s brought films like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954) to the screen, re-introducing the “brute” in the former and rehashing the corrupt labor union story line in the latter. Stanley Kowalski, as played by Marlon Brando in *Streetcar*, is a beer-guzzling brute who rapes his emotionally defenseless sister-in-law (although the rape is merely implied on screen). He and his working-class friends are portrayed as men who drink, work, play cards, bowl, and brutalize their women.^{iv} In *On the Waterfront*, Brando plays Terry Malloy, a different kind of working-class man and a different kind of boxer, in this case an ex-boxer. He stands up to a corrupt union boss and his henchmen, one of them his own brother, only to be castigated by “his own,” the men who have chosen to be “D and D” (deaf and dumb) in the face of crime hearings into union corruption. Although he does the right thing, he has to be shamed into taking action by a priest and the woman he loves. Once he takes action, he finds himself ostracized. The only way he can regain the respect of “his own” is by doing the only thing a brute can do—physically fight the bad guy, in this case the corrupt union president. With few exceptions, the working-class men in the film are weak and easily duped and intimidated by the corrupt union leaders, who are merely working-class men with suits. Although Terry Malloy represents what a working-class man can be, the film generally presents a negative view of the longshoremen and the working-class mob union leaders who would manipulate them.

Although Hollywood continued to produce films about the working class in the 1960s—*A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Hud* (1963), *Who’s That Knocking at My Door?* (1968), and *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962) are four—John Bodnar notes that the decade definitely experienced “a noticeable drop-off in the production of stories featuring working-class protagonists” (184). While some films like *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *In the Heat of*

the Night (1967), which is briefly explored in Chapter 1, still contained stereotypical southern working-class bigots, the focus of tales about the working class seemed to change along with the times. Now, instead of trying to find their way in the world or rise above their station in life, working-class characters were rejecting society, serving at times as surrogates for the counterculture. These characters were “detached from the mainstream political community,” in Bodnar’s words (184). In operating outside of society or rejecting its tenets, these characters were not only portraying working-class angst, but they were also expressing concerns members of the counterculture were feeling in the tumultuous years following the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Robert Ray puts it this way in discussing Left films of the era, most of whose protagonists originated in the working class: “The Left films clearly intended their outlaw heroes to represent the counterculture’s own romanticized image of itself” (314).^v They were also intended to attract youth audiences. As Paul Monaco notes in *The Sixties*, “For this audience, the identification with the antiheroes was assumed to be rooted in a widely shared sense of alienation from middle-class American society, the values of America’s older generations, and the nation’s economic, social, and political ‘establishment’” (182). In an era of “creeping leftism” in Hollywood film, according to Peter Biskind (qtd. Ryan, *Camera Politica* 3), the heroes of the Left that we will examine here are not long hairs on bikes or members of the New Left. They are working-class people who feel the same alienation from society as do their counterparts in the counterculture who reject “the imperialist aspirations of their business-government leaders” (Ryan, *Camera Politica* 8). In exploring *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), we will see how the era of “counterculture” films began promisingly with two

films that chose to explore the similarities between the working class and the counterculture youth rather than their differences.

Both of these films were influential in their own way. *Cool Hand Luke* took the 1950s theme of teen alienation, applied it to an adult film, and helped define a new kind of anti-hero for the American screen. But *Bonnie and Clyde* clearly had the most impact on the film industry and society as a whole. The 1967 film made the thematic treatment of sex and realistic violence acceptable in Hollywood cinema, helping to bring about the demise of the Hollywood Production Code. *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Cool Hand Luke* to a lesser extent, also demonstrated that the youth of America would buy movie tickets if Hollywood provided the right kind of entertainment. Hollywood did not immediately put this lesson to work, as we will see in Chapter 1. But it was clear even in 1967 that *Bonnie and Clyde* resonated with youth audiences in a way that no other film of its time did, becoming what many call the landmark film of the decade. As Lawrence Murray writes, *Bonnie and Clyde* “appealed to the spirit of the age, especially among youths” (251). He adds:

Its affront to traditional sensibilities afforded an opportunity for millions of outraged Americans to expel—vicariously—a welter of conflicting emotions . . . The picture, in its own way, addressed the needs, desires, and aspirations of a society replete with ambivalent feelings. (252)

First, we will discuss *Cool Hand Luke* and its impact on sixties youth audiences. We will then turn our attention to *Bonnie and Clyde*. Because of its profound effect on the industry and the public, particularly the youth audience, it will command significant attention here.

Cool Hand Luke

When *Cool Hand Luke* came to the screen in November of 1967, the “summer of love” had ended in Haight-Ashbury; President Lyndon Johnson was in the process of escalating the Vietnam War; more than 100,000 war protesters had marched on the Lincoln Memorial less than a month earlier; and *Bonnie and Clyde* had already made its mark with the youth audience in America. Although *Cool Hand Luke* is a studio production and features one of Hollywood’s biggest stars, Paul Newman, the film about a working-class antihero nonetheless touched a nerve with the youth audience. As Paul Monaco writes in *History of The American Cinema, the Sixties*, “In a nation experiencing an enormous pull of cultural change, and for an American cinema now forced to appeal to younger audiences, *Cool Hand Luke* was emblematic of a shifting audience taste toward stories about individualists, malcontents, and rebels who steadfastly resisted the proprieties of respectable society” (182). As we will see in Chapter 1, this shifting taste two years later encouraged the filming of *Easy Rider*, which revolutionized filmmaking in Hollywood, in part because of its subject matter, and in part because of its independent, and inexpensive, financing.

Lucas Jackson, or Cool Hand Luke, is a counterculture working-class hero, which may sound oxymoronic considering that the counterculture was primarily a middle- and upper-middle class phenomenon. But he is just that, the evolution of a new kind of anti-hero that first came to Hollywood in the early 1960s in films like *Lonely Are the Brave*, *The Hustler*, and *Hud*. As Monaco writes, “With its classic hero out of vogue, Hollywood seemed to be concocting its own version of the antihero out of a pastiche of underdog status, American individualism, and existential quest for identity and self-expression” (182). Although Hollywood had been fashioning heroes and antiheroes out of working-class

veterans since the end of World War II—Luke is recognized as a war hero early in the film by the warden, although it's not clear whether he fought in World War II or Korea—this time it is a bit different. Luke is not an aggressive or violent veteran who rages against society, as many later Vietnam veterans do in Hollywood films, but a man of the mid-1960s. Monaco writes:

Luke is reminiscent of the rebel heroes that Hollywood had been treating on and off since the mid 1950s—he is a veteran, he is of the working class. Nonetheless, Luke's character typifies the cultural shift of the late 1960s in which a number of motion pictures accept such a flawed hero as his own victim. (182)

He is also different from the individualists who came to the screen during World War II and again in the mid-1970s. His is not an individualism that is made for emulation by the masses.

Luke's working-class roots are apparent throughout the film, and so is the claustrophobic life that he and others of his class are forced to live. The very first scene of the film, through its tight framing of the protagonist, demonstrates his lack of mobility, as it also demonstrates his disdain for the unseen powers that govern most people's lives. The first shot of the film is a close-up of a set of hands and a tool, which we later realize is a pipe cutter. Immediately the word "Violation" fills the screen. In the next shot, the camera pulls back a little to show a parking meter and another close-up of the hands and the cutting tool. Again the word "Violation" fills the screen, but this time it is clear that we are looking at a parking meter. The camera then pans up the body that owns the hands and the audience sees Paul Newman in close-up, holding a pipe cutter in one hand and a beer in the other, and wearing an ironic grin. In a tight, high angle shot, he slumps to the ground with his back

against the meter and opens the beer as the sound of a police siren is heard. He has been caught, and the credits begin with *Cool Hand Luke* and a tight profile of Luke's seated body. Throughout this scene, the tight shots of Luke and his hands on the tool clearly situate him as a working-class man who is struggling to find living space in a life where any "Violation" can bring the "man" to a working man's doorstep, or in this case to the curb where he is cutting the head off a parking meter.

In the next scene, we see Luke arriving for duty on a prison farm, having received two years for his destruction of public property. When his war record is brought up by the warden—including his heroism and the fact that he left the service at the same rank he entered it with—Luke's only response is, "Like I was just passing time." As the audience soon learns, however, Luke is not a man who passes time well or responds to confinement of any sort. He rejects the confining life that a working-class man must lead, and his inability to conform to the rules of the prison, and the greater society, ultimately lead to his death.

Throughout the film, many tight shots of Luke are used, partially because of the iconic nature of Newman, but primarily to show the claustrophobic world in which he and the other prisoners live. Even when the chain gang is on the road, the shots are tight. The men are often shot in long, deep focus shots working along the sides of roads, but there is rarely any room to move right or left in the frame. Low angle shots of the guards are common, particularly in the case of the "man with no eyes," a sharpshooting "captain" of the prison road crew who wears reflective sunglasses. On several occasions, the camera records the action through the reflection in his glasses to establish the fact that the "man" is always watching. These low angle shots of the "man with no eyes" clearly show individual

dominance, but they also symbolically indicate the oppressive world in which the prisoners, i.e. the working class, live.

One short but pivotal scene takes place about halfway through the film when Luke's mother, whom he calls Arletta (Jo Van Fleet), comes to visit him at the prison. Lying in a makeshift bed in the actual bed of a truck, she, too, is shot in tight framing, showing the restrictive life she is leading and has led. She is clearly dying of the ravages of life and a lifetime of smoking, as her omnipresent cigarette implies, and she wants to say good bye to the son she acknowledges is her favorite. In one poignant moment, she reminisces about her husband. As she does so, it becomes apparent that Luke's father did not hang around to raise his two sons, providing a possible explanation for Luke's own inability to settle down and live a "normal" life. "You're old man wasn't much for hangin' around—but, dammit, he made me laugh," Arletta says, implying that maybe that's all a working-class man, or woman, can hope for from life. A bit later, she asks Luke, "What went wrong?" alluding to his life, not just his incarceration. Luke's response sums up his constricted life. "I just can't seem to find no elbow room," he says. Here, too, Luke is tightly framed by the makeshift bed canopy on the truck. Luke's answer resonated with many at the time who felt the modern world to be stifling, and it also hinted at what Robert Ray calls the "lateness" of many films of the Left at the time that "suggested that America was no longer living in a frontier age" (302). Luke can't find "no elbow room" because there is precious little room left for the "working man" after the closing of the frontier. Arletta's final words to Luke as he is called away are, "Laugh it up, Luke. You'll make out," again imploring him to exercise the one implied escape a working-class man still has, laughter and a good time. But it's doubtful she

believes he will “make out” as the camera next captures her crying when she hears Luke tell his nephew, who is there with his father, to avoid the mistakes he has made.

Although he, like most of his fellow prisoners, is of the working class, Luke stands out. He represents working-class agency, but as the film implies, it is an individual, not collective, agency. In a constricted life, this agency may be limited, but he exercises it at every opportunity. He is a rebel from the beginning, explaining at one point why he isn't engaging in conversation with other prisoners by saying, “I ain't heard that much worth listening to. Just a lot of guys laying down a lot of rules and regulations.” He becomes a symbol for the other prisoners, rising to heroic heights when he boxes the biggest, toughest prisoner in the chain gang, Dragline, played by a hulking George Kennedy, and refuses to lay down the gloves despite being repeatedly knocked to the ground. At one point, being implored to stop, he tells Dragline, “You're going to have to kill me.” Those words become prophetic later when he applies the same standard to the prison authorities.

As the film proceeds, the men begin to live vicariously through Luke's exploits—his “cool” card playing, his eating of fifty eggs to win a bet, and his three escapes. Each time he is returned to prison after an escape, the men gather in the barracks to cheer him on in one way or another—one time singing a spiritual to encourage him when the warden and his minions try to break him by having him repeatedly dig a hole and then refill it.^{vi} His nemesis at the beginning of the film, Dragline in some ways becomes “Lenny” of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* to Luke's “George,” eventually escaping with him on Luke's final attempt to find “some elbow room.”

The relationship between Luke and the other prisoners says something good and bad about the working class. On the one hand, it shows that collective action is possible—they

pull together to help Luke through the oppressive treatment of the prison system, offering him moral support at times and physical support at others. At one point, for example, they eat his food when he faces additional punishment if he doesn't clear his plate. But the relationship between the men and Luke also demonstrates that if true collective action is possible, it must be led by a vanguard. Agency here is confined to one man, not unlike the agency demonstrated by Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*. Although Luke's actions lift the men up and show them that a working-class man can have agency, can have a say in his own fate, the men fail to see the same potential in themselves. They need a symbol upon which to rest their hopes. Even Luke recognizes this, at one point sending the men a picture of himself with two beautiful women in a faux magazine he created for them while on the lam. When he is returned after his second escape, beaten and bloody, the men insist that the photo is real. Luke rises from the table he has been placed on and yells, "Get out there yourself. Stop feedin' off me," and stumbles off. Later, once he is "broken" by the prison keepers through physical and mental torment, once he seems to have "gotten his mind right" as the warden has implored him to do, the men turn away from this new obsequious Luke. At this point Luke admonishes his former admirers, crying out, "Where are you now?" No longer a symbol of freedom to them, just another beaten down inmate, they abandon him and their own dreams of freedom, denying any form of collective action by the working class in the absence of a "vanguard" leader.

During the film, Luke also experiences a crisis of belief, in essence asking God, "Where are you now?" It is clear from the spiritual that he sings after his mother's death that he wants to believe, but he can't give himself over to a greater power when he sees the state of the world around him. This rejection of God or, to be more precise, his crisis in belief,

would have resonated with a Left audience and members of the counterculture and youth audiences who were looking for alternatives to traditional religion at the time. This crisis later plays a key role in his death.

After his third escape from the chain gang, all of which were precipitated by the death of his mother and the decision by the warden to put him in the “box” to keep him from trying to escape to attend her funeral, Luke is trapped in a church. Even Luke sees the irony in this and he tries to get answers for his plight from God. “Inside, outside, all them rules and regulations and bosses . . . just where am I supposed to fit in?” he asks out loud. He drops to his knees and waits. When no answer comes, he says, “Yeah, that’s what I thought. . . . I guess I gotta find my own way.” At that point, he steps to the door and looks into the lights of the cars that have the church surrounded and, smiling, repeats a phrase the warden has said on more than one occasion: “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” With that a shot is heard and Luke goes down, hit in the throat. We immediately learn that the shot has come from the “man with no eyes,” who was humiliated by Luke during Luke’s last escape. Clearly, his authority, any authority, could not be challenged in that way without retribution. As the other armed officers stare at him in shock, Dragline, who had been captured and sent into the church to convince Luke to surrender, stumbles out of the church supporting Luke. At this point, Dragline hands over Luke to a guard, runs towards the “man with no eyes,” and tries to strangle him.

As the film ends, Dragline is shown talking to the inmates on the road again, telling them how Luke was smiling to the end. An earlier shot of Luke in the car as it pulls away from the shooting scene at the church seems to support that—through a foggy and rain-drenched window Luke appears to be smiling. The men again latch on to Luke’s star, but this

time he has had to die in order for them to “live” in their search for personal freedom. In an echo of sorts of Arletta’s earlier advice to “laugh it up,” the men smile and laugh at the tales about Luke and “that old Luke smile” that Dragline speaks about. Dragline’s final assessment of Luke again shows how these men of the working class still could not stop “feedin’ off” Luke. “Cool Hand Luke, hell,” Dragline says. “He’s a natural born world shaker.”

With this line, the recognition of Luke as a Christ figure is complete. He is a misfit in society; he is a symbol of freedom that others are drawn to; he performs “miracles” by escaping three times (and eating fifty eggs in an hour even after Dragline says, “No man can eat fifty eggs”); he is “beautiful” as Dragline says more than once; and most importantly, he questions God for forsaking him and he dies so that others—fellow inmates—might “live.” He is even resurrected in the end as the photo of him “smiling that Luke smile” with the two women is projected on the screen as the last image of the film with a zoom shot, rising as if headed to heaven. He truly is a “natural born world shaker.”

Lucas Jackson also serves as a surrogate for the disaffected youth who were struggling to make sense out of the world in the mid-1960s. Like them, Luke fights an “establishment” that seems to hold all the good cards. Luke represents the potential “agency” in all who feel oppressed by this omnipotent oppressor. Although collective action is not hinted at in the film, Luke has at least given the men hope that they can change their lives individually. He has also helped to establish a more healthy community, albeit one that is confined by barbed wire fences. In “The Idea of a Hero,” Sheila Schwartz notes that Luke teaches the men that even a confined man has the freedom to choose his own attitude in any set of circumstances. She writes, “Once the men have understood the possibility of inner freedom, the foundations of fear and desperation on which the power of the establishment

has been based are irrevocably shaken” (84). It is worth noting that in 1967, at the height of the anti-war movement and civil unrest, a major studio, Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, distributed a film that clearly had an anti-establishment message.

Bonnie and Clyde

That brings us to *Bonnie and Clyde*. Although released three months prior to *Cool Hand Luke*, I am discussing it last because of its unique history and its cultural impact on Hollywood. No other film, with the possible exception of *Easy Rider* two years later, had the impact on Hollywood of the 1960s that *Bonnie and Clyde* had. Its graphic violence, mixing of genres, use of French New Wave techniques, overt appeal to an alienated youth market, and its introduction of new and beautiful faces—Warren Beatty had been around for several years, but had not reached star status, and Faye Dunaway had only appeared in two films, *The Happening*, a youth-oriented film that may have hit the screen before its time in 1965, and *Hurry Sundown*, released earlier in 1967—made it a cultural phenomenon. Set in the 1930s, the film is designed as an allegory of the 1960s (Murray 241), substituting working-class outlaws for rebellious youth.

Bonnie and Clyde was originally planned as an independent film. Screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton, a writer and a graphic designer, respectively, for *Esquire* at the time, believed a film based on the New Wave techniques of Francois Truffaut and Jean Luc Godard could be filmed for \$350,000-\$400,000. (Later they discovered it could not be made for less than \$1.2 million and the film became a Warner Brothers project.) Their original wish list included Truffaut as the director. As Mark Harris describes in detail in *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood*, Truffaut liked the

project, flirted with doing it, almost turned it over to his then friend Godard, and eventually recommended Arthur Penn for the job when he became tied up with another project. Ultimately, Truffaut's commitment to filming *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) as his first American film turned him away from the project. Ironically, Truffaut introduced the project to Warren Beatty at a luncheon with Beatty and Leslie Caron, Beatty's girlfriend of the time. Beatty was actually lobbying for a lead role in *Fahrenheit 451* when the project entered the conversation. In another irony, Truffaut apparently left the luncheon unimpressed with Beatty while providing him with an entrée to the project that would make his career (93-94).

Arthur Penn had worked with Beatty on *Mickey One* (1965) and was considered an apt American substitute for the French New Wave directors. According to Lawrence L. Murray, Penn fully acknowledges that he helped to shape the Depression-era film to reach the youth audience of the mid-1960s, much like the New Wave films had done earlier in the decade with the gangster genre. "The director accurately perceived that the zeitgeist of the 1960s, the alienation of the young from standard social conventions, was quite comparable to his image of the 1930s," writes Murray. "His intent was 'to make a modern film whose action takes place in the past,' to appeal to the sensibilities of a youthful audience caught in the throes of rebelliousness and challenge" (241). Newman and Benton also clearly had the counterculture in mind when they wrote the film. Here they are quoted from their essay, "Lightning in a Bottle":

If Bonnie and Clyde were here today, they would be hip. Their values would have become assimilated in much of our culture—not robbing banks and killing people, of course, but their style, their sexuality, their bravado, their

delicacy, their cultivated arrogance, their narcissistic insecurity, their curious ambition have relevance to the way we live now. (qtd. in Ray 314)

The two screenwriters and Penn believed that by setting the film in the 1930s they could draw a connection between the Depression-era bank robbers imprisoned in their working-class world and a youth audience that felt a similar alienation from society some 30 years later. They were apparently right, as youth audiences flocked to the film, along with others. As William L. O'Neill writes in *Coming Apart*, "Hence, though ostensibly not even about the 1960s, *Bonnie and Clyde* rendered the spirit of the age more finely than any other picture, except perhaps *Dr. Strangelove*. It was one of the very few works that posterity could use to judge the era fairly" (217).

Bonnie and Clyde begins with a series of Depression-era photographs that accompany the credits, each photo introduced by a "click" of a camera shutter. Soft 1930s music plays in the background as photos are displayed, with the final two photos shots of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty, dressed in period costumes as Bonnie and Clyde. The use of the Dunaway and Beatty photos in lieu of the real Bonnie and Clyde is a self-reflexive move that clearly establishes this as a motion picture. Unlike classic Hollywood, which tries to conceal the constructed nature of film, *Bonnie and Clyde* embraces it. This move not only shows the influence of the New Wave on the film and forces the audience to view the film more actively, but it also establishes one of the themes of the film, the modern concept of stardom based on images created through the media. As the credits end, two large, red lips encompass the screen. They are Dunaway's as Bonnie Parker. The camera then pulls back slowly as she sits, back to the camera, and we see that she is nude from the waist up, shocking for a Hollywood film of the time. She immediately turns to her right and we see what she sees—

her face and body from the shoulders up, admiring herself in the mirror. Bonnie and Clyde always remain cognizant of how they look and how they are being received by the public through the media. During their rampage through the Southwest they often take time to photograph themselves and to read periodicals about their exploits, reminiscent of the Jean Paul Belmondo character “Michel” in Godard’s *Breathless*, a film that inspired the writing of *Bonnie and Clyde*. This obsession with photography and image plays an important role throughout the film as Bonnie and Clyde take on the roles of gangster and hero to the working class.

This obsession also demonstrates that Bonnie and Clyde are no different, in some ways, than anyone else growing up during the early years of cinema, pulp magazines, and radio. As Chip Rhodes writes in *Structures of the Jazz Age*, “[I]n the gradual shift in American society from a producer-oriented, crafts-dominated economy to a consumer-oriented, mass production economy, mass culture became the dominant ideological determinant of individual behavior” (111). Before film and radio, mass culture’s ability to reach rural America was limited. But when films began to attract more people than church, and radio was heard in all corners of the country, people like Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow could dream of lives that would transcend their working-class roots. “In other words,” Rhodes writes, “movies (and mass culture generally) offer subjects an ideal, imaginary self that is adored by the public and validated by those around him/her: a self, in other words, with personality” (113). This impact of mass culture is demonstrated most clearly in a late scene in the film when Clyde discovers that Bonnie’s poem about the Barrow Gang has been published in a local newspaper. After she reads it to him—in an interesting sequence of shots with her reading of the letter serving as a voice-over bridge to several

scenes of the two of them together in different locations, the final one in an open field—he says, “You know what you done there? You told my story . . . One time I told you I was going to make you somebody. That’s what you’ve done for me. You made me somebody they’re going to remember.” It is not a coincidence that this moment leads directly to their making love, the first time impotent Clyde has been able to perform sexually with Bonnie.^{vii}

This obsession with notoriety and being “somebody they’re going to remember” proves to be their downfall, however, as their fame leads the authorities to them on several occasions, the final one the deadly ambush that claims both of their lives. While their desire for “stardom” humanizes them with the audience and makes them folk heroes with the working-class characters in the film, it also demonstrates the bankrupt nature of a society built on image and materialism, a theme that is also touched on in *Medium Cool* in Chapter 1. Although Arthur Penn attributed much of the success of the film to the fact that “there was a sense of two individuals not belonging to the life and times of a society in which they found themselves” (qtd. in Murray 250), their obsession with notoriety and image shows that Bonnie and Clyde are still in some ways trapped within the logic of that society.

Early in the film the desperation of the Great Depression is vividly depicted in a scene that could have been pulled from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Bonnie and Clyde, “holing up” in an abandoned farmhouse after their first robbery together—a petty robbery of a local store in the town where Bonnie lives—are surprised by a poor farmer whose family sits waiting in a truck that carries all of their remaining belongings. It quickly becomes clear that he and his family have been evicted from the farm by the bank. In a showing of solidarity, Clyde shoots the bank sign posted to the house and offers the gun to the farmer, who helps him to shoot

out the windows. This scene establishes Bonnie and Clyde as burgeoning folk heroes who sympathize with the plight of the downtrodden, and builds sympathy for the characters.

Penn mixes in humor to soften and humanize his gangsters, which also serves to not only build sympathy for them, but to also create a dilemma for the audience when the gangsters later are required to kill. One such humorous scene comes during the first half hour of the film when Clyde attempts to rob a bank, only to discover that the bank has failed. To save face with Bonnie, who had expressed doubt about his willingness to rob the bank, Clyde forces the banker at gunpoint to walk outside to tell Bonnie that the bank has indeed failed. Then, in an act that foreshadows other senseless violence, Clyde shoots out the windows of the failed bank.

The bank robberies are also accompanied by lively Flatt and Scruggs blue grass banjo music. As Mark Harris notes, Benton and Newman actually wrote much of the film with the music playing in the background and later decided that it would work well as a score (35). After the early bank and store robberies, the banjo music provides background during the escapes, lending a light feel to the robberies, which are always shot in high-key lighting instead of the dark and brooding lighting usually associated with gangster activity. All of these choices serve to give an almost comic feel to the events—Lawrence Murray likens the early scenes to a Keystone Kops escapade (243)—which make the violence that comes later even more startling for the audience.

The first shooting appears to be incongruous with what has come before it, in more than one way. Not only does it change the tone of the film, but it also represents violence against a member of the working class. It takes place when Bonnie and Clyde rob a bank and their new partner, C. W. Moss, played by Michael J. Pollard, makes the mistake of parking

the getaway car and getting blocked in. The actual parking of the car is comical—anyone who has ever seen a Warner Brothers gangster movie from the 1930s knows you don't parallel park getaway cars—and this makes the shooting that follows even more shocking to the audience. The audience is still smiling when Bonnie and Clyde run out of the bank to find that Moss is struggling to extricate the car from the tight parking spot. But those smiles quickly go away when a bank teller jumps onto the now-moving car's running board and Clyde shoots him in the face as the victim's blood graphically sprays the car window. It is the first killing in the film, and the violence escalates from there. As Murray notes, the audience found the violence disconcerting. "Having been led to empathize with Bonnie and Clyde and to perceive them as likable people who have accidentally fallen into a life of crime, the audience is confused as to how to respond to the transition," Murray writes (244). This shooting mimics another senseless killing in Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*), when Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) shoots a police officer in cold blood to avoid being arrested for stealing a car. The shooting is particularly shocking because the violence, like the violence in *Bonnie and Clyde*, seems to be incongruous with the tone of the film. While I agree with Murray's overall conclusion, it is a stretch to claim that Bonnie and Clyde fell into the life of crime accidentally—they made clear choices to do so.

I believe the aspect of the teller's shooting that troubled the audience most, however, was not its graphic nature or the fact that it occurred at all—it was that the violence was directed at another member of the working class who was simply doing his job, not a greedy banker or a gluttonous capitalist or one of the faceless representatives of police authority who blast away at the gang from inside an armored vehicle. Having previously been accepted by the audience as a defender of the poor and downtrodden, Clyde's violent act against a

working man seems incongruous with the view of Bonnie and Clyde as Depression-era Robin Hoods. Clyde's action is also stunning because, unlike in an earlier scene, he is the initiator of violence. Prior to the bank robbery, Clyde attempts to steal food at gunpoint from a local grocer after he and Bonnie have gone without food for some time. As he is occupied with the clerk, a deep focus shot shows another man rushing towards him from behind with a meat cleaver in his hand. Clyde avoids the initial strike as the cleaver crashes down onto the counter. He then pistol-whips the man after a brawl whose outcome was clearly in doubt. As Clyde hops into the car, puzzled by what has just happened, he turns to Bonnie, who is behind the wheel, and says, "Why did he try to kill me? I didn't want to hurt him. Try to get something to eat around here and some son-of-a-bitch comes up on you with a meat cleaver. I ain't against him. I ain't against him." But he doesn't seem to realize that robbing someone at gunpoint, particularly a local store owner during the Great Depression, is "hurting" him. It is an act "against him." Although some may justify Clyde's shooting of the bank clerk as a reaction to the earlier incident, it is still shocking because it seems wholly unnecessary—the car could have simply sped away, forcing the clerk to jump from the moving vehicle.

Clyde seems to want it both ways. He wants to be an outlaw who lives by his own rules, which in his case means pointing a gun at a working-class store clerk or a bank teller on occasion, and he wants to be the folk hero of the working class. He doesn't seem to understand that robbing a local store is robbing from a working-class man, or that robbing a bank before federally insured savings accounts means robbing from the working man/woman. To draw a parallel to the 1960s, this may have been Arthur Penn's way of saying to the counterculture that you can "turn on, tune in, drop out" and "do your own

thing,” or you can change the system from within, but you can’t have it both ways. If you try to have it both ways, the establishment always wins because it sets the rules of the game.

Although the shooting of the teller and other acts of violence by the Barrow Gang are troublesome for the audience, as the film proceeds and the violence ramps up, it is clear that the overwhelming force of violence comes not from the gang, but from the authorities. On several occasions, the authorities attempt to take the gang down with overwhelming force, only to be outwitted or outshot. But in the end, as song writer John Mellencamp would say, “authority always wins.” *Bonnie and Clyde* ends in a hail of bullets as the two lovers, having just recently consummated their relationship, are ambushed along a lonely road by ex-Texas Ranger Frank Hamer and local police. The sequence includes more than sixty camera shots and took several days to shoot. The bodies of both gangsters are riddled with bullets after they share a final, knowing look at each other before the bullets begin to fly. According to Harris, Penn had a specific idea in mind when he shot the sequence, one based on what was happening in the world and the nation at the time:

The summer riots were on his mind; so was the war in Vietnam, which in the two months that *Bonnie and Clyde* had been shooting had become the subject of increasing pessimism in the nation’s press and of major public protests. . . .

Penn wanted . . . an ambush that would, as Richard Gilman later put it in *The New Republic*, “mount up to an image of absolute blind violence on the part of organized society, a violence far surpassing that which it is supposed to be putting down.” (256)

In short, Penn was trying to capture the Zeitgeist of the era in one long, brutal demonstration of official violence directed at two outlaws.

Murray believes the film succeeded for two reasons—it did appeal to the “spirit of the age,” as Penn, Newman, Benton, and Beatty intended; and the violence provided an “emotional catharsis” for the audience:

Surrounded by carnage, barraged nightly on the televised news with the shock and fury of scenes from Newark to Hue, the filmic murder and mayhem presented a means for expunging confused feelings from the psyche. More importantly, counterpoints of humor and the frequent slapstick quality of the movie’s violence made the subject more bearable. (251)

The violence of *Bonnie and Clyde* clearly was good box office, but I believe its most important contribution was its decision to show the parallels between the working-class and youth experiences. If the youth of the 1960s were angered and alienated by an “establishment” that sponsored an unpopular war overseas and limited civil liberties at home, the working-class of the 1930s was equally disillusioned by the failure of its banks and its government to provide for it. By drawing this parallel, the film opened the door for other parallels to be made. It provided a space for the working class and the counterculture to negotiate and to find common areas of agreement rather than obvious points of contestation.

Unfortunately, neither *Bonnie and Clyde* nor *Cool Hand Luke* went far enough. Lauded for their anti-establishment themes—Paul Monaco notes in *The Sixties* that critic Charles Champlin claimed that *Cool Hand Luke* “proved that the term ‘Hollywood’ need not be a limiting definition” (182)—both films stop short of criticizing the overarching system that produced a world with “no elbow room” and failing banks. As Monaco writes:

Set in the early 1930s, *Bonnie and Clyde* alluded only peripherally to the failures of capitalism, dealing instead with the Great Depression in a highly

stylized manner while managing to suggest vague connections to contemporary disquietude and protest in American society in the late 1960s.

(186)

By concentrating on the violence of both the authorities and to a lesser extent the gang as a means to comment on the Vietnam war and violence in America in the 1960s, Penn misses an opportunity to point the finger at the bankers and captains of industry and political leaders who led the country into these tough times of the 1930s and 1960s. Never does the audience see a group of bankers or the authorities plotting the demise of Bonnie and Clyde. The gangsters are taken down by an individual bounty hunter, Hamer, and a local police force, leaving the hands of the bankers and politicians unsullied. This point is accentuated by the fact that the gang is always betrayed by a member of the working class before every police assault. By failing to adequately criticize the system that created the conditions that led to the creation of a Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, the film fails to provide a key point of convergence for the working class and the counterculture audience of 1967.

Cool Hand Luke also stops short of directly criticizing the capitalist system. Luke is seen as a victim of himself as much as a victim of the system. Blame for his ultimate demise is also deflected in part to a cold warden and a “man with no eyes,” but not to the system as a whole. Rather than “rouse the masses,” the film provides only one charismatic member of the working class with agency. In this sense, Luke Jackson is presented as exceptional, a Christ-like figure who literally rises above the other men with whom he shares a prison farm. When he dies, this 1960s version of the “rugged individualist” of American cinema leaves behind men still in search of a vanguard leader. While Sheila Schwartz may be right in saying that “the foundations of fear and desperation on which the power of the establishment has been

based are irrevocably shaken” (84) when Luke challenges them, the men still lack agency to act on their own when he is gone. It is clear when Dragline says, “He’s a natural born world shaker,” that he and the other men see Luke as exceptional. As working-class men on the margins of society they do not see the same potential in themselves.

But although *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Cool Hand Luke*, products of the Hollywood system, did not go far enough in their criticism of the larger economic and political systems, they did provide a promising start for films about the counterculture and its relationship with the working class. By choosing to draw upon the similarities between the youth counterculture and the working class—whether the contemporary working class or a 1930s version—these films found some areas of convergence that could have been exploited by filmmakers who followed. At a time when the counterculture and many in the working class had misgivings about the war and the direction in which the nation was headed, these films were able to recognize those commonalities rather than exploit the hardhat vs. counterculture binary. Unfortunately, the moment did not last. As the decade wore on, and the country became more polarized, Hollywood—primarily for economic reasons as we will see in Chapter 1—chose to exploit this polarization by taking one side or the other, Left or Right, on the screen. As we will see, the decision to exploit the schism between the working class and the counterculture dramatically affected how the working class would be portrayed on the screen during the last years of the sixties, when the counterculture took center stage, and throughout the 1970s as the country turned to the right.

The history of Hollywood shows that class has been a key component in film from its earliest days. From the first decades of the 1900s, before what we know as “Hollywood” even existed, through the tumultuous years of the 1960s and 1970s, class, and the working-

class in particular, has been at or near the center of American film. The plight of the working class has always been an important and often contested subject for American filmmakers, even when working-class characters became less prominent in Hollywood films during the 1960s. From the worker filmmakers of pre-Hollywood, to the noir films of World War II veterans, to the 1960s films that substituted the working class for the counterculture, to the films of the 1970s that re-valorized the working class, the depiction of the working class in American film has always been dictated by the political and cultural climate of the time. Although there have been times when class has been de-emphasized in order to emphasize class mobility or to offer a united front in the face of an outside danger (the war years in particular), depictions of the working class have never completely disappeared from the screen.

While this Introduction has chronicled the treatment of the working class through the first seven decades of American film and foreshadowed the chapters to come, the following four chapters will demonstrate how the depiction of the working class in film evolved as the political and cultural climates of the country changed, and how that treatment helped to shape the image, and self-image, of the working class. As we will see, throughout the counterculture period Hollywood, acting in its own best economic interests, exploited, some might say created, the binary of the counterculture and the working class in order to attract audiences to theaters. The industry did produce films that explored the desire for community, new and reconstituted, but it did not explore in any meaningful way the commonalities between the working class and the counterculture, nor did it provide a blueprint for how these two groups could work together to fight their common foe, the “establishment.” We will also see that following a brief renaissance of film in the early 1970s, Hollywood returned to

traditional narratives and the trope of the rugged individualist in its effort to exploit the cultural and social climate of the time. We will also see that, in doing so, Hollywood helped to associate the working-class with attitudes prevalent on the Right, and helped to shape how the working class perceived itself and the world around it.

ⁱ It should be noted that Joe Buck, as a male hustler, and Ratsos Rizzo, as a homeless man who will do anything to hustle a dollar on the street, both embrace the counterculture later when it fits their needs.

ⁱⁱ Although *Dirty Harry* made money, it was not a big hit at the box office. Its sequels did significantly better later in the decade.

ⁱⁱⁱ More than seven decades after Walter Benjamin posited filmmaking as potentially empowering for the individual, some may argue that Benjamin's view of the emancipatory aspect of film is again being realized in the present day on internet sites like You Tube and Dailymotion, which provide outlets for non-professional videos shot by average people.

^{iv} An argument could be made that Mitch (Karl Malden) does not fit this stereotype because of his initial sensitivity to Blanche and his more genteel manner. But it should be remembered that he ultimately abandons Blanche when he learns that she has a "past," a cowardly act designed to maintain his status with his working-class friends.

^v In *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Robert Ray describes the myths of the "outlaw hero and the official hero" in American culture. He writes, "Embodied in the adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, wanderer, and loner, the outlaw hero stood for the part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as a teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong" (59).

^{vi} Luke's relationship with the other men has some similarities to R. P. McMurphy's relationship to the other patients in the mental institution in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, based on Ken Kesey's 1962 novel of the

same name. Like R. P. McMurphy, Luke becomes a leader and inspiration to the men. The obvious difference is that the men in *Cool Hand Luke*, while criminals, are not, as a rule, mentally deficient.

^{vii} Bonnie and Clyde are not the only ones cognizant of the media. After one bank robbery, the bank president and a guard, who was shot at by the Barrow Gang, are pictured posing for a photograph for the local newspaper.

CHAPTER 1

THE LATE 1960S: THE PRIVILEGING OF THE COUNTERCULTURE

Since the inception of the studio system in the 1920s, the working class has rarely been represented realistically on the screen. This tendency of Hollywood to patronize or trivialize the working class took a portentous turn in the late 1960s when the working class was not only stereotyped, but often marginalized and, in worst-case scenarios, demonized. It was the time of the counterculture in America and in Hollywood, and the film industry, seeking to capitalize on the mood of the nation and reach out to a growing youth audience, turned to the production of counterculture-themed films. (It should be noted that classic Hollywood films also continued to be made.) While that move was understandable from both an economic and aesthetic standpoint, an unfortunate by-product of this trend *du jour* in Hollywood was the victimization of the working class, a group that already felt put-upon. That is not to say that all films of the “youth-cult” era, as David A. Cook calls it (162), denigrated the working class. Some films like *Medium Cool* (1969) and even *Alice’s Restaurant* (1969), both of which we will explore later in this chapter, presented sympathetic and complex views of the working class. But more often than not, the counterculture played the sympathetic protagonist to the working-class antagonist.

As we saw in the Introduction, the era did not begin this way. In both *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, the working class serves as surrogates for the counterculture, establishing commonalities between the two groups—the one exception being law enforcement officials, who are portrayed as arms of the establishment, which is common in cinema. But as the decade wore on and the counterculture took center stage in American

film, the working class morphed into a surrogate for the establishment. Instead of exploring the similarities and common ground between the working class and the counterculture, filmmakers chose instead to foreground the counterculture and cast the working class in the role of “other.” Unlike the “Okies” in *Bonnie and Clyde*, who empathize with the outlaw gang and its assault on the establishment, this new working class distrusted a counterculture that flaunted its freedom and attacked the established rule. In the process of creating this binary, the filmmakers also generally portray the counterculture as victims of violence initiated by the working class as an establishment tool. In short, Hollywood failed to build on a foundation started by films like *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, opting instead in the years between 1969 and 1971 to produce a series of films about youths that almost always privileged the counterculture at the expense of the working class. In its effort to attract youth audiences to the theater, Hollywood failed not only to reach the broader audience it sought, but also to capitalize on what may have been its only chance to demonstrate that the working class and the counterculture had more commonalities than differences.

In this chapter, four films of the counterculture era, all released between the summer of 1969 and the summer of 1971, will be examined, with their treatment of the working class highlighted. The films are *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Alice’s Restaurant* (Arthur Penn, 1969), *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969), and *Billy Jack* (Tom Laughlin, 1971 and 1973). These films were chosen not just because they deal with the relationship between the counterculture and the working class, but also because each film addresses this relationship in a unique way. In the process, these films offer diverse views of the working class. While the vast majority of youth/cult films of the era privilege the counterculture—these include

films like *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), *Getting Straight* (1970), and *Zabriskie Point* (1970), which all took place on or near college campuses and celebrated protest while demonizing police and the “establishment”—and while that is also true of *Easy Rider* and *Billy Jack*, some of these films offer more subtle and even-handed views of the working class. For that reason, the films will not be presented in chronological order, but instead will follow an order that reflects their rendering of the working class, from most antipathetic to most sympathetic.

Because of its landmark status as the “original” youth-cult film and its clear privileging of the counterculture, *Easy Rider* will be discussed first. We will explore how the film not only showed Hollywood how to reach a youth audience—even though many of its successors failed at the box office—but how it also gave Hollywood permission, so to speak, to give creative control to young directors, as long as production and distribution costs were held in check. Most importantly, we will explore how *Easy Rider*, for the most part, privileges the counterculture at the expense of the working class and provides a template for copy-cat films to follow. It should be noted, however, that the depictions of both the working class and the counterculture in *Easy Rider* are far more nuanced than a first viewing might indicate. For example, while working-class characters in many films that followed *Easy Rider* are one-dimensional and generally shown from a perspective friendly to the counterculture, the working class in *Easy Rider*, while clearly the “other,” is also represented at times by sympathetic and well-rounded characters. One of these, a struggling rancher in the Southwest, will be discussed at length later in this work. In the youth/cult films that followed, the working class was regularly represented by violent law enforcement officers charged with upholding the wishes of the “establishment” or intolerant and ignorant locals

who served as protectors of the status quo. The one-dimensional quality of these characters may have been a factor in the failure of most youth-cult films at the box office.

Next, we will discuss *Billy Jack*, despite its appearance very late in the youth/cult cycle. The reason for discussing *Billy Jack* second is clear—*Billy Jack* represents in many ways the last gasp of the counterculture on film. Although it was released two years after *Easy Rider* and re-released two years after that, it explored themes that were more common in the late 1960s than the early 1970s. Released independently by Tom Laughlin after its initial weak marketing and distribution by Warner Brothers, *Billy Jack* was “the only movie to realize Hollywood’s post-*Easy Rider* fantasy of huge grosses from a cheaply produced youth-cult film” (Cook 175). Like *Easy Rider*, the film generally provides a negative view of the working class while privileging the counterculture. The locals, like those in *Easy Rider*, are bigoted, violent, intolerant of difference, and one-dimensional. One important difference here is the depiction of the local sheriff. Unlike his predecessors in *Easy Rider* and other youth-cult films, the sheriff here is depicted as an open-minded upholder of the law—a man who believes in “live and let live” as long as that means living within the law. The more benign depiction of the sheriff could be seen as an attempt to harken back to a simpler time in American film, the era of the western, when the “law” was depicted as the protector of the average citizen and not a partner of the powers-that-be.

Next we will look at *Alice’s Restaurant*, a film that provides surprisingly complex, although not fully formed, depictions of the working class as well as the counterculture. Based on an autobiographical song by Arlo Guthrie, and narrated by Arlo as he plays himself in the film, *Alice’s Restaurant* offers a compassionate look at the counterculture, but not without criticism. More importantly for our purpose here, the film also offers an ambiguous

yet often sympathetic view of the working class, primarily in its depiction of the title character. In short, while the film appears on the surface to be another youth/cult film that privileges the counterculture as it satirizes the establishment and the working class that is called upon to enforce establishment standards, a closer look at the film demonstrates nuance and complexity that can be lost in its generally light and satirical tone.

The chapter will end with *Medium Cool*, a film that utilizes live footage of the Chicago “police riots” during the 1968 Democratic Convention and offers a complex and generally sympathetic view of the working class, demonizing only those who serve as the violent arm of the establishment. Although made primarily for a counterculture audience, *Medium Cool* actually explores the world of the working class and those on the fringe of the working class with more subtlety than it explores the world of the counterculture. In this film, which offers a scathing critique of the media and its role in the desensitization of the masses to the violence that was being presented on TV screens nightly during the late 1960s, the counterculture actually serves as a backdrop for subplots that explore themes of poverty, race, and self-realization. While other youth/cult films of the time explore the gulf between the counterculture and the working class, generally privileging the counterculture at the expense of the working class, this film looks at both groups sympathetically and attempts to demonstrate commonalities between the two, emphasizing the exploitation of the working class and the counterculture by the “establishment.”

Before we explore these films and their depiction of the working class at a time when the counterculture was dominating headlines in the daily newspapers and on the nightly news, it is important to look at the movie industry and the mood of the nation as the decade of the 1960s marched towards the Nixon and later the Reagan years.

The 1950s were difficult for Hollywood as it attempted to find its way in a changing marketplace for entertainment. Television was keeping people at home; the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and Sen. Joe McCarthy were attacking real and perceived communists in Hollywood; and the studios were divesting themselves of their theaters as a result of the Paramount decision in 1948. Weekly attendance at movies dropped from a high of 90 million in 1946 to 46 million in 1956. Great movie houses, abandoned by the industry, were crumbling in the inner cities. An explosion in population drove many to the suburbs, and the industry was in a poor position to follow its audience because of the high cost of land in the suburbs (Paul Monaco 40). The industry tried a variety of technical gimmicks—cinerama, cinemascope, and even 3-D films—and also got a lift from the new phenomenon brought on by the automobile age, the Drive-In Theater. The industry also fought back with content, taking on controversial subject matter that TV could not address, and with scope, bringing the epic to the screen with films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben-Hur* (1959). By the end of the decade, the industry was seeing some results for its efforts, some stabilization, but the number of domestic tickets sold continued to drop. From 46 million a week in 1956, the number of tickets sold plummeted to about 20 million a week by 1970 (Monaco 40).

It should be noted that at this time, particularly in the early 1960s, American studios were looking more and more to Europe to help heal the ailing film industry. Foreign markets had become increasingly vital to Hollywood in the late 1950s as the last of the studios divested themselves of their theaters and the coercive practices of block and blind booking became a thing of the past. (When they controlled production, distribution, and exhibition, studios could dictate what films an independent theater would show—creating a market for

its B-movies.) As Paul Monaco writes, “By the late 1950s, that reality pointed toward the major studios increasingly placing their emphasis on distribution and thinking more globally.” He also notes that foreign revenues for the Hollywood majors surpassed domestic revenues for the first time in 1958 and continued that trend through the 1960s (10)

The next step was to increase foreign production of films in what was called “runaway production,” a practice encouraged by foreign national subsidies to studios that chose to film in overseas locations rather than in Hollywood. In the early 1960s, responding to the economic climate and the growing importance of foreign ticket sales, American studios partnered with international studios to produce films overseas. By 1960, 40 percent of American productions were shot overseas (Monaco 14). This served the dual purpose of extending Hollywood’s influence in the world market and reducing production costs by becoming less labor-intensive and avoiding paying union salaries to members of the Hollywood film industry. The artistic argument for location shooting was that the post-World War II audience was no longer satisfied with the look of films shot on Hollywood back lots. American filmgoers insisted on realistic settings, the industry said. Monaco believes this argument was problematic because some films were not affected at all by being shot in foreign locations—the “Spaghetti Westerns” for example, were wildly popular despite being shot in Italy instead of the American West—while others, like *Lolita*, were negatively affected because they failed to visually convey the essence of America because of their foreign locales (15).

The underlying motive was economic, however, and this issue became most apparent when 3,400 workers were laid off by Hollywood studios in March of 1960. This led to labor unrest and congressional hearings, but little was actually done. Eventually, production began

to move back to the States when foreign shooting became less profitable and more problematic, as language barriers, location costs, and less competent foreign work crews added to costs. As Monaco writes, “The economics of runaway production were complex, for it soon became apparent to the industry that in the long run there was no guarantee that shooting a film where labor costs were lower necessarily reduced the production’s total cost” (15).

Along with the shifting of a significant amount of production overseas in the late fifties and early sixties, Hollywood continued to look for other ways to survive and flourish in the new climate. Domestically, Hollywood’s fortunes turned twice in the 1960s. As the decade began, the industry was still recovering from the three key crises of the previous decade—HUAC, the Paramount decision, and TV. Of the three, television proved to be the most problematic as it continued to keep people away from the theaters. With the marketing of color TV, the concern in the industry only grew. But despite these ongoing concerns, the film industry was able to survive through revenues generated by blockbuster films like *The Sound of Music* (1965) and the James Bond series, as well as low-budget films geared towards specific niche audiences. But, as David J. Londoner notes, the same three developments that allowed the industry to raise its profits throughout the middle years of the 1960s—blockbusters, new studios, and an expanded relationship with television—proved to be drags on the industry by the end of the decade (Londoner 606).

The industry continued to invest in big-budget blockbuster films, many of them musicals, to pull viewers away from televisions and into theaters. These “road show pictures,” as David Bordwell refers to them because of the industry’s decision to play them on a single screen in major cities for months on end before a general release, were high-risk

ventures that gambled on significant returns on a large initial investment. While some succeeded, like *The Sound of Music*, others like *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962) failed miserably, contributing to a restructuring of the industry by the end of the decade (2). As Mark Harris notes:

These . . . road show pictures were long, large, and lavish. Handled wrong, these movies could turn into *Cleopatra* [which cost a then-record \$40 million and was universally panned] or *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Done right, they were *The Ten Commandments* or *Ben-Hur*, money machines that could often play theatrically for more than two years before exhausting their audience. (45)

Producer Ned Tanen argues, in fact, that two of the decade's most profitable films, *The Sound of Music* and *Easy Rider*, almost destroyed the industry because attempts to copy their successes generally produced commercial disasters (like *Dr. Doolittle*, 1967) or poor imitations (like *The Strawberry Statement*, 1970) (Paul Monaco 4). The impact of *Easy Rider* on the industry will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

A second development that initially pumped money into Hollywood but eventually disrupted the supply/demand relationship in the film industry was the creation of three new film companies: CBS, ABC, and National General. By overpaying for properties and stars, while also overpaying theater owners to exhibit the films, the three new players eventually drove up production and distribution costs after bringing an initial burst of energy and revenue to the industry (Londoner 607).

A third development was the leasing of recent and relatively recent films to television, which clamored for Hollywood films because of their popularity on the small screen. By the mid-1960s, the *Movie of the Week* was a popular staple on several broadcast

networks. While this phenomenon proved to be profitable for a while, initially bringing in \$150,000 for a lease that permitted two showings within three years and later bringing in upwards of \$800,000 per film, the TV market eventually dried out because of saturation, and the expected (and budgeted) revenues plunged.

These three developments were devastating to the industry. According to Londoner, the three new players, ABC, CBS, and National General, collectively lost more than \$80 million and “Hollywood nearly collapsed” (607). Leonard Quart and Albert Auster go even farther: “By the end of the decade the studios were no longer interested in making films, they had assumed merely the marketing and financial end of the process” (Auster 73). David Bordwell notes that the “huge losses” by the studios led to their takeover by conglomerates “bearing mysterious names like Gulf & Western [which bought Paramount in 1966] and Transamerica Corp. [which bought United Artists the following year].” He adds, “Feature filmmaking continued to hemorrhage money—by some estimates, as much as a half a billion dollars between 1969 and 1972” (2).

During the decade of the 1960s, the number of tickets bought at domestic theaters dropped from a high of 1.39 billion in 1960 to 1.03 billion in 1965 and a low of 912 million in 1969. Box office receipts rose only from \$956 million in 1960 to \$1.4 billion in 1969 despite a more than doubling of the average cost of a ticket (Bordwell 194-203). As Robert Sklar writes, “After most of the major motion picture companies suffered severe financial losses in 1969 and 1970, one thing was clear: the old ways of film marketing and distribution no longer worked to their advantage” (323). With the industry in debt and with the box office stagnant, it became clear that Hollywood would have to tap into new markets. The success of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn) and *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols) in 1967—*The*

Graduate actually grossed more than \$100 million domestically, almost five times the domestic gross of *Bonnie and Clyde*, but did not become the cultural phenomenon that the latter film did (Bordwell 201)—and films like *Bullitt* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, provided a potential answer. As discussed in the Introduction, films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) in the mid-1960s demonstrated to studios that a youth market was eager to go to the theater if filmmakers would provide the right kind of entertainment. They also showed that the working class—whether in a period piece about Great Depression outlaws or in a more contemporary tale about a decorated war veteran turned vandal—could serve as temporary surrogates for the counterculture while Hollywood figured out how to portray the actual counterculture on screen.

Had Hollywood been more astute in their observations during the early and mid-1960s, however, they may have come to this conclusion several years earlier. The Elvis Presley vehicles during the early and mid-1960s, the low-budget beach party movies with Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello (1963-1965), and more artistic films like the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) showed that a youth audience was there to be tapped. In the mid-1960s, Roger Corman, through American International Pictures, not only tapped this audience but also showed the industry a new way to market and distribute films. At its peak, AIP was producing twenty-five feature films a year, more than the Hollywood major studios. As Monaco notes, Corman's *The Wild Angels* (1967), the precursor to *Easy Rider* and a vehicle for Peter Fonda, Nancy Sinatra, and Bruce Dern, not only won critical acclaim overseas by being accepted at the Venice Film Festival, but also proved to be strong at the box office. Corman called these films "protest films," but, as Monaco notes, critics dismissed them as "motorcycle flicks" while Hollywood condemned them as "unpatriotic" (28). The

contrast between Corman's view of the films and the view of the Hollywood establishment is important because it mirrored the clash of the nascent counterculture and the greater "establishment" in regards to the Vietnam War and other cultural issues of the time.

The template for producing films quickly, inexpensively, and for a youth audience was there to be copied, but Hollywood did not immediately catch on. As Monaco notes, Hollywood recognized that a new audience was emerging—the popularity of the European "art film" in urban areas and on college campuses was one sign—but did not know how to respond. The industry could not decide whether reproducing the art film was the answer to attract greater audiences or whether "the emerging American film culture was better represented through a blending of modified Hollywood formulas served up with more sensationalistic effects" (44-45). Hollywood didn't realize at the time that "the low-budget films of Roger Corman . . . best defined the directions in which feature films were going after the mid-1960s" (45). (This could have been at least partially due to the nature of the film business—a project can often take several years in pre-production, production, and post-production before coming to the screen, and deals are often signed many years in advance. But it does not fully explain why Hollywood failed to earlier recognize that a potentially lucrative youth audience was out there waiting for films that spoke to it.) Corman also had lessons to teach traditional Hollywood about marketing and distribution. Only later, however, with the success of *Easy Rider* by Corman protégés Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, did Hollywood get at least part of the message. The final lesson about marketing was not absorbed until the re-release of *Billy Jack* by another AIP alum, Tom Laughlin, in 1973 (27-28). The *Billy Jack* phenomenon will be discussed later in this chapter.

As Quart and Auster note, changing mores brought on by social movements and court rulings on obscenity also opened the door to a new kind of filmmaking, one that would appeal in both form and content to a younger, hipper audience. This new approach allowed Hollywood to tap into the youth audience that had been identified with the mainstream success of 1967 films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate* and *Cool Hand Luke*. “The deviant lifestyles and political ideas of the young, though often exploited and adulterated by Hollywood, still had to be dealt with, especially since they had begun to make up the largest portion of the cinema audience” (Auster 73). Looking back on the 1960s, Paul Monaco writes that the competition from television and foreign art films, as well as the rapidly shifting cultural and demographic makeup of the country, created unprecedented challenges for Hollywood. He adds:

One might be tempted to speculate on how Hollywood would have fared with its recovery and redirection in a less highly charged period of change, but such speculation is counter-historical. For the American feature film . . . these years were difficult indeed. (4)

During the mid- and late 1960s, Hollywood was also responding to a new era of permissiveness brought on by challenges to the Production Code, which had been in effect for more than three decades. Foreign films of the 1960s, not bound by the code, contained more mature content and dealt with more mature themes—clearly an attraction for the youth crowd. This put pressure on Hollywood to develop films of equal maturity, both thematically and visually. Films like *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), which, counter to the code, did not punish young, illicit lovers for their sexual indiscretions, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, which ignored the code with its sympathetic look at criminals, overt critique of American society,

and extreme violence, led to the demise of the code in 1968 and its replacement by the modern ratings system (Monaco 56-62). Hollywood then turned its attention to films that would attract the massive baby boom generation. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner write, “Films like *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Easy Rider* redefined the prevailing representations of the world for many young people, offering touchstones and providing points of reference for constructing alternatives to the conformist ethos of the preceding era” (8).

To appeal to the youth audience in the late 1960s, however, a particular point of view generally had to be embraced. Although *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *The Graduate* did not directly address the counterculture, they did address the sense of alienation felt by a generation of youths who were embracing the counterculture. A logical step was to look for films that addressed the cultural upheaval in the country.¹ When these stories of the “culture wars” came to the screen, they almost always came from a Left perspective and generally privileged the counterculture point of view. Films are generally about action, motion, and point of view, and the action that Hollywood was most interested in portraying in the youth films of the final years of the 1960s was the action taking place on college campuses and on the streets of major cities. The Vietnam War was not yet the subject of films (unless one considers John Wayne’s paean to militarism, *The Green Berets*, released in 1968), but it was almost always a subtext in them. Vietnam War films would come later when the war issue was not quite as raw. The point of view Hollywood was most interested in proffering to a nascent youth audience in the late sixties was the anti-establishment point of view. Hollywood, having witnessed disastrous box office performances by expensive studio films like *Dr. Doolittle* (1967), *Hello Dolly* (1969), and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970),

which attempted to repeat the success of *The Sound of Music* and almost bankrupted Twentieth Century Fox (Balio 446), turned to young directors and new material to shock itself out of its doldrums.

As Hollywood struggled through the 1960s and tried to adapt to economic challenges and the new marketplace, it was not alone. Virtually every institution in the nation was struggling to find its bearings in the tumultuous time, and tensions rose between various groups and classes because of the challenge to the dominant ideology on several fronts. College campuses were rife with demonstrations about an unpopular war; city governments and their police were the targets of protests and riots in the inner city as the Civil Rights movement began to evolve into a Black Power movement; women were burning bras to protest a patriarchal society; and flower children were taking to the streets of Haight-Ashbury and Greenwich Village—and later to communes—to drop out of a society they viewed as materialistic and corrupt.

While these protests of various sorts were taking place, primarily involving the sons and daughters of the privileged classes, working-class people across the nation—not unlike Hollywood—were trying to make sense of their changing world. Tensions between the counterculture movements and the white working class—tensions that would graphically come to the screen in the late 1960s—began to bubble to the surface, with several incidents of confrontations between war protesters and blue collar workers reported during the time. Morris Dickstein, a graduate assistant at Columbia University during the late 1960s and later a professor there and at Queens College, put it this way: “It was one of the ironies of the sixties that protest was so much a middle-class phenomenon, while the children of the

working class, who were less likely to have the protection of college deferments, were actually dying in the war” (257-258).

This resentment also surfaced in confrontations between police and counterculture protesters, with the Chicago “police riot” during the 1968 Democratic Convention the most obvious example. As members of the working class, many police came to the confrontations with an ideological axe to grind. Dickstein witnessed the tenor of the confrontation between the police and white, middle class protesters during the famous Columbia University demonstrations of 1967. The police, he said, tended to show more restraint when dealing with black protesters at Columbia conducting a civil rights protest than with the middle-class white students who were simultaneously protesting the war: “Though personal frustration and resentment undoubtedly played their part, there was clearly an explosion of class anger at the whole elite institution and at frivolous middle-class kids who were squandering an educational opportunity that they and their children would never have” (258).

As economic times worsened, this tension only worsened, caused at least in part by President Lyndon Johnson’s refusal to raise taxes after 1965 to pay for the Vietnam War. Although the effects of this error did not surface immediately, it was clear by the end of the decade that an economy that had fueled a steady rise in American living standards since World War II was slowing dramatically:

According to some economists, it was Johnson’s failure to press for a tax increase early in 1967—his refusal to admit that we actually were fighting a full-scale war—that led to the first waves of inflation and finally, with the help of the oil cartel, to the disastrous combination of inflation, recession, and unemployment that hit the country so hard by the fall of 1973. (Dickstein 271)

Tax increases had come previously, in 1965, to fund social programs and the initial escalation of the Vietnam War. This tax hit the working class and the “middle sector” the hardest, according to Gus Tyler, assistant president of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. The working class, through the Democratic Party, had supported the war and the new social programs, but now it was paying the brunt of the costs for both. As Tyler notes, “Between 1965 and 1969, the buying power of the worker was in steady decline—despite sizable wage increases. The pay envelope was being chewed up by inflation and taxation” (203).

This sudden reversal of fortune for the American economy caught some by surprise. As late as the late 1960s, futurists were predicting a reduction in the work week because of increased automation, and some in the middle- (and upper-) class counterculture and feminist movements were exploring how this new age of less work and more leisure would affect their lives. One of the noted feminists who weighed in at the time was Shulamith Firestone. “We will be beyond arguments about who is ‘bringing home the bacon’—no one will be bringing it home, because no one will be ‘working.’ . . . Machines thus could act as the perfect equalizer, obliterating the class system based on exploitation of labor,” Firestone wrote in 1970 (183).

But the working class was not operating under the same delusion. Members of the “middle sector” had been feeling the crunch for years. “By 1969 it [the boom] was clearly over. The war produced an inflation that eliminated most income gains. In 1969 some fully employed workers had less real income than in 1968” (420). This crunch, William O’Neill writes, was exacerbated by Nixon administration fiscal policies that cut spending, tightened the money supply, and subsequently stopped economic growth, which led to rising

unemployment and increased tensions. As O'Neill writes, "A recession could hardly heal the wounds prosperity had failed to treat" (420).

As the 1970s approached, the working class was feeling the squeeze from above and below. From above, the government they had trusted had sent their sons to war while the sons of the middle and upper classes benefited from deferment after deferment to avoid service. Closer to home, the government's mismanagement of the economy had put many of the working class on unemployment lines. From below, the poor, in the eyes of the working class, were benefiting from their tax dollars that funded new social programs established in the mid-1960s by the Johnson Administration during the final years of the boom. Social programs that seemed necessary to most when they were enacted in good times—or at least tolerable to most except those on the far right—became a source of resentment as times turned bad. Gus Tyler put it this way in 1970: "The worker feels that he is paying triple: he pays for his own way; he pays for the poor; he pays for the rich. He is ready to do the first; he resists the others" (203).

As all of this was going on in the country, Hollywood was looking for answers to its own economic woes. With Richard Nixon now firmly ensconced in the White House and the nation clearly turning to the right, Hollywood, despite keeping up appearances, was experiencing its worst economic crisis since the years immediately following the Paramount decision in 1948. "One had to read the trade papers or the financial pages to grasp the enormity of the Hollywood troubles," Sklar says (286). After refusing to address the controversial social issues of the 1960s in a direct way for most of the decade, Hollywood in the late 1960s turned to the youth market and/or independent filmmaking to solve its economic woes.

When *Easy Rider* came to the screens in 1969 and achieved success far beyond Hollywood's expectations, the film industry belatedly discovered a model upon which to expand its audience. It also discovered a protagonist—the counterculture. The counterculture became the subject du jour as Hollywood began to see the benefit of marketing inexpensive films about youths to youths, labeled counterculture youth or youth/cult films. *Easy Rider* began a brief run of Hollywood productions that directly addressed the counterculture, films that presented youth angst, campus unrest, and anti-establishment themes to the expanding youth audience. But in doing so—in catering to a youth audience with films about and generally sympathetic to the counterculture—Hollywood also turned away from films about the working class. While the number of films with working-class protagonists had declined in the 1960s, as noted in the Introduction, the working class became even rarer as protagonists in Hollywood films of the late 1960s. Worse yet, when working class characters did appear in counterculture-themed films of the late 1960s, they most often appeared as marginalized antagonists to the counterculture.

Easy Rider

Easy Rider is a journey movie and a buddy movie, but primarily it is movie about the counterculture. Arriving on American screens just as the counterculture movement was cresting, the film established the binary of the counterculture vs. the working class and set the tone for the portrayal of working class characters in many youth/cult films that followed. As we will see, while not all depictions of the working class in the film are negative, the lasting impression of the working class is one of an intolerant and potentially dangerous force. Because this film spawned many imitators, and because it was the first widely

distributed film to truly privilege the counterculture over the working class, it forms the foundation for the discussion of film in this chapter. As noted above, the film is more nuanced about its portrayal of the working class and the counterculture than an initial viewing might indicate. Although the lasting image of the working class is negative—it is responsible for the murders of Wyatt and Billy, the film’s protagonists—other examples of working-class tolerance are on display in the film. Wyatt and Billy, on the other hand, while presented as victims of senseless murder, are also shown to be complicit in their own downfall. For example, they claim to want to escape a repressive society, but they embrace its materialism and, particularly in the case of Billy, adopt an antagonistic posture towards it in general and the working class in particular. They become victims of intolerance, but their own intolerance and mocking of society—Billy’s in particular—often adds to the tension between themselves and the society they claim to want to leave behind. But, because of its success and its depiction of the counterculture vs. working-class binary, *Easy Rider* remains the landmark film that opened the door for more youth/cult films to exploit the differences, rather than the commonalities, between the counterculture and the working class.

Easy Rider is the story of two small-time drug dealers who make one final sale and ride off to find Mardi Gras on customized Harleys. The audience isn’t given any exposition, so the characters Wyatt and Billy can only be defined by their initial action in the film. The lack of exposition is reminiscent of Italian neorealism of the post-World War II era, which specialized in presenting a “slice of life” rather than a story with a traditional Hollywood arc. As Robert Ray notes, the popularity of these “realistic” depictions of life was a first indication to Hollywood that its “homogenous mass audience . . . was disappearing” (138). Although *Easy Rider* came two decades after the apex of the neorealism movement and much

had changed in the international world of film in the interim, the early scenes of the film and their lack of exposition and sparse dialogue demonstrated to the audience that this was not traditional Hollywood fare.

Although a stylistically experimental film—with flash forwards, jump cuts, and flash cuts borrowed from French New Wave and American underground film, and a general rejection of classic continuity editing—star and co-writer Peter Fonda cited inspiration for the film from the John Ford classic *The Searchers* (1956), a western in which John Wayne searches for many years to rescue his kidnapped niece. The difference, Fonda says, is in the motivation and mode of transportation of the searchers: “They’re [Wyatt and Billy] not looking for Natalie Wood [who played Wayne’s niece], they’re looking for America and they’re on choppers” (qtd. in Paul Monaco 188). As Robin Wood notes, *Easy Rider* helped to inspire a cycle of “buddy films” in the 1970s with its journey mode, and many of these films highlighted working-class protagonists. One of these films, *Scarecrow* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1973), will be discussed in the next chapter. In all of these films, many of which deal with working-class angst, a search of sorts takes place. Wood writes, “It seems to me that the basic motivating premise of the 70s buddy movie is not the presence of the male relationship but the absence of home” (201). It is this home that Wyatt and Billy set out to find in their quest from California to New Orleans, a home they never find as their journey ends prematurely with two shotgun blasts. But it should be noted that this “absence of home” that Wood writes about was not new to film—the same absence is explored in *The Searchers*, *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), and other films. The exploration of this theme demonstrates that, while *Easy Rider* was experimental in form and style and a product of its time, it was not a complete departure from the classic Hollywood style of storytelling. *Easy Rider*, in fact,

may be called a pastiche of several classic genres. As Monaco writes in *American Film Now*, “*Easy Rider*, by all accounts one of the most significant movies of the decade, was a Chase-Caper-Road-Youth-Drug Buddy Film” (56).

Easy Rider also takes the classic Western and reverses it. While the westerns of John Ford and Howard Hawks capture an America and its settlers moving west to explore the seemingly ever-expanding frontier, Billy and Wyatt—who clearly share the names of two icons of the West, Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp, for ironic purposes—head east in their own quest for an America no longer available in the West because of the closing of the frontier. As Monaco notes in *History of the American Cinema: The Sixties*, “With a narrative structure built on a journey east from Los Angeles toward a destination called Heaven, Florida, *Easy Rider* has been said to bitterly observe the death of frontier America as part of its symbolism” (188). Billy and Wyatt’s journey takes them through the Southwest and a handful of adventures before ending, with finality, in Louisiana after a visit to Mardi Gras. Along the way, the two visit a rancher and his young family, stop off at a commune to drop off a hitchhiker, and spend the night in a Texas jail with the rarest of sightings in that part of the country—an ACLU attorney with aristocratic ties, George Hanson, played by Jack Nicholson in a role that earned him an Academy Award nomination. The journey ends tragically, however, as all three men are brutally murdered by “rednecks” who, to paraphrase Hanson, fear free men.

Irony is on display in early scenes of the film, but because Billy and Wyatt have not yet spoken a word to each other and the audience doesn’t know them except for their act of securing and re-selling cocaine, the irony does not come to light until later. Their decision after their big drug sale to buy new bikes; Wyatt’s decision to buy a flashy leather outfit and

helmet with stars and stripes, demonstrating their willingness to embrace materialism; and the very idea that one can buy freedom and still remain unencumbered by one's possessions contradicts their unstated goal of seeking a life free of everyday constraints. As the film proceeds, it becomes clear that some of these "things" in their lives don't allow them to completely escape the society they wish to leave behind. These "things" go beyond the material, too. One—again, for Billy in particular—is an antagonism towards the working class that they, particularly Billy, view as ignorantly complicit with the establishment. What they don't realize is that this antagonism prevents them from seeing the common exploitation of both the working class and the counterculture by the establishment.

Easy Rider begins with the sound and then the picture of two bikers rolling up to a Mexican bar and what looks to be the office of a junkyard located behind it. The two bikers, Wyatt (Fonda) and Billy (Hopper), are atop inexpensive motorcycles and dressed in casual clothing appropriate to riding. Billy wears western garb, with a buckskin coat and floppy buckskin hat, while Wyatt is dressed in jeans and a jacket. After the two men purchase a kilo of cocaine from the Mexican dealer—with only a few lines of Spanish spoken between them—the film cuts directly to another location with a low angle shot of Wyatt looking up at a plane that flies low over his head. As the camera pulls back to show Wyatt and Billy leaning against a pickup truck on the edge of an airport, the front end of a Rolls Royce pulls into the foreground. A young, affluent dandy, played by Phil Spector, exits the car, and "the deal" takes place. Here we have several symbols of mobility—the airplane, the truck, and the Rolls Royce— that provide hope that maybe a frontier of some sort is still available. The setting, while chosen for its privacy within the narrative, also represents the possibility of physical mobility; just as the covered wagon of John Ford represented movement west, the

airfield and its airplanes represent the possibility of movement in any direction. Both the covered wagon and the airplane represent the potential escape from the mundane, from the lives of quiet desperation Henry David Thoreau mused about. The Rolls is a more problematic symbol. While it symbolizes affluence and another kind of freedom—the freedom of upward mobility—it can also represent decadence, gluttony, and unchecked materialism. This dual meaning is played out in the film as Billy and Wyatt achieve financial security through the sale of the drugs, but at what cost?

The song “Goddamn the Pusher Man” plays as the next cut shows us a low angle shot of a new bike. The choice of the song is interesting because, if taken literally, it is damning the two characters whom the audience is being asked to identify with as protagonists. As the film proceeds, the spirit of the song proves to be prescient. The camera seems to caress the bike, showing its various features in homage to American technology and the power and freedom that it putatively represents. Wyatt has traded in his old bike—and old life—for one that he believes will take him where he wants to go. But, like the Rolls in the previous scene, it represents conspicuous consumption more than freedom. It places him firmly in the center of the consumer society he wants to escape. As the film plays out, this sense of freedom experienced by the consumption of technology proves to be an illusion as the bike leads not to freedom, but to death. As Jean Baudrillard theorizes in *The Consumer Society*, any attempt to purchase “freedom” and to set oneself off as an individual actually serves to perpetuate the closed, materialistic system Wyatt putatively is trying to escape. Baudrillard writes:

The consumer experiences his distinctive behaviours as freedom, as aspiration, as choice. His experience is not one of being *forced to be different*, of obeying a code. . . . In the very act of scoring his points in the order of

differences, each individual maintains that order and therefore condemns

himself only ever to occupy a relative position in it. (61 [Baudrillard's italics])

As the camera pans up to the seat of the motorcycle, the audience sees Wyatt tucking money into a plastic tube and hiding it in the gas tank of the motorcycle. Wyatt is now dressed in leather pants and vest—a further capitulation to materialism—and his motorcycle is painted with the stars and stripes, as is his helmet. This new look prompts Billy to nickname Wyatt “Captain America.” While Billy’s use of the term is tinged with irony, I do not believe the look itself is intended by Wyatt as an ironic statement. Wyatt seems to be saying that America is supposed to be a land of the free, and his new bike and clothes seem to say that that freedom is, or should be, available to everyone, even the drug-dealing biker who chooses to “retire” in Florida. America is not just for you, he seems to be saying—it is for everyone. But he is also implying that freedom can be purchased when in reality he is maintaining the order Baudrillard writes about and is simply securing a position within that order.

Before the two bikers roar off, Wyatt tosses his wrist watch to the ground in a naïve gesture designed to demonstrate his freedom from time. I say naïve because it quickly becomes clear that he and Billy cannot free themselves from the constraints of time any more than the next man or woman can. Although Wyatt preaches patience to Billy throughout the film—Billy is always in a rush to get to a “destination” while Wyatt is more interested in the journey—time, and the times, eventually catch up to them as they travel across the country to make it to Mardi Gras on time, only to find tragedy the following day.

After the tossing of the watch, the two bikers roll off on their newly customized Harleys to the driving beat of Steppenwolf’s “Born to Be Wild.” Symbolically, the road and the future open up before them, but if one pays close attention one can see, and hear, that

everything may not be what it appears to be. As the audience gets to know the two bikers in the following scenes, the leather outfit, sparkling new bikes, and even their attitudes become incongruous with their spoken intentions. Wyatt, for example, has chosen to free himself from the constraints of time, but he has also bought into the commodity world that equates time and money by purchasing the new bike and expensive clothing. This fissure in Wyatt is never quite sutured. The stars and stripes on his bike and helmet are also problematic. By co-opting these traditional patriotic and conservative symbols to stake his claim to a piece of the American Dream, he has drawn a clear line between himself and those who pursue that dream in a traditional way. In this way, he has placed a target on his back at a time when tensions between the counterculture and the working class are running high, and he has set himself up as a potential victim of this civil war.

The difference in the two lead characters is made clear during the first night that they spend on the road following the major drug sale that finances their future. While Billy expresses excitement about going to Florida as they rest in front of a campfire, exclaiming that they have “made it,” Wyatt is more introspective—so much so that Billy comments on his quiet demeanor. Wyatt responds, in 1960s jargon, “I’m just getting my thing together,” a phrase that would have resonated with many young in the audience. This scene also establishes Wyatt’s point of view as dominant. Throughout the film, through flash-cuts and pans from what appears to be Wyatt’s point of view, the audience is invited into Wyatt’s thought process.ⁱⁱ This is not true of Billy, whose perspective is never foregrounded. The campfire scene ends with a flash-cut that shows what appears to be light shining through the rafters of an old barn. Like all the flash-cuts in the film, these look like isolated frames on the screen that appear to the viewer almost like the opening and closing of a camera’s shutter on

the image. This is the first of the flash-cuts, and it, like the others, foreshadows future events in the film. In this case, the flash-cut simply foreshadows their awakening the following morning on that same campsite adjacent to the barn. Later flash-cuts anticipate their demise. Although the flash cuts often appear to come from Wyatt's perspective because they generally follow a shot of him, there is no evidence that Wyatt is clairvoyant or that he actually has visions. For example, he never discusses the content of these flash-cuts with Billy or chooses another path due to the content of the flash-cuts. The flash-cuts seem to serve two purposes—the juxtaposition of the flash-cuts preceded by a shot of Wyatt (which is generally the case) encourages the audience to sympathize more with Wyatt's point of view; also, the flash-cuts seem to pull the two protagonists forward in the story, lending an almost fatalistic sense to the proceedings, as if this journey is beyond Wyatt's or Billy's control.

While the use of flash-cuts and other visual devices give the film an experimental look, the sound of pulsating rock music on the soundtrack is one of the first hints that this is not just your older brother's biker film. Throughout the film, the rock soundtrack helps tell the tale of the journey of Wyatt and Billy. On the screen, the soundtrack adds vitality and a contemporary, rebellious feel to the film. Off the screen, it helped attract and entertain a youthful audience, and also drove the signature Steppenwolf song up the charts. The rock and roll soundtrack also did another thing. It established the counterculture as the protagonists in the film. With every protagonist comes an antagonist, however, and in this film it was destined to be the working class. An early scene in the film, which comes just before the first night in the open, sets the tone.

After what appears to be the first day of their journey (before their campfire conversation), Wyatt and Billy pull up to a roadside motel with a vacancy sign blinking.

Billy beeps his new bike horn several times as the two wait outside the office door for someone to respond. As the motel manager steps into the night in response to Billy's "beep," Wyatt asks if he has a room for the night. Without a word, the manager turns away and re-enters the office. Wyatt tries again, "Hey, you gotta room? Hey man, you gotta room?" The manager has closed the door behind him. In his first line of dialogue in the film, Billy holds up his middle finger and yells, "You asshole," and the two bikers roll off. The first response from most viewers is to sympathize with the bikers, who, although not exemplary characters, are the central characters in the film. But to do that is to deny their actions, particularly Billy's, as they pull up to the office. Billy clearly shows little respect for the manager when he beeps several times instead of walking to the door. The manager, on the other hand, shows no respect for Wyatt when he refuses to even respond to his question, which was asked in a business-like, if not friendly, manner. While the sympathy of the audience, particularly a young audience, is likely to be with the counterculture heroes, this interaction is emblematic of a larger issue. This inability of the bikers and manager to communicate establishes a relationship of tension between the counterculture and working class in the film and portends the tragic events to come.

This tension is quickly, but only temporarily, dissipated the following day, however, when another encounter with the working class results in a different outcome. The animosity demonstrated between the counterculture, in the guise of Wyatt and Billy, and the working class, in the form of the motel manager, is absent the following day as the two travelers engage a struggling rancher and his family after Wyatt's bike has suffered a flat tire. In this scene, Wyatt pushes his bike up to the rancher as he works near his barn and asks if he can stop to repair his flat. The rancher is a 40-something white man who welcomes the two

bikers without hesitation. He is clearly a hard-working man who is struggling to scratch out a living and raise a large family on a small farm/ranch in the Southwest. A little later, in an interesting composition, a long, deep focus shot of the inside of the barn captures the rancher and another man in the lower left of the frame shoeing a horse and Wyatt in the top right of the frame fixing the flat. While some see the shot as simply a juxtaposition of nature and technology, it can also be seen as a visual representation of how two cultures, one represented by the working-class rancher and the other by a leather-clad member of the counterculture, can co-exist in time and space.

After Wyatt fixes the tire, he and Billy are invited to dinner with the rancher, his immigrant (Mexican-American) wife, and their children. As they sit down to eat, the rancher politely asks Billy to remove his hat while they say grace. Billy nods and removes it. This polite exchange and the honoring of another's wishes and traditions contrasts starkly with the earlier clash between Billy and the motel manager. It is also here when Wyatt, the more thoughtful and introspective of the two and by all accounts the more tolerant, extends the olive branch to the working class by engaging the rancher in meaningful conversation, demonstrating what could be if the two cultures took time to communicate.

Ironically, this sincere attempt to communicate is first demonstrated in a brief failure to communicate, when the rancher doesn't understand what Wyatt means when he says he and Billy are from "L.A." As the rancher looks at him quizzically, Wyatt explains, "Los Angeles." At that explanation, the rancher nods and opens up to the two men, remarking that he was on his way to California when he "stopped off here and, well, you know how it goes." They, of course, don't know "how it goes" because they have never been able to find "home." Their quest, in fact, will end in an "absence of home," a theme that repeats itself in

the other three films we will discuss in this chapter: *Billy Jack*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Medium Cool*. But this brief exchange between Wyatt and the rancher breaks the ice and begins to build a bond between the two very different men. When Wyatt then compliments the rancher on his nice "spread," using the language of the American West and the genre western in an effort to reach out to his host, the rancher is at first unsure of his sincerity or meaning. But Wyatt persists: "It's not every man can live off the land, you know. Do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud." Although it is clear the rancher is not familiar with the argot of the counterculture, he clearly gets the message. Again, the two men have bonded at a deeper level as the biker on his way to find America seems to recognize something of America in the man and his family. In its simplicity, this exchange shows what America could be if this kind of exchange became the norm.

Stylistically, the conversation between the two men is generally presented in a two-shot or a one-shot with a pan, a common form throughout the film in lieu of the more traditional shot-reverse-shot. These techniques give the conversation scenes a more voyeuristic feel instead of presenting the shots and reaction shots from various characters' points of view, a break with classic continuity editing. They also have the effect of providing some distance between the audience and the protagonists, as does the paucity of dialogue between the protagonists in most of the film, along with the episodic nature of the film and the lack of exposition. The intention may well have been to limit our association with the protagonists in order to allow the audience to see their deaths at the end in a more clinical and less emotional way. This choice may have been Hopper's way of saying this is not a story about Billy and Wyatt—it is a story about America.

While criticized by some as already-dated 1960s jargon—*Newsweek*'s Joseph Morgenstern for one said he was “astounded” that he was touched by the film despite its being riddled with clichéd dialogue (Mordden 233)—this dinner conversation is telling on two fronts. First, it shows that the working class and the counterculture had more in common than either may have thought. As the upcoming scene at a “hippie” commune demonstrates, segments of the counterculture revered the earth and the natural life, a life the working-class rancher is living in a more traditional way. Second, it shows that the working class and counterculture could get along if they took the time to learn more about each other and were more tolerant of differences, allowing similarities to surface. The rancher, along with his large family, has offered food and hospitality to two strangers who have happened upon his farm riding supercharged motorcycles, sporting long hair and unshaven faces, choosing not to judge them by appearances alone. Wyatt, and Billy to a lesser extent, have expressed appreciation for his action, with Wyatt earnestly complimenting him about his choice to live a life in commune with the land. In a touch of irony, it is the rancher, having settled in the Southwest after failing to reach his intended destination of California, who is living off the land and shoeing horses as a “free” man while Wyatt and Billy are desperately searching for America and their abstract idea of freedom on two high-powered products of the modern commodity world.

This tension about the definition of freedom and the desire to be “free” takes on different shapes and meanings at different times in the film. Ultimately, the question becomes, “What is freedom?” Wyatt’s conversation with the rancher, as well as his demeanor at the farm, clearly indicates that he recognizes freedom, in one of its definitions, in the life of the rancher and his family. But other expressions of freedom in the film cross

over the line of self-expression to antagonism. Wyatt and Billy never seem to understand that one person's expression of personal freedom may infringe on another's ability to do the same—or may simply antagonize another group, as we will see in the upcoming parade scene. As time goes on their different manifestations of “freedom” lead Wyatt and Billy into situations that are not only dangerous, but ultimately deadly. The failure to anticipate or to fully understand the reactions of others to their expressions of freedom plays a significant role in their demise. Whether these decisions are made out of pure ignorance of the potential consequences or out of naivety about the world around them, or are simply spawned by euphoria over their newfound economic independence, is not clear. But when Wyatt and Billy encounter the working class later in the film, they don't encounter a tolerant, generous, hard-working man of the earth. They encounter southern bigots who represent the dark and dangerous underside of the working class.

Historian Bruce J. Schulman recounts that Dennis Hopper and his co-star Peter Fonda were subjected to violence in the South while shooting the film. “They had expected the taunts” for their long hair and outfits, Schulman noted, but they did not expect the level of violence they encountered. “Patrons in one bar jumped the longhaired filmmakers themselves,” Schulman said (19). In an interview on the *Easy Rider 40th Anniversary* DVD, Hopper acknowledges that the film crew experienced several run-ins with locals during their trip through the South. His experiences actually inspired him to choose a real sheriff and several other locals as actors to bring authenticity to the restaurant scene that foreshadows the killing of George Hanson. It is not clear whether the actual run-ins with southern bigots influenced the film's ending, but a quote by Hopper that appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* clearly indicates how he felt shortly after the film came to the screen. “Don't be scared, go and try to

change America,” Hopper concluded, “but if you’re going to wear a badge, whether it’s long hair or black skin, learn to protect yourself” (qtd. in Schulman 19).

At a time when the “other” was present in so many varieties—African-American, hippie, militant feminist, New Left, student protesters, etc.—many in the working class felt threatened. At the root of much of the antagonism between the working class and the various groups was the war that was claiming young working-class lives at an alarming rate. Despite the fact that these men were only actors and that the film was bringing revenue into the small town, the real working class antagonists could not see beyond their own fears, prejudices and anxieties. Encounters like this surely made it easier for Hopper and Fonda to later portray the working class as intolerant and violent, but their choice also made it easier for other filmmakers of youth/cult films to follow suit without providing a more nuanced look at the working class.

Another important sequence in the film is the commune episode. While more about middle-class youths and their quest for an unfettered life rather than the working class, this segment is important because it demonstrates that the “hippies” and the working class had more in common than they likely realized. As we will see, however, neither group seemed to recognize that at the time.

After Wyatt and Billy leave the rancher and his family, they pick up a long-haired hitchhiker on the road and agree to drop him off at a commune in Arizona. The cinematography here is striking as Laszlo Kovacs captures the color and majesty of the western landscape in a series of tracking shots and pans. The same iconic landscapes that appear in countless westerns of the 1940s and 1950s also appear here, again demonstrating the freedom of the open road and the connection between *Easy Rider* and the classic westerns

that came before it.ⁱⁱⁱ Billy's hyper personality and paranoia are on display throughout this sequence as he clearly does not warm to the new companion. Billy often rides behind Wyatt and his passenger wearing a look of disdain. Fearing at one point that the stranger will notice the money in Wyatt's gas tank when they stop at a gas station, he pulls Wyatt aside to express his concerns. Wyatt, as usual, serves as the voice of calm and reason. "He won't know what it is, man. . . . Everything is fine, Billy." Throughout the film Billy is anxious to reach their destination—Mardi Gras—or any destination. Anyone or anything that delays their progress becomes an irritant to him, and he complains to Wyatt or pouts alone to show his displeasure. Wyatt, on the other hand, seems content with experiencing the journey.

Before arriving at the commune, the three men spend the night at an Indian burial ground in what appears to be a cave. Flash-cuts foreshadow the night they will spend in the cave. Technically, the scene is shot primarily with available light from a campfire, and Kovacs again eschews shot-reverse-shot in favor of a deep focus shot of all three men in the frame, with Billy sitting behind the other two on a stone ridge in the cave. One-shots are often used when someone speaks, but the camera is generally situated in the foreground to capture the interaction from a more neutral, master shot perspective. These choices allow the audience to see the conversation as it develops without the camera commenting on the action or taking a particular character's point of view. They also give the conversation a realistic feel because the audience sees reactions in real time rather than through the eye of an editor. Billy's animosity towards their guest—and his anxiety to move on—contrasted with Wyatt's limitless patience, further explicates the character of the two protagonists. What is learned about the protagonists in this scene also lays groundwork for future events and the eventual demise of the main characters. When the three men eventually arrive at the commune—after

spending a night in the cave carrying on a rambling and occasionally incoherent conversation while passing “joints”—they are welcomed by a rag-tag group of hippies who are trying to survive in an almost desert-like setting.

Kovacs uses pans and tracking shots to introduce the members of the commune. In one particular scene, a 360-degree shot is used to individually show the faces of all the members as they sit in a circle and pray for a better growing season. In another scene, deep focus and wide-angle shots are used liberally in an attempt to show the open and yet intimate nature of communal living. Again, two-shots dominate as shot-reverse-shot is eschewed. The camera establishes no hierarchy within the “clan,” as the shots symbolically establish the democratic nature of the commune by choosing no favorites.

While both men eventually learn to enjoy the communal experience—with the help of two women—Wyatt, in particular, recognizes the importance in the commune of shared responsibilities and a willingness to work together for a common goal. At one point as he and Billy watch young men and women sewing seed in a rocky terrain, he turns to Billy and says, “They’re going to make it.” Nothing in this shot supports that conclusion—the land is barren, hard, and unwelcoming—but Wyatt believes the willingness to work together and pull in the same direction will allow this small group of middle-class city kids to conquer nature. He sees something here in these farming novices that he previously identified in the working-class rancher and his family—the willingness not only to work the land, but to work together to form a new kind of family. Unfortunately, he recognizes too late that this same kind of cooperation between the counterculture and the working class could have served to forge a different kind of future for America.

The democratic nature of the commune notwithstanding, there is no denying that this early commune still carried with it some baggage from the past—baggage also carried by the working class. Although the hippie commune has members of both sexes, along with children, it is an exclusively white and patriarchal society. As you enter the “home,” it is clear that the domestic duties are handled exclusively by the women. They are cooking and caring for the children as the men either stand around outside smoking marijuana and conversing or take part in sowing seed in the rocky landscape. Despite the lack of a clear structure of couples and traditional families, the domestic scene at the commune is not unlike the one at the working-class rancher’s “spread.” In both places, children run and play as men do “manly” things and women take care of the domestic chores. Based on reports of the time, this is an authentic depiction of a counterculture communal society in the late 1960s. As Robert McRuer writes, “[D]espite a supposed affinity with African American cultures . . . the counterculture was predominantly white and male. It was often, indeed, not only predominantly male, but openly sexist” (217). Although this attitude began to change in some communes after 1970 as a result of the women’s liberation movement, gender roles played a large part in early communes according to Timothy Miller:

More often than not communes were male-founded and male-dominated, and dominant men did not typically fall immediately into gender enlightenment in communal settings any more readily than they did elsewhere. Often gender roles tended to govern daily life and work. (344)

Ironically, this view of gender roles was clearly another area where the counterculture, the working class, and the dominant culture as a whole shared yet another—albeit negative—value.

The commune episode marks the high moment for Wyatt, Billy, and the counterculture in the film. Although it is clear to an objective outsider that this particular commune is doomed to failure, it still represents optimism that an alternative life can be forged. Just as the working-class rancher provides a positive picture of the working class, the naïve but hard-working commune inhabitants offer hope that one can construct a life outside the constrictions of society. After Wyatt and Billy leave the commune, their world becomes increasingly dangerous and their encounters with the working class become increasingly violent. In the scene directly following the commune episode, the two men engage in a miscalculation that begins their spiral downward, culminating in their murders on a quiet two-lane highway. While traveling through a small Texas town, they come upon a local parade and decide to join it on motorcycle. Based on their smiling faces, they see this as an innocent moment of self-expression. The locals see it differently. They consider it a mockery of their tradition—and while that is a reasonable assumption, it could also be interpreted as Wyatt and Billy’s way of trying on a basic level to connect with the “America” they are searching for, an America of hard-working people steeped in nostalgia for a simpler time. But the local police don’t see it that way, and the two men are arrested.

The first shot in the sequence cuts directly from the commune to a close-up of a tuba and the sound of parade music. This straight cut serves the purpose of taking Wyatt and Billy out of their world and dropping them into the middle of another that they are unfamiliar with. After a close-up of another brass instrument, a long shot of the parade fills the screen, followed by close-ups of the marching band and baton-twirling young women. Cutting quickly from shot to shot, the short sequence captures the flavor of a hometown parade. The warm weather and the presence of colorful banners imply that the parade is celebrating a

national holiday. As Billy and Wyatt join in, smiling and bobbing their heads, still seated and marching in tune to the music as they propel their bikes down the street sans motors, we suddenly hear a siren and a close-up of a police car. As the two bikers veer off to the left, a man on a horse tosses a lasso in their direction, symbolizing their capture and foreshadowing their treatment as “animals” who must be locked up to protect the community. The next shot is a close-up of Billy behind bars trying to talk his way out of the arrest for “parading without a permit.” While in jail, where they are referred to as “animals” by the local police (clearly a negative characterization of the working class), they meet George Hanson, a local attorney and scion of a prominent local family. Hanson helps them to make bail and decides to travel with them to Mardi Gras, a decision that he will not live to regret.

The decision to join the parade is yet another example of the two travelers’ inability to anticipate how others will react to their expressions of freedom. Because we are not privy to their decision-making process here, it is unclear whether they are ignorant, obstinate, or simply naïve. They are clearly outraged about being jailed—Billy in particular—but their only defense is a lie as Billy tries to convince the police that he and Wyatt are traveling performers. Whatever their motivation, this prank ultimately sets in motion a series of events that costs George Hanson his life. When they lose their own lives later, it is in part because they do not heed George’s advice.

The murders of Billy and Wyatt, as well as the murder of George Hanson, are foreshadowed in a haunting exchange between Billy and George as the three men share a campfire and a “joint” on their journey to Mardi Gras. The scene takes place only hours after the three men have been refused service at a small town Louisiana restaurant and subjected to the glares and sarcastic comments of a sheriff and some locals. After sitting at a table for

several minutes without being acknowledged by the management and absorbing a series of subtle and not-so-subtle barbs directed at them (“Looks like a bunch of rejects from a gorilla love-in,” etc.), they decide to leave. As they do, they are followed out to their bikes by a gaggle of high school girls who ask them for a ride—which they politely deny. Although this exchange is quick and innocent, it does not go unnoticed by the locals. As the three men leave, one of the locals turns to the sheriff and repeats something he had said earlier, “I still say they’re not going to make it to the Paris line.” This ominous statement portends George’s death in the following sequence.

Later that night, George, Wyatt, and Billy sit around the campfire on what appears to be the outskirts of town. During the conversation, which has moments of high comedy because of George’s introduction to marijuana—much of the comedy emanating from the fact that the men were, in fact, high at the time of the shooting, according to Fonda—Billy recalls the earlier incident when they were refused a room at the motel, claiming that the motel manager was afraid of them solely because of their appearance. He still fails to understand why his appearance has such a negative impact on the establishment, in this case represented by the working class. The following exchange casts a portentous cloud over the proceedings:

George: Oh, they’re not scared of you. They’re scared of what you represent to them.

Billy: Hey, man. All we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.

George: What you represent to them is freedom.

Billy: What the hell’s wrong with freedom, man? That’s what it’s all about.

George: Oh, yeah; that's right. That's what it's all about, all right. But talking about it and being it, that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare them.

Billy: Well, that don't make 'em runnin' scared.

George: No. It makes 'em dangerous.

This quote proves to be more than prescient, as the three are attacked that evening by ball-bat wielding "locals," leaving Wyatt and Billy injured and George dead from a cracked skull.

In the final scene of the film—George Hanson is already dead and Wyatt and Billy have completed their visit to Mardi Gras—two rednecks in a pickup truck pull alongside Billy and Wyatt on a two-lane Louisiana highway. The passenger pulls a shotgun from a gun rack and points it at Billy, telling the driver of the pickup that he wants to “scare the hell out of ‘em.” Billy responds with his middle finger, repeating his salute to the motel manager in the early scene. The gun goes off and Billy is shot, his bike and body left lying twisted on the road. It is unclear whether the shot was an instinctive reaction to the “finger,” the gun went off accidentally, or the passenger simply miscalculated a shot designed only to scare Billy. But the result is a twitching, dying body on the highway. It is then that the two rednecks realize they must now finish the job or risk leaving a witness behind. After Wyatt rides back to see how badly hurt Billy is, he hops onto his bike and says he's going for help, headed in the same direction as before. A long shot captures him speeding away, his back to the

camera. The shot cuts to the truck turning around and heading back towards Wyatt. In the next shot Wyatt is driving towards the camera and the truck, and the audience senses that something bad is going to happen. A final shot of Wyatt shows him speeding by the camera location, looking to his left as if looking at the pickup coming from the other direction. The editor quickly cuts to a close-up of the pickup as the passenger shoots through the driver's window. Wyatt's bike flies into a field on fire and explodes. Wyatt's body is never shown on camera.

The fact that the shooting of Billy may be accidental, Peter Lev says, allows for a number of interpretations of the incident. One is that America is a violent place with classes and regions in virtual civil war; another is that the deaths are accidental and more about “exaggerated B-movie violence than about social comment” (*American* 11). But Lev embraces a third explanation—one that I ascribe to in part—that the ending was a response to the “political rhetoric of the time” that witnessed a presidential candidate in 1968, George Wallace, promise to run over any “hippie” that lies down in front of his car in protest (*American* 11). But even as a response to contemporary rhetoric, the bloody ending did not attack the “establishment” per se, which had demonized the counterculture in its media and through its politicians. Instead, it attacked the intolerant wing of the working class, leaving a lasting image of the working class as murderers, and as accidental and incompetent murderers at that. The image of the tolerant and generous rancher, the positive representative of the working class in the early part of the film, is long forgotten.

Although it can be argued that the killings at the end of *Easy Rider* make dramatic and narrative sense, the representation of the working class as racist and redneck is problematic. This impression lasts long after the credits roll. Some critics, and viewers,

justify the violence perpetrated by the rednecks, saying it provides a just fate for two dope pushers who bought their freedom on a final “score.” This position would be consistent with the defunct Hollywood Code, which required that all criminals be punished for their wrongdoings. But, as Quart and Auster note, “It is a climax that not only acted as a judgment on their personal quest but seemed to extend to the American experience as a whole” (Auster 93). As a narrative element, it had justification. Here were two drug pushers who had used an illicit drug sale to fund their “retirement,” one of whom had shown recalcitrant and antagonistic traits throughout the film. Neither man had shown any remorse or concern about the impact of their dope pushing on the community despite Wyatt’s generally patient and generous disposition towards others in the film. Also, based on Billy’s decision to give the rednecks the “finger,” something he had figuratively been giving to the establishment during the entire film, one could understand, if not justify, the killings—if one believed the shooting was intentional. But whether the shooting was intentional or not, the final murders served as an indictment of an entire class—the working class.

Wyatt and Billy are not heroes, nor are they innocent victims of a working class gone wild, even if they are shot in cold blood at the end of the film. They are not even positive examples of the counterculture, despite attempts to create sympathy for them, primarily through Wyatt’s expressions of tolerance. They are drug pushers who made a deal with the devil—cocaine—and are punished in the end.^{iv} Even with their faults, however, could Wyatt and Billy have survived their journey across America and lived happily ever after in retirement in Florida if they had been more in tune with the world around them? Maybe. Wyatt and Billy regularly misread situations and miscalculate the possible ramifications of their actions—again, whether this is due to naivety, ignorance, or obstinacy is not clear. Their

expression of freedom entails, in part, thumbing their noses at the establishment. In a volatile time of high tension in a nation at war abroad and at home, they needed to be more aware of how their actions were affecting others. A more tolerant, or at least a wiser or humbler approach by them, might have elicited a different response from the working class people they encountered. That is not to justify the beating death of George or their shootings—those were murderous acts perpetrated by ignorant bigots. But by not understanding how they were going to be received, which should have been obvious to them, they put themselves into potentially dangerous situations. Instead of embracing the good in the working class through their encounter with the rancher, or trying to understand why members of a community whose lives revolve around ritual and tradition might interpret their attempt to join their parade as a mockery, they blindly go about “doing their own thing.” They—Billy in particular—haven’t learned the lesson George Hanson tried to teach them before his death. “Flipping off” someone might feel good for a few seconds, but it is not a wise way to communicate with men who carry hatred and guns with them wherever they go.

As noted in the Introduction, the depiction of southern working class whites as bigots and murderers was not limited to films about the counterculture. In *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), bigots, working class and other, try to railroad a black man for a rape he did not commit. Another film from the counterculture era, Norman Jewison’s *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), explores this same phenomenon. In the film, the specter of the racist southern cop and racist working class is omnipresent—although it should be noted that the upper class is portrayed as equally racist. In the film, Det. Virgil Tibbs (Sidney Poitier), despite being outfitted in an expensive suit and exhibiting a regal carriage, is arrested in a bus station the night of a murder simply because of the color of his skin. He is then verbally abused and

belittled by men, including Chief Bill Gillespie, played by Rod Steiger, who are clearly his intellectual inferiors, escaping prosecution only because he can prove that he is a Philadelphia detective visiting his sick mother. In one pivotal scene, Tibbs backhands a southern “aristocrat” after first being slapped. “Audiences reacted so strongly to the chance to see Poitier fight back, and the politics behind it, that *In the Heat of the Night* soon acquired the jokey nickname ‘Super-Spade Versus the Rednecks,’” Mark Harris writes (336). The racial element here made the fighting back of the black man cathartic for many in the liberal audience. The counterculture, however, was rarely as successful in its attempt to defend itself against the working class—often representing the establishment—in films of the era.

After *Easy Rider*, this stereotypical southern, working-class redneck became a common foil for the counterculture, too. The demonizing of the working class was not limited to the depiction of southern bigots. In film after film during the brief era of counterculture/youth films following *Easy Rider*, violence is directed at members of the counterculture by members of the working class from all geographic regions of America. The working class that had served as a surrogate for the counterculture in films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Cool Hand Luke* serve primarily as foil for and antagonist of the counterculture. This portrayal changed in Hollywood only after economic and political conditions changed on the ground in America in the 1970s.

In one key scene in *Easy Rider*, shortly after the murder of George Hanson, Billy turns to Wyatt at a campsite and says, “We’ve made it,” alluding to the fact that they can now retire to Florida on the profits from their final drug deal. Wyatt sees it differently, though, and responds, “No, Billy, we blew it.” Some critics interpret Wyatt’s response as reflecting the failure of the counterculture to live up to its own ideals; others believe it simply refers to

the characters' decision to build their future on a drug sale, an illicit capitalist venture. David E. James takes a harsher view. He believes it is "an allegory of the film, of the failure of Hopper and Fonda to make a film adequate to the ideals of the counterculture" (17). But there is another way to look at this exchange, and it points to a different kind of failure by the counterculture.

Viewed through the lens of class, Wyatt's assessment could be construed as an allusion to the failure of the counterculture to build strong coalitions within the movement, and, maybe more importantly, to build permanent bridges to the working class. The counterculture, no matter how honorable or righteous its intentions, did not build the kinds of coalitions needed to sustain the movement—not with the black community, women, gays, the Old Left, or the working class. This failure demonstrates how the counterculture "blew it" in its attempt to dramatically alter a dominant culture it rightfully perceived as patriarchal, racist, and oppressive. Wyatt recognizes this failure in himself and Billy—he sees that they have not changed anything but their own economic status. Throughout, their interactions with the working class, with the exception of the rancher, are negative and unproductive. Wyatt's realization again foreshadows the bad things that will come their way, as well as the bad things that will plague the counterculture movement in its relationship with the working class.

This failure of Wyatt and Billy, symbolic of the failure of the counterculture in the 1960s, is an example of the failure of the counterculture to form what Antonio Gramsci called "historic blocs" within the counterculture movement. In the 1930s, jailed by the Italian government for his Marxist beliefs, Gramsci began a detailed study of Marxism and the failure of proletarian revolutions to take place on a large scale, as Marx had predicted.

According to Marx, the proletariat—working class—would erupt in spontaneous revolution in the most advanced industrial nations of the world, which included Germany and Italy at the time. Instead, the only large scale proletarian revolution took place in Russia, a second-rate industrial nation at the time—and even this revolution was not spontaneous and had to be led by an intellectual vanguard. Gramsci concluded that governments do not rule by coercion and power alone. They also rule by winning the people’s consent. This is done by convincing people through superior ideas, not force. Anyone who wants to challenge the dominant forces of society must also form historic blocs to challenge the dominant ideology and create a counter-hegemonic force. Coercion and the use of power are a last resort for any ruling group, although their threat is implicit (1136-1143).

According to Gramsci, the only way to counter hegemonic rule is by winning the battle of ideas through the leadership of what he calls “organic intellectuals”—and by creating historic blocs to promote those ideas (1138). The counterculture was unable to form the kind of historic blocs that would have led to earning the “people’s” (read working class’s) consent. (It should be noted, however, that the counterculture did leave its mark on the culture in many ways, as witnessed by the loosening of restrictions on the arts, the environmental movement, the gay rights and women’s movements, the animal rights movement, and many other remnants of the era.) The failure of the counterculture to win the ideological battle allowed the establishment to co-opt the working class and to re-form a historic bloc to foment a counter-revolution in the United States in the 1970s, as will be evidenced by some of the other films we will explore in this and later chapters. Viewed through that prism, it is clear that Wyatt and Billy, as representatives of the counterculture, did indeed “blow it.”

Impact of *Easy Rider*

Produced for about \$400,000 by Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson of Raybert—later to become BBS Productions when Steve Blauner joined them—and released through Columbia Pictures in June of 1969, *Easy Rider* changed Hollywood in a number of ways. Technically, its incorporation of experimental and new film techniques—flash cuts, non-continuity editing, jump cuts, the use of direct cinema, the incorporation of rock music into the soundtrack—resonated with the youth audience. As Mimi White writes, “For aspiring Hollywood filmmakers, the European and independent models afforded freedom from restrictive formulas and expanded possibilities for self-expression that potentially resonated with the anti-establishment mood of the counterculture” (26). Everyone was surprised when it grossed more than \$19 million domestically (many sources place its international take at \$50-\$60 million), placing it fourth that year in gross receipts, one step ahead of *Hello Dolly*, a disastrous example of Hollywood’s penchant for producing high-budget, high-risk films (Bordwell *The Way Hollywood* 203). Hollywood took notice. Geoff King writes that the newer aesthetic was derived not only from European New Wave works by Jean Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut and experimental works by American filmmakers John Cassavettes, Stan Brakhage, and Maya Deren, but also from American International Pictures exploitation films of the mid-1960s:

The strands of “exploitation”, “art” and “underground” cinema sometimes came closer together, however, jointly forming important sources for the Hollywood “Renaissance” of the late 1960s to the mid-to-late 1970s, a period in which a financially struggling Hollywood finally began to come to terms with its changed demographic and social context. (6-7)

The independently financed *Easy Rider* also opened the door for Hollywood to hire young, fresh directors to take creative chances on the cheap. It announced the beginning of what became known as the New Hollywood, later dubbed the Hollywood Renaissance by Diane Jacobs in her book of the same name. As Jacobs notes, only 19 commercial films were produced independently in 1968, the year before the release of *Easy Rider*, but that number grew to 107 in 1972 (4). Although most of the youth-oriented films that followed *Easy Rider* failed at the box office, Peter Bogdanovich, director of *Paper Moon* (1973) and *The Last Picture Show* (1971), says *Easy Rider*, overall, helped to shape a new Hollywood. He writes:

Certainly *Easy Rider* was one of the first of Hollywood's more radical films to find success, which I think had a very positive effect on mainstream movie making. . . . So then toward the end of the sixties, everybody started saying this was the way to make pictures. Go on location with a million dollars, take a script that was a little different to a new director and do it. (qtd. in Rausch 173)

Throughout the four decades since its release, *Easy Rider* has been explored primarily as a work that helped to revolutionize the way Hollywood does business and as a film that captured a moment in time. In virtually any work that discusses key moments in the history of cinema, it is held up as a turning point. While there is wide disagreement about the quality of the film—Paul Monaco calls it a “challenging movie that elevated what might have been dismissed as a ‘biker flick’ into a landmark movie” (187), while David E. James calls it a film of “thematic confusion” and “formal incoherence” (14)—*Easy Rider*'s impact on the industry and on the culture has become an accepted fact, even by some of its most ardent critics. David Thomson, who once called it “one of the worst acclaimed films ever made in

America,” acknowledges that it “dollar for dollar, exerted the most pull on Hollywood” (*The Whole Equation* 325). Other critics consistently refer to it as culturally one of the most important films of the post-1960 era. Quart and Auster call it “the most culturally significant and commercially successful of cinematic attempts at capturing the rebellious and alternative lifestyles of the 1960s” (Auster 91).

But, while the film was significant culturally because it helped to define an epoch, it is sometimes forgotten that *Easy Rider* actually put a period on the counterculture era. In the parlance, it hit at the right time, something the film industry didn’t seem to grasp at the moment. Hollywood misinterpreted the significance of the box office for *Easy Rider*, choosing to copy not just the film’s style and its economic structure—which were worthy of copying—but also its counterculture theme, a theme that would soon be passé. The film industry cranked out imitations for the next two years or so, but with little success. Alexander Horwath writes, “The studios and the filmmakers had overlooked the fact that *Easy Rider* was both the culmination and the end point of a broader ‘dissident’ rhetoric in American public life . . . when the film came out, even the counter-culture had begun to lose its shine” (91).

After *Easy Rider*, Hollywood studios followed a familiar industry pattern. As Robert Ray borrowed from Francois Truffaut in the title of his book, *A Certain Tendency of Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (19), I will borrow from him in noting that one major tendency of Hollywood since its inception has been to repeat a recipe for success. The recipe for *Easy Rider* was relatively simple—choose counterculture protagonists who espouse counterculture views, use innovative New Wave techniques to tell the story, hire young directors and relatively unknown actors and film on a shoestring, and, most importantly for

our purposes here, pit the protagonists against the establishment, most often represented by the working class. Although this recipe ultimately failed, for a short period of time on American movie screens it rendered the working class as not only the defenders of the status quo, but often as reactionaries.

In the following films, *Billy Jack*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Medium Cool*, we will see how the relationship between the working class and the counterculture played out on film in counterculture/youth-cult films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although all of these films offer sympathetic looks at the counterculture, they also offer unique views of the working class. But if a single theme for these films were to be offered, it might very well be “missed opportunities,” because, as in *Easy Rider*, chances to build lasting bridges between the working class and the counterculture are squandered even when the elements are there to be constructed.

The next film, *Billy Jack*, returns to the ideological template of films like *Easy Rider*, *The Strawberry Statement*, and *Zabriskie Point*, which depict, and sometimes exploit, the binary of the counterculture and the working class. The film does not present quite as bleak a picture of the working class as *Easy Rider*, however. One bright spot in the film, the “liberal” thinking sheriff, offers some hope that a dialogue can be achieved between the working class and the counterculture. Billy Jack is himself a product of the working class, but as a modern-day, left-wing vigilante, his “dialogue” usually takes place with his fists. Released in 1971, and then again in 1973, the film offers probably the final onscreen hurrah for the counterculture before the nation turned hard right and Hollywood followed. Coming late in the cycle of counterculture/youth films, *Billy Jack* provides an ambiguous look at the

working class, but one that ultimately presents the class in a dark light—or at best in chiaroscuro.

Billy Jack

Billy Jack is a modern-day western, replete with a Vietnam war hero and a pacifist group in search of “home,” who only want to live in peace on an Indian reservation; a love interest; working-class townsfolk who are dominated and intimidated by a local “baron” of capitalism; an unworthy heir to that baron; a corrupt deputy (Deputy Mike played by Kenneth Tobey); and a well-meaning sheriff. It tells the tale of a man of part Native-American blood who returns to the reservation to find peace and a home after fighting in a war, but instead finds another kind of battle waiting for him with the leading local capitalist. Originally released in 1971, it did not do particularly well in its first go-around. Only after director and star Tom Laughlin, who plays the title character, sued Warner Brothers for control of the film when the studio failed to properly promote it did the film take off in its second release in 1973. Unlike the counterculture/youth films that followed immediately on the heels of *Easy Rider* and bombed at the box office—*The Strawberry Statement* and *Zabriskie Point* are two—Laughlin found an enthusiastic reception for his film a full four years after Wyatt and Billy were last seen searching for America on “choppers.”

In its second release, *Billy Jack* literally became the last hurrah for the counterculture on screen. Its success was surprising not only because so many counterculture/youth films had failed in the years following *Easy Rider*, but also because it was actually a simple, classic Hollywood narrative about a hero, a rugged individualist, who stands up for the weak. It is a modern-day western, except this time the outlaw sheriff is on a motorcycle and he knows

kung fu. As Howard Hampton writes, “Laughlin’s mystical, taciturn martial-arts-expert was the resurrection of Gary Cooper for the Age of Aquarius—a vigilante for peace and brotherhood, a real Captain America. The movie is so old-fashioned it felt brand new to young people: Tom Mix lives!” (261).

Another irony of *Billy Jack*’s second release is that, despite its being a counterculture film, its success inspired a change in the way Hollywood distributed its blockbuster films during the 1970s. As David A. Cook notes, Laughlin employed saturation booking for the 1973 re-release, flooding the Southern California market. Also known as “four-walling,” saturation booking entails booking a film in as many theaters in a particular region as possible and following that up with television spots tailored to the specific market. This tactic was used by exploitation films in the 1960s—from which Laughlin emerged—to stay ahead of the word-of-mouth on poor films that would otherwise be killed by reviews. Four-wall distribution gave a filmmaker an opportunity to dominate a particular market for a short period of time and to generate strong profits. Later in 1973, major films like the *The Exorcist* and *Westworld* utilized saturation booking to generate substantial profits. *Jaws* also followed the formula and also copied *Billy Jack*’s concept of “re-release” to capitalize on seasonal audiences. As Cook notes, although saturation booking was deemed unfair and a moratorium was put on the practice in 1976 after complaints from the National Association of Theater Owners, Hollywood learned a great deal about how to generate profits and demand for its product by copying the practice used by Laughlin (16, 41).

One of the first widely distributed films to deal with the war in Vietnam—Laughlin’s earlier *Born Losers*, a 1967 AIP biker/exploitation film, had introduced the Vietnam veteran Billy Jack to the screen (Auster 42)—*Billy Jack* is the story of a disillusioned Vietnam

veteran who now clearly questions war, but who is not reluctant to use force against his enemies. His ethnicity is never made clear, but it is assumed that he is half Native American. As he explores his own purpose on earth, as well as his mortality through a rattlesnake ritual designed to test his faith, he takes on the role of protector for an alternative, progressive reservation school operated by his love interest Jean (Delores Taylor). The title character is a mysterious man who lives deep in the reservation. We learn of his past as a warrior through a voiceover by Jean. Unlike the protagonists in *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*, he has found a home, physical and spiritual, after returning from Vietnam. He generally only surfaces when his home is invaded either literally or figuratively by outside forces, or when the residents of the progressive school—some of them assumed to be runaways whose lack of “home” has led them to the reservation—are threatened in some way. He is clearly an enigma. Although attracted to Jean and her pacifist ideology, he struggles to contain his own violence, doling out punishment whenever he feels force must be met with excessive force.

The working-class townspeople, led by a local capitalist Stuart Posner (Bert Freed), reject the school and its inhabitants, especially the Native Americans. Posner's distaste for the reservation inhabitants is primarily driven by greed because they stop him from exploiting the countryside. The contempt targeted at the school and its inhabitants by the townspeople is based both on their fear of Posner and their inability or unwillingness to understand the alternative lifestyle practiced by the Native Americans and the operators and inhabitants of the progressive school. Here, as in many classic westerns, the townspeople are simple dupes of Posner, a powerful economic force in the community.

The two groups—the counterculture, represented by the school inhabitants, and the townspeople—co-exist only as long as they do not interact, but when they do, the anger, fear

and hatred surface. The first confrontation between the groups takes place when Posner and his men go onto Indian land to illegally round up wild stallions. To underscore Posner's power, one of his "cowboys" is Deputy Mike, the same deputy who feels compelled to serve Posner in the opening sequence of the film rather than ride with the sheriff to Haight-Ashbury to collect his own runaway daughter. The roundup is shot in breathtaking aerial shots as the camera tracks the wild horses fleeing from the crew of cowboys hired by Posner. Touching on a theme that was relatively new in Hollywood and the nation at the time, animal protection, the aerial shots show the brutality of the chase as several horses are caught on a rocky canyon hillside, some falling against rocks. The scene is so realistic it has a documentary feel to it. As the chase ends, the horses are rounded up and corralled.

At this point, two key storylines emerge. The first involves Posner's son, Bernard (David Roya), who cannot live up to his father's expectations. When Bernard refuses to shoot the corralled horses (killed for their meat), his refusal triggers his father's public castigation, establishing the strong father/weak son story line. It also gives Billy Jack enough time to exit the woods on horseback, establishing the more important story line of the lone protector of the meek against the powerful economic force. Billy, alone on horseback—carrying a rifle—stops the slaughter. The scene clearly defines three pivotal characters: Posner, as the unscrupulous capitalist who will go to any lengths to fill his pockets; Bernard Posner as a weak, second-generation version of his father who will clearly play a larger role in future events; and Billy Jack, as *High Noon's* (1952) "Will Kane" of the reservation.

As the film proceeds, Billy is called upon to protect the Indian children and the administrators/teachers of the school on several occasions. Although the first confrontation ends peacefully, the second one in town erupts into violence as the children of the school are

accosted by Bernard and a friend in an ice cream shop and humiliated after they have been refused service by the proprietor. In a deep focus shot from inside the ice cream parlor, Billy is shown through a large picture window crossing the street towards the shop as Bernard dumps flour onto some of the children to “make them more white.” Billy uses his martial arts to humble Bernard and his friend, and then takes to the street to face down a large group of Posner loyalists in the town square, some wielding bats and other convenient weapons. He loses this battle to Posner’s working-class minions—it was a fight he knew he couldn’t win—as Stuart Posner watches from his Cadillac parked by the curb.

Class clearly plays a role in these confrontations. Affluent Stuart Posner’s distaste for Billy and the school seem directly tied to his economic interests, although bigotry surely plays a part as well. The working class animus, however, appears to be motivated as much by racism and intolerance as it is by fear of Posner, whom they take their cue from in their interactions with the progressive school. The working class here is represented almost exclusively by young and middle-aged white men. Their response to the progressive school appears to be little more than an irrational fear of the “other,” a condition in which members of the dominant culture view non-whites as “alien and inferior, yet frightening and dangerous” (Leitch 1575). The townspeople fear the “other” not because of any physical threat, but because the colonized group, most prominently represented here by young Native Americans, refuses to adopt the culture of the colonizer.

The fear here also extends to the counterculture, which the white men fear will contaminate the dominant culture, a common theme in the late 1960s and early 1970s that is directly explored in a barbershop scene later in the film. They also fear the “other” represented by the counterculture operators of the progressive school because they, too,

refuse to live by the rules of the dominant culture and instead attempt to adopt the rules and culture of the “other.” This rejection of the dominant culture is represented most clearly in the character of Billy Jack, a working-class man who has returned to his Native American roots in an attempt to overcome his rage about the war. As we will see, however, this rage erupts whenever members of the progressive school are threatened by the town’s working class whites or Posner.

Although two members of the town council (read middle class) demonstrate open-mindedness by visiting the school to “dialogue” with Jean and others, no such effort is ever hinted at by the townspeople. With the exception of Sheriff Cole (Clark Howat), the working class is portrayed as unable to move beyond its bigotry—or its desire to curry favor with Posner. The white, working-class men remain nameless (except for Deputy Mike), flat characters who serve two primary purposes in the film—to provide reactionary counterparts to the counterculture and to serve as punching bags, and worse, for Billy Jack. Although the relationship between the rich land owner and the townspeople harkens back to the classic Hollywood western, it also had a contemporary correlation in 1971, too. As the government was drafting the sons of working-class fathers to fight the “other” in Vietnam while guaranteeing college deferments for the sons of the rich and powerful, Posner was “drafting” working-class sons to fight his private war against the “other” in his community while he and his son watched from a safe distance.

In another powerful indictment of the working class akin to his earlier choice to serve Posner’s instead of his own daughter’s interest, Deputy Mike is exposed as crude and violent. In the first scene between him and his now pregnant teenage daughter, Barbara (Julie Webb), he is tightly framed and shot from a low angle wearing only jeans and a white T-shirt as he

hovers above as she sits on a couch. The first words we hear him say to his daughter are, “My first instinct is to beat the hell out of you.” He then tries to ascertain who the father is, but she responds in a rebellious and intentionally hurtful tone, telling him she has been “passed around by so many Maharishi types” (touching on a counterculture theme of the time) that she doesn’t know who the father is. “I got balled by so many guys I don’t know if the father is going to be white, Indian, Mexican, or Black.” From the same low angle, he is shown striking her. In the next scene, Billy Jack finds her beaten and bloody near a river on the reservation.

This scene also offers an awkward attempt to find balance in the film. Haight-Ashbury, the San Francisco community of the “flower children” in the 1967 summer of love, elicited a wide range of responses in 1971. While those in the counterculture saw it as a symbol of love, harmony and freedom—as long as you didn’t get busted with drugs on you—and others saw it as an opportunity for capitalist exploitation of a culture (O’Neill 252), many outside Haight-Ashbury in the working class saw it as a decadent, drug-infested sewer filled with dirty hippies and other types that represented all that was wrong with America in the late 1960s. By referencing Haight-Ashbury in the way that it does, the film appeals to this conservative element, which contradicts the generally positive view of the counterculture presented by the film.

Billy is a complex presence in the film, too. As a trained warrior and member of the working class, he has been taught to fight for what is right. While he believes in the work of the school and sees value in its (Jean’s) pacifism, he has not abnegated violence as a means to an end. Of course, if he had, the movie would not have been titled *Billy Jack*. It would have been titled *Massacre at a Native American School*.

The positive depiction of Sheriff Cole is also a departure from earlier counterculture films, although it does recall a film like *Lonely Are the Brave* in which a lawman develops an affinity for an “outlaw” he is tracking. In *Easy Rider*, *Alice’s Restaurant* and *Medium Cool*, the police are seen as simply an arm of the establishment—a willing arm of repression. But in *Billy Jack*, the sheriff is portrayed as an even-minded man—a well-rounded character—who actually protects the school from an attack as Martin and others show up in the dark of night to search for his pregnant daughter. The sheriff also willingly participates in some street theater with teachers and students from the progressive school during one of the school’s visits to town. While the positive rendering of the sheriff does not negate the other representations of working-class bigotry and paranoia, it reveals another side of the working class that is missing in some of the other films that followed *Easy Rider* and may point towards a more sympathetic portrayal of the working class in films later in the seventies. It certainly opened up a space for dialogue between the two cultures, although within the film the sheriff is the only member of the working class who attempts to reach out to the counterculture school.

The sheriff aside, the overwhelming image of the working class in the film is one of bigotry, intolerance, and fear of the other. A particularly insightful piece of dialogue takes place in a local barbershop as the bus from the school pulls into town on a field trip. Looking out the barbershop window, one “towny” turns to the sheriff, who is getting his hair cut, and asks him when he’s “gonna do something” about those “long hairs” and “dope smokers” who have had the audacity to come into their town. (The sheriff has already shown himself to be more tolerant of the school than Posner or the townspeople would like.) One of the barbers interjects, “He’s waiting for some of our kids to start going out there and smoke dope.” This

brings a chuckle from some of the patrons, but it also demonstrates the working class's fear of the counterculture. This was clearly a concern in some enclaves of the greater society of 1971, too, as people feared that their children would "turn on, tune in, and drop out," as Harvard's Timothy Leary preached (Braunstein 7). The sheriff, true to his character, responds dryly to the jibe in an attempt to point out the absurdity of reflexively fearing the "other." In a calm voice and measured tone he says, "No, I'm going to shoot three or four of them to show them who's boss."

Following the rape of Jean and the killing of a Native American teenager wrongly accused of fathering Barbara's unborn child, *Billy Jack* evolves into a revenge-film with a leftist edge. Jean had kept the news of the rape from Billy for a long time, fearing his likely response against the rapist, but when the young Native American is killed she acknowledges the earlier incident to Billy, who already suspects it. Billy's struggle with pacifism is evident in a brief exchange with Jean, who has asked him to forsake violent revenge. His complex feelings about violence are apparent as he evokes the memory of JFK, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King to justify his planned use of violence for a Leftist cause:

Billy: Where are they now?

Jean: They're dead.

Billy: Not dead. Their brains blown out because your people [white people] couldn't even put the same controls on their guns as they do on their dogs, their bicycles, their cats and their automobiles.

He then challenges her to name "one place where people really care about each other." When she fails to name one, he rides off on his motorcycle to find Bernard.

The choice to have Billy respond with violence again harkens back to earlier western narratives. Pacifism does not make for particularly exciting cinema, and Laughlin knows this. By creating a character who wants to embrace pacifism, but who claims to be forced to action by terrible acts of violence against the innocent, the film appeals not only to members of the counterculture audience represented by the victims in the film, but also to members of a working class audience that expects their heroes to exact revenge on the “bad guys.” Auster and Quart say this about writer Tom Laughlin and his film:

He is clearly more intent on having it every which way he can than achieving any kind of intellectual coherence. Even though the film provides the audience with an unendurable number of murders, rapes, and beatings, it also exults in counterculture elements and activities. (43)

I would agree. Laughlin clearly has it both ways, exalting the counterculture while celebrating the rugged individualist who is willing to exact violent revenge without flinching. The message of the film is clearly mixed. On one hand the counterculture ideology of peace and love is applauded, while, on the other hand, violence is offered as the only response to oppression—only force can defeat force. The film seems to be saying that peace and pacifism are honorable ideas, but you better have an enforcer around just in case.

The confrontation scene with Bernard follows. The scene is introduced by just the shadow of Billy’s trademark hat on a hotel door as honky-tonk music plays in the background. Billy opens the door to the hotel room and finds Bernard in bed with an underage Indian girl (another symbol of the rich white man exploiting the “other”). In a series of shot-reverse shots, we see the expressions on both men’s faces—as well as the frightened girl, whom Billy tells to leave the room. Bernard pulls a gun from beneath the

sheets and shoots, missing Billy with the first shot as Billy stands calmly in the doorway. Bernard hits him in the side with the second shot, but Billy methodically steps forward and ends Bernard's life with a single karate chop to the throat. (The use of martial arts at the time was also a sign of the "other" as it was used not only in Asian films, but also in American Blaxploitation films.)

The film marches towards its climax after Billy returns to the school to shepherd Barbara to a safe place. Billy shoots the deputy, Barbara's father, in self-defense and then barricades himself in an old church on the reservation. After many tense hours of negotiations and heartfelt pleas by Jean for him to end the violence, he surrenders to the sheriff, who has prevented the federal agents from rushing the church. The final surrender could be interpreted as a plea for America to turn away from the violence of war. As the camera tracks Billy as he is marched handcuffed to the car through a gauntlet of supporters, he is an obvious Christ figure in a scene reminiscent of working-class Terry Malloy's stumbling journey through dock workers to "claim his rights" in *On the Waterfront* (1954). Like other films of the era, this scene also incorporates contemporary music as the popular song "One Tin Soldier," which opened the film, plays again. But even here Laughlin has it both ways—the contemporary song also harkens back to an earlier era of good guys and bad guys as the lyrics tell the story of Billy Jack just as the title song in *High Noon* told the story of Will Kane.

Technically, the camera is used throughout the film to comment on the differences between the progressive school (read counterculture) and the working class. For example, Laughlin uses long shots and aerial shots along with open forms to show the vastness of the country where the school is located. In town, however, most of the shots are tightly framed,

with the majority being shot indoors, symbolically establishing the contrast between the free and open society of the progressive school and the Indian reservation, and the closed, paranoid society of the town and its working class. Although the film is clearly leftist in its politics and generally privileges and valorizes the counterculture, it is shot in the classic Hollywood style, with continuity editing and traditional uses of the camera—tracking, dollying, and panning. Laughlin eschews the use of New Wave techniques like jump cuts and flash cuts, and documentary techniques like direct cinema that were used in films like *Medium Cool*, *Easy Rider*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, techniques that spoke to a young audience. Instead, he attracted the youth audience with his pro-counterculture, leftist ideology, while he attracted a broader audience by updating the western genre within a classic Hollywood paradigm. The *mise en scene*, particularly the costuming and look of the characters, also played a role by establishing a clear binary between the counterculture and intolerant members of the working class. The counterculture here is represented by long-haired teachers and the natural and simple looking Jean, whose long, straight hair and clothing recall an aging hippie. They, along with children of all ages, Native American and white, and Billy, dressed in a black T-shirt and jean jacket with his omnipresent “Natani Nez” hat, are contrasted throughout the film with the generally burly, short-haired, white working class men who are regularly dressed in jeans and work clothes, including white T-shirts and flannel shirts. The costuming and the physical appearance of the characters make it easy to see the progressive school inhabitants as victims of an oppressive white working class—with Billy and the sheriff standing out as the only examples of working class tolerance.

This return to a traditional, classic Hollywood style was a harbinger of things to come, particularly in the mid- and late 1970s when Hollywood as industry moved away from

the more experimental filmmaking pursued during the early counterculture period. As noted earlier, the classic Hollywood style never completely went away as traditional fare continued to be produced by studios throughout the late 1960s, even during the height of the counterculture/youth boom. But the success of *Billy Jack* not only showed the industry how to market its films, it also showed Hollywood that filmgoers would respond to traditional stories, whether they came from a Left or a Right perspective. In this case, the film comes from both the Left and the Right. As noted before, the film ideologically privileges the counterculture and the Left. But in Billy's attempt to preserve that ideology, the film resorts to the same kind of vigilantism that became popular in films that followed like *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974), films clearly from the Right. This return to tradition—a conservative move—was apparent in other films of the mid- and later 1970s that returned the working class to the role of protagonist, often valorizing it as America emerged from the Watergate scandal and the failure in Vietnam to celebrate its bicentennial, as we will see in Chapter 3.

Billy Jack drew large audiences—David Bordwell, in *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, estimates its rentals at \$32.5 million, the receipts minus the “nut” paid to the exhibitor (192, 206)—but while it was celebrated by the counterculture at the time of its release, it could not escape the same trap that films like *Easy Rider* fell into, the demonization of the working class at the expense of the counterculture. In an effort to create a marketable film, Laughlin resorted to the trusted formula that drew crowds to westerns as far back as the silent era—he created characters with white hats and black hats. In this case, the obvious “white hat” belongs to Billy Jack—who as the protagonist has a back story and is a complex and rounded

character—and the black hat to Stuart Posner and his son Bernard. But others wore black hats in the film, too, and they were all members of the working class.

Laughlin deserves credit, however, for offering a critique of an economic system based on greed and intimidation, embodied here by the Posners. His critique of Jean's pacifism, while arguable, also shows a willingness to find some fault with the counterculture, as does his willingness to expose the excesses of the counterculture in his depiction of Haight-Ashbury as a place where young women were used as sexual objects by more worldly men. To his credit, unlike some who came before him, he does not simply dote on the counterculture. In the character of Sheriff Cole, Laughlin also offers a working-class character who shows a willingness to engage in dialogue with the counterculture.

But in the end, Laughlin misses an opportunity to demonstrate that the counterculture and the community's working class have a common enemy—men like Stuart Posner who manipulate the system to their advantage and then pit the counterculture and working class against each other. Although Bernard Posner is dead and Stuart Posner has failed to exact revenge on Billy Jack before Billy surrenders to federal authorities, the working class and counterculture remain as far apart as ever. The black hat has been humbled by the white hat, but the community, represented by the working class, and the reservation/progressive school, represented by the counterculture, never come together in recognition of their common foe despite several efforts by Jean to bring the two groups together. In one sequence, she takes street theater to the town and enlists the sheriff as a participant in one improvisational scene. In another, she and members of the school attend a city council meeting to question Posner's stranglehold on the town, and when some council members question the "education" the school provides she invites council members to the school to see their operation. Although

two council members do visit the school and leave impressed, a bridge to the working class residents of the town is never realized. Throughout the film the agency is with Billy Jack, the taciturn, rugged individual of American lore, as the pacifist counterculture is depicted as defenseless, and the working class is portrayed as violent, bigoted enforcers for the powers that be. Billy's vigilantism may have been cathartic for the paying audience that wanted to see revenge carried out on the Posners and their minions, but in the end the counterculture and working class remain just as far apart as ever.

Alice's Restaurant

Released two months after *Easy Rider*, *Alice's Restaurant* satirizes late-1960s America, poking fun at the establishment and the bureaucracy while generally privileging the counterculture, sometimes at the expense of the working class. Because the film is presented almost entirely from the point of view of one counterculture character, Arlo Guthrie playing himself in the autobiographical film, the viewer is invited, and tempted, to sympathize with the counterculture perspective. Arlo is, in fact, a generally likable and honorable young man. He loves his father and honors his mother; he is a good friend; he is a man of principle who refuses to take advantage of a young groupie who throws herself at him, or his vulnerable married friend, Alice, when she comes to him after temporarily leaving her husband. He generally "does his own thing," and even when his "own thing" exploits the kindness of a friend or two, we forgive him because he appears to be a naturally gentle soul. Because director Arthur Penn enlists Arlo as the voice-over narrator of much of the film, the audience naturally is drawn to Arlo's story, which represents the counterculture point of view in the film. But to simply look at the film through Arlo's eyes would be a mistake. Much more is

happening in the film, and while some of the plotlines are not fully developed, the working class is almost as central to the film as the counterculture.

Although the primary plotline in the film explores Arlo's experiences during the period between his registration for the draft and his ultimate refusal for service by the U.S. Army, the film also tells the story of Alice (Pat Quinn) and Ray Brock (James Broderick), the Alice and Ray of *Alice's Restaurant*. The stories are, in fact, inseparable because Alice and Ray provide a safe and supportive haven for Arlo and other youths who need a hot meal or a bed to sleep in while they try to "find themselves" in the confusing world of the late 1960s. Alice serves as the "sensual earth mother" (Quart 90) to her brood of counterculture youths who wander in and out of the loosely formed "commune," a converted church that allows this rag-tag "congregation" to find spiritual and corporeal sustenance without being required to commit to any official doctrine. As members of the working class, fully a dozen or so years older than their young friends, Alice and Ray provide a counter, as well as a complement, to the counterculture in the film. They, particularly Alice, are required to endure the mundane in life—working for a living, paying bills, and surviving in a working class community—while their young friends ponder their futures, drift from college to college, safe haven to safe haven, and seek ways to avoid serving in a war they do not support. Alice's central role in the film is indicated not only by the title of the film, but also by the final scene. As the film ends it is Alice's figure that fills the frame, not Arlo's, indicating that this film was much more than an homage to the counterculture.

Offered as a youth/cult film for a 1969 youth audience that was fully engaged in the anti-war movement at the time, *Alice's Restaurant* has been generally regarded as a film about the counterculture. Critics, as well as audiences, were induced to look at the film

primarily as a counterculture work. As Quart and Auster write about Arthur Penn's "elegiac and loosely episodic" film, "Its prime purpose was to provide a critical but loving evocation of the counterculture" (90). While that may be true, and may very well have been Penn's aim, the film also explores the working class not only through Alice and Ray Brock, but also through "Officer Obie" (William Obanhein), a well-meaning but sometimes overreaching public servant, and other working-class characters who are treated occasionally as the targets of satire.

To be fair, Auster and Quart do acknowledge that Alice and Ray play a key role in the film, but that the film simply does not get "sufficiently close" to the Brocks or to the youthful members of the counterculture—with the exception of Arlo. They add that the film is "not a fully-realized and coherent portrait of the counterculture" (90). With these assertions, I would agree. The characters of Alice and Ray, as well as peripheral members of the counterculture, are not as fully developed as they could be, and subsequently the relationships between them are not fully developed. But to look at the film only through the prism of the counterculture is a mistake. Alice and Ray are working-class characters empathetic towards the counterculture, and it is their relationship with the counterculture that is at the center of the film. Although geared towards a counterculture audience, the film offers generally sympathetic portraits of both the counterculture and the working class while refusing to cover up the blemishes or, as Quart notes, the "painful limitations" (90), of either. In the case of Alice, *Alice's Restaurant* even provides some scenes that undercut sympathy for the counterculture while offering a poignant portrait of a woman caught both between and within two worlds, the counterculture and the working class.

While the working class is generally vilified in *Easy Rider*, it is portrayed in a much more nuanced fashion in *Alice's Restaurant*, and is most prominently represented by an earnest and loving, albeit frustrated, Alice. Although it can also be an unthinking cog in a bureaucratic machine, a dimwitted member of the armed forces or law enforcement, or an ignorant and intolerant redneck who can't see past a young man's long hair, the working class in the film is never rendered as vile, racist, and murderous as it is in *Easy Rider* and other youth/cult films of the era. This is partly due to the tone of Arthur Penn's film—satirical in large part but ultimately tragic—but it must also be attributed to Penn's choices. For example, the one scene of concerted working-class violence in the film is used primarily to demonstrate the intolerance of the establishment for the counterculture. Arlo is tossed through a plate glass window by some bigoted locals in Montana and, while he sustains a bloody nose, his injuries are relatively minor.

We do not see the full results of the attack—a swollen face and black eyes—until the next scene when Arlo is called up before the college administration to account for his role in the melee. Here it becomes clear that Arlo's presence in the college community is not welcomed, as the administrator adopts the position that Arlo was responsible for the run-in. By creating this binary in relationships between the counterculture and the working class outside the commune, the film unfortunately misses an opportunity to explore the commonalities between the two groups, although the characters of Alice and Ray inside the commune provide an opening to do just that. Fortunately, the primary representatives of the working class in the film are Alice and Ray, who are more clearly defined and complex characters.

But Penn does not ignore the blemishes of these more “enlightened” working-class characters, either. Ray’s potential for violence is part of his character, and in one scene he expresses himself violently, roughing up Shelly (Michael McClanathan) when he learns Shelly has stashed drugs in the “church,” and then slapping Alice when she furiously admonishes him for knocking Shelly down. Throughout the film there is also an uneasy sexual tension between these three characters that is never quite explained or resolved. It is this tension that leads to Alice’s verbal attacks—first directed at Shelly for lying to her about his drug use and then directed at Ray for using “muscle” on Shelly—and subsequently leads to Ray’s violent response. But, while the working class’s blemishes sometimes show at times, the depiction of the working class is generally sympathetic, even when occasionally condescendingly so. Although, as in *Easy Rider*, the working class in *Alice’s Restaurant* serves as foil for the counterculture (read Arlo) on several occasions, and is the target of the film’s satire, the rounded characterizations of Alice and Ray and the sympathetic look at some other working-class characters serve to counter the negative stereotypes of the ignorant and intolerant working class. Unfortunately, the filmmaker never goes beyond those characterizations to construct lasting connections between the working class and counterculture.

Alice’s Restaurant grew out of Arlo Guthrie’s autobiographical song, “Alice’s Restaurant Massacree,” which told the tale of his experience with the draft in the mid-1960s and life at the commune run by Alice and Ray outside the town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The restaurant that Alice operates does not play a large onscreen role in the film, but serves more as a metaphor for any place that offers comfort and sustenance to those of the counterculture who reject the ways of the establishment. Two key scenes in the

restaurant, however, demonstrate the burden that Alice is carrying not only for members of the commune, but also for Ray. They will be discussed in more detail later. While *Alice's Restaurant* takes its cue from Arlo's satirical song, like *Easy Rider* it does not ignore the dark side of the counterculture's experimentation with drugs—Shelly dies of an overdose after his argument with Ray—nor does it completely ignore the plight of the working class during the war, as a black soldier who has lost an arm in the war is a visitor to the commune. It is clear from the start that the film's overt sympathies, as per Arlo's autobiographical song, are with the counterculture as much of the satire is aimed at the police and the military, two handy and popular targets of satirical send-ups at the time. But one should not assume that the film is light fare because it is based on a satirical narrative song. To the contrary, the film is laced with tragedy and ultimately ends on a somber note.

One interesting element of *Alice's Restaurant* is the line it draws between the counterculture and the Old Left, represented in the film by Arlo's father, folk singer Woody Guthrie, now paralyzed, mute, and dying because of his losing battle with Huntington's chorea. The Old Left is also present in the characters of folk singer Pete Seeger, playing himself, and the middle-aged female owner of a small New York night club/coffee house. Arlo clearly wants to connect to his father and the Old Left, but Woody's inability to do anything but blink reduces any communication with him to the rudimentary level. That does not stop Arlo from seeking counsel from him, however, as we will see later. This "search for father" is a thread that weaves throughout the narrative as Arlo also responds to Ray as a father figure at times, as do Shelly and others. Ray, however, proves to be inadequate in that role, choosing too often to remain one of the "kids" instead of accepting the responsibility of the parent. As for the night club owner, Ruth (Eulalie Noble), Arlo's rejection of her

unwanted sexual advance symbolizes a failure of the predominantly white, middle-class counterculture to unite with the Old Left, in more than just the obvious way. With the exceptions of Arlo's "monologues" with Woody, the only real connection made between the counterculture and Old Left is musical: Arlo and Seeger sing one of Woody's songs to him in the hospital, temporarily uniting the Old Left and the counterculture, but only on a superficial level.

This inability to bond with the Old Left is emblematic of the failure of the counterculture to create a lasting connection to the working class. The Old Left, particularly in the 1930s, was predicated on building connections between working people and the intellectuals on the left. This effort was illustrated onscreen in Martin Scorsese's *Boxcar Bertha*, a 1972 film about union activism during the Great Depression, and Hal Ashby's biography of Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, released in 1976. The Old Left never quite made the connection with a broad labor movement that it had hoped to make, although it desperately tried to do so. Government "red-baiting" based on labor activists' early sympathy with Russian-style communism and the suspicion in the 1920s of American workers about their immigrant union "brothers" were two reasons for this failure. As Walter Kalaidjian writes, "Soviet pressure during the early 1930s simply drove America's own nativist left away from the mainstream into the obscure margins of a proletarian subculture" (60). But the Old Left at least recognized the need to build coalitions. This kind of recognition is missing in the counterculture characters of *Alice's Restaurant*, and the depiction of many working-class characters in the film illustrates this lack of recognition.^v

This "blind spot" is evident in the behavior of the counterculture characters of the film, particularly in Arlo. Throughout the film, Arlo travels whenever and wherever he

wants, he enrolls in a university to avoid the draft (although he is forced to drop out by local authorities), and he plays “gigs” whenever he feels like it. At no time does he appear concerned about where his next meal is coming from or whether he will have a bed to sleep in. As a member of the more privileged middle class, he takes these things for granted. By contrast, Alice and Ray—particularly Alice, who is left to do most of the work—must scratch out a living not only to support themselves, but also to support the extended family of which Arlo is a member. While Arlo and the others drift in and out of the commune as their needs dictate, working-class Alice and Ray literally and figuratively pay the price: on one hand they supply the accommodations and food; on the other they suffer stress to their marriage.

Despite his obvious soft spot for the counterculture, Penn does not hide the fact that the counterculture characters generally fail to take responsibility for their own lives and that Alice as “earth mother” is thus called upon to be the responsible one in all of her relationships. The young counterculture characters, still groping for their identities and drifting through their young lives, turn to her whenever they are in need. Ray is not much better. He is an aging dreamer who flits from one venture to another, refusing to grow up. This is clear in several scenes, but particularly in the two restaurant scenes alluded to before. In the first scene, Shelly, who has recently been released from treatment for his drug addiction and is now in the care of Alice and Ray as he tries to kick his drug habit, is helping Alice at the restaurant when Ray walks in. “C’mon, Alice, I’m going to take you swimming,” he says, slapping her on the derriere and ignoring the customers packed into the restaurant who are waiting for Alice to feed them. Alice points to the customers and Ray says, “Oh, let them all go into the kitchen and help themselves.” When Alice ignores Ray’s counsel and indicates that her help has called in sick, Ray says, “Hey, you’re letting this place eat you up,

baby.” His refusal to acknowledge that she is responsible for keeping a business operating and providing for her immediate and extended family underlines his irresponsibility.

Later, in another restaurant scene, Ray playfully asks Shelly to taste over-spiced chili as Alice tries to work around them in the kitchen to prepare food for her customers. After a brief argument she literally drops plates on the counter in front of several customers, takes off her apron, and storms out, saying, “I’m on vacation.” The next scene shows Alice arriving at Arlo’s door in New York, where he is “crashing” at a friend’s vacant apartment—freeloading again. She is distraught and overwrought, and her admission to Arlo is telling: “I guess I’m the bitch with too many pups . . . I couldn’t take them all milking me.” Here we have a clear example of the working-class woman serving in a traditional “mother” role for all of her “children,” her husband included, as the others take time out to explore the world around them without accepting responsibility for themselves, let alone for dozens of others.

The tone of *Alice’s Restaurant* is set in the first scene, which opens with a blank screen as credits begin to run and overlapping conversations are heard. The only visual is the credits, with the conversations touching on various views of fighting in a war, serving in the Army, and making life choices like having a child. Although the musical score drowns out an occasional word or two, the conversations have a realistic quality to them as the young male speakers engage in nervous laughter as they ponder what the future might hold for them. Based on bits and pieces gleaned from the conversations, these are primarily young working class men whose choices appear to be limited to getting married and having children—one child is enough and two too many, one says, preferring the Army to family life—or serving in the military and “traveling the world.” The possibility of a college deferment, the preferred choice of the privileged, is never raised in the conversations. Arlo, playing himself, provides

a voiceover as a folk guitar plays in the background and the fragmented conversations continue.

As the credits continue, a door is heard closing, and a female voice of authority is heard asking routine questions of a young man registering for the draft. As a picture finally appears on the screen, we see a one-shot of Arlo, wearing a large, wide-brimmed, brown hat over his long hair. The voice of authority, a middle-aged black clerk (Vinnette Carroll) checking the forms supplied by potential draftees, dominates the audio and then the video as she is shown in a medium shot from a high angle sitting behind her desk in the gray, sparsely decorated room. Arlo is called to the front. During a brief exchange, shot from over Arlo's shoulder initially to establish the point of view of the scene and much of the film, he tries half-heartedly to convince her that he should be rejected by the Army because Huntington's chorea is hereditary and he "could" become afflicted. Her no-nonsense rejection of his half-serious attempt to avoid the draft clearly illustrates that she, unlike Arlo, does not have time to engage in frivolities. She has a job to do and a boss to answer to, and if she is to feed her family and pay her rent, she must do it well and in a no-nonsense manner. The scene ends in a comic moment as she calls another young man to the desk. An eye-level one-shot shows him knitting on a bench in the corner (one way to avoid the draft was to feign homosexuality). He walks to the desk and smiles as the camera shoots him from over her shoulder in a reverse shot. His devilish grin is foregrounded, and the scene quickly cuts to Arlo hitchhiking on the open highway. The opening sequence sets a satirical tone for the film, but it also draws a distinction between the counterculture and the working class that will be on display throughout the film. The other young men in the induction center are most certainly headed towards induction and service in a war 6,000 miles away, and their nervous

laughter cannot hide that fact. The female worker has a job to do if she is going to continue to collect a paycheck, no matter what she may think of the war. Arlo, however, is already on the road to a safe haven far from the responsibilities of fighting a war before the ink on his draft registration has dried.

Not unlike *Easy Rider*, *Alice's Restaurant* is episodic and disjointed at times. Stylistically, this is a deliberate departure from the classic Hollywood form of rising action, climax, and denouement. The loose, episodic narrative is consistent with the nature of counterculture protagonists in general—as well as the audience the film is directed at. As Lester D. Friedman notes, counterculture protagonists tended to vacillate between “dropping in and dropping out,” and the “episodic plotting in many cases dispenses with clear motives and consistent, causal logic” (32). This structure defines *Alice's Restaurant* as counter “classic Hollywood” in form and simultaneously reflects the many sides of Arlo's character. Throughout the film, many facets of Arlo are shown, some seemingly incongruous with the sympathetic narrator of the film. The devoted son is also the willing exploiter of Alice's kindness. The musician who refuses to take advantage of a young groupie has no qualms about making a well-meaning police officer the butt of his jokes. The young man who can take Alice in at her darkest hour drives away with his girlfriend as Alice stands sad and alone outside her “church” on her wedding day. Arlo drops in and out at his own convenience, demonstrating a self-indulgence that sometimes rivals that of Wyatt and Billy in *Easy Rider*, minus the extreme consequences. In short, he is a work in progress, and the film's loose and episodic nature marries form to content.

Quick cuts are the norm in much of the film, and color is also used thematically. In many of the scenes when the counterculture is foregrounded, the colors are bright and bold.

This is particularly apparent in the wedding sequence at the end of the film when Alice and Ray renew their vows. Everyone is arrayed in colorful period costumes, with Alice and Ray standing out. The scene suggests a marriage of counterculture and working class values, as a “church” wedding is accompanied by wine, song, and not a little reefer. In some ways the sequence references the hospital scene between Arlo and Pete Seeger as well as the barn scene in *Easy Rider* when the motorcycle riders are shown in a deep focus shot along with the farmer and his horse, showing a potential for the joining of the counterculture and working class. But, just as in *Easy Rider*, the “marriage” does not take. As the guests leave the wedding, Alice is shown in isolation outside the converted church, symbolizing not only the likely end of her marriage to Ray, but also the failure of the working class and the counterculture to join hands. This one-shot demonstrates that not only have the two sets of values failed to blend, but that working-class values themselves have failed to address the needs of women, represented here by Alice.

Penn also uses tracking, hand-held cameras during scenes of great emotion, providing a realistic and intimate look at the characters. In two particular scenes this technique is used effectively to capture intimate emotions. The first one is the funeral scene for Shelly. A handheld camera begins with a long shot of a snow-covered cemetery and then tracks through the cemetery to the casket, capturing various characters positioned throughout the cemetery as it tracks. As the camera moves from the rear of the cemetery to the grave where Shelly will be laid to rest, the positioning of the characters suggests the pews of a church, with characters standing in horizontal lines, front to back, some leaning on a fence, others standing next to grave stones. The tracking of the camera seems to represent the life journey of Shelly as it intersected with the lives of the friends positioned throughout the cemetery.

The other example of a tracking camera is the final scene when a hand-held camera tracks sideways and then forward as it remains trained on Alice as she stands still and silent outside the “church” door watching Arlo’s van pull away. Ray, still disconsolate about Shelly’s death and drinking heavily, has retreated back into the church, leaving Alice alone to face a life that appears headed away from him. Both scenes deal with loss—one the loss of a life and the other the likely end of a marriage and the potential loss of an era as Ray has chosen the wedding celebration to announce his desire to sell the church and buy a farm that he envisions as a newer and bigger commune. Both scenes are also almost colorless, cold and gray contrasting to the bright colors usually associated with the counterculture throughout the film. Alice, who has agreed to re-marry Ray in the church as a way to heal the two following the death of Shelly, has again realized that Ray, despite his desperate need for her, is never going to accept her as an equal partner in the relationship. His unilateral decision to sell the church and announce it to the wedding revelers before discussing it with her has reopened her eyes to the folly of their relationship. Even if the decision to sell the church and buy land makes sense on some level, Ray’s unilateral decision is indicative of his mercurial nature, as well as his patriarchal tendencies.^{vi} The silent and still picture of Alice at the end of the film represents a woman trapped in a life that can only change if she moves beyond her relationship with Ray.

Although the film ends on a somber note, the early part of the film provides many light moments. Immediately following the draft registration scene, Arlo hitchhikes to Montana to enroll in college and “get him some of that government-approved education”—in other words, a deferment. Shortly thereafter, his friend Roger (Geoff Outlaw) shows up, somehow runs afoul of the locals and police, and is sent packing. Roger’s expulsion is

followed by a visit to Arlo by the police, who make it clear that he may want to consider following Roger out of town. In the following scene, touched on before and reminiscent of the scene in *Easy Rider* that foreshadowed the killing of George Hanson, but with a somewhat lighter tone due to Arlo's sardonic voiceover, Arlo is accosted by some locals (read working class) in a restaurant because of his hippie look and thrown through a window. After Arlo is ludicrously blamed for the incident by the college administration and the police—even the immigrant proprietor of the restaurant points an accusing finger at him—he again finds himself on the highway, this time headed east.

The “absence of home” theme in the film begins to take shape in these early scenes with Arlo. If he is not on the road headed west or back on the road returning east, his “home” is always temporary and never secure. The boarding house where he establishes brief roots in Montana is not only occupied by a “square” roommate who rejects his lifestyle, but it is also owned by an elderly woman who cannot tolerate his habits of playing music or smoking marijuana. His room is literally invaded by local police after Roger is sent packing because of a trumped up charge. The visit is simply a veiled threat warning him that a similar fate awaits him if he decides to stay in town. As the film proceeds, this absence of home repeats itself numerous times. In one scene, for example, Arlo is invited back to a “crash pad” by an underage groupie who, by all evidence, is a runaway living in a place where whoever brings home a sex partner gets the bed. Throughout the film, Arlo moves from one place to another, sometimes “crashing” with Alice and Ray, other times living off other friends, but never establishing a “home.” Even Woody and Arlo's mother have a temporary home, the hospital where Woody is confined because of his debilitating disease. Throughout the film, working-class Alice and Ray attempt to provide a home for the wayward counterculture characters

who populate their lives, but even Ray the dreamer is forced to admit in the last scene of the film that they have failed. As the last people pull away from their wedding celebration, Ray says, “I wish we had them back. [If] we’d had a real place we’d all still [have] been together, without buggin’ each other. We’d all be some kind of family.” As we will see later, Alice, too, is looking for a home as the film ends.

These early scenes, although sometimes almost comical, clearly demonstrate the divide between the counterculture and segments of the working class at the time. The counterculture characters reject the work-a-day lives of the working class and its willingness to fight the privileged class’s war in Vietnam; the working class only sees “long-hairs and draft dodgers” who flee to Canada or burn their draft cards while their own sons go off to fight a war they have been convinced is in America’s best interest. The satirical tone of much of *Alice’s Restaurant* never allows this animosity to rise to the level of violence reached in *Easy Rider*, but the working class is clearly the “other” in the film. Satire must have a target, and Penn chooses the working class, as representative of the establishment, as that target. These moments sometimes provide easy laughs, but the result is the exploitation of the differences between the counterculture and working class, not a celebration of commonalities.

Although he does not paint the entire working class as univocal or single-minded, members of the class, with the exception of Alice and Ray and the registration center worker, often come across as simple and unsophisticated. That is not to say that characters, counterculture and working class, always respond in a predictable manner, or that the working class routinely rendered as intolerant. Sometimes the opposite is true. For example, in the sequence when Arlo hitchhikes back east, he is picked up by a truck driver who,

despite his obvious distaste for Arlo's appearance (Arlo had tucked his hair beneath his hat while hitchhiking but unveiled it when he entered the truck), gives the counterculture character a ride. In the following scene, Arlo is shown walking past a tent revival meeting. The scene is full of damnation and hellfire and culminates with a young child tossing away his crutches and walking towards an evangelist, who welcomes him with open arms. While many in the audience may have expected Arlo to direct a satirical comment at the "flock," he chooses instead to wonder aloud about his father. "Seems like Woody's road might have run through here some time," he says in voiceover, demonstrating again his search for his father.

By contrast, Alice and Ray are seen mocking organized religion only a few scenes later as they take ownership of the church as worshippers are literally filing out of the church's final service. At one point, Ray plasters himself against a church wall with his arms extended as if he were being crucified. As they later remodel the church with friends, they again show little regard for the history of the structure. In an ironic twist, Arlo, thinking of his father's working-class roots, appears here to be more tolerant of the beliefs of working-class worshippers than Alice and Ray, two members of the working class. Arlo's reaction to the worshippers might be attributable in part to the way people behave when they are alone with their thoughts instead of in a communal setting. Had Arlo been involved with the remodeling effort, he would likely have taken part in the mocking of religious tradition. The fact that Ray and Alice choose later to re-marry in the "church" shows their ambivalence towards the idea of tradition, although their disdain for Marx's "opium of the masses," and the flock, is quite apparent.

While the renderings of Alice and Ray, working-class people who are countercultural at heart, provide balance for the other portrayals of the working class in the film and offer an

opportunity to build a sturdy bridge between the two groups, Penn portrays even their efforts as futile. Although Alice and Ray try valiantly to build a small bridge between the two groups, and succeed on some level, it is clear in the final shot of the silent and solitary Alice that something has failed to connect in this relationship. A parasitic relationship between the counterculture and the working class, like the relationship between Alice and Ray, cannot endure when only one partner in the “marriage” can be free from responsibility while the other is mired in it. That, it seems, is at the root of the tension between the two groups—in the film and in the real world—and it is that tension that cannot be successfully resolved. It’s quite possible that Penn recognized this dilemma and provided the somber ending to illustrate his own doubts about any successful marriage of the two parties.

Throughout the film, Alice runs her restaurant with little help from Ray. As we learned in the commune scene in *Easy Rider*, Ray’s attitude was not uncommon in the counterculture (or the working class from whence he came). As Doug Rossinow writes, “The New Left’s sexual agenda for most of this movement’s existence included neither gender equality nor androgyny. Not until the last years of the New Left, between 1968 and 1973, did radical women (and some men) move the New Left toward feminism” (116). Although the New Left is not synonymous with the counterculture, it was certainly connected with the broader movement at the time, and it brought its patriarchal tendencies with it. Ray truly is a character caught between times. Born in the 1930s, he is trying to live a life free from the shackles of a society that demanded much from men of his generation, but he is unable to leave behind his patriarchal ways. This is amplified in the scene where he slaps Alice after she has admonished him for being nothing but “one big muscle.” In some ways, he recalls the working-class “brute,” a character who appeared regularly in 1930s American films about the

working class and who reappeared in films like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954). In other ways, Ray represents an acceptance of a new generation and its mores. The rendering of his character could be viewed as symbolic of another unresolved tension between the working class and the counterculture: the contrast between the perceived brute force of the working class and the perceived pacifism of the counterculture. Although neither behavior was universal in either group, the perceptions of each were common to both.

An incident that takes place about halfway through the film paves the way for Arlo's eventual rejection by the Army, which is at the core of the film. After Alice and Ray reconcile following her decision to "go on vacation," Ray invites commune members and various other counterculture friends and allies to their converted church for Thanksgiving dinner. This spirited celebration is capped off by the loading of Arlo's Volkswagen van with "about a ton" of garbage. As the day winds down, the group decides to dump the van-load of garbage in a no-dumping area after they discover that the town dump is closed on Thanksgiving Day. Arlo's subsequent arrest and conviction leave him with a criminal record, and when this record is later discovered by the Army as he takes his physical for induction into the service, he is dispatched as unfit for military service—to his and his friends' delight. The litterer has been judged to be unfit to kill in the name of his country. In both sequences—his arrest and conviction in court for littering and his induction rejection—the working class is charged with carrying out the establishment's rigid and ridiculous policies and, consequently plays foil to the counterculture.

After the dumping of the garbage, Guthrie is arrested by "Officer Obie" of Stockbridge when a letter containing Arlo's name and address are found in the pile of garbage. As the satirical voiceover from Arlo states, the investigation—dozens of pictures of

garbage are presented as evidence at the trial, overseen, literally, by a blind judge—was perhaps a bit overzealous. At trial’s end, Arlo is fined \$50 and set free. Officer Obie is not depicted as violent or vindictive, as police generally are in counterculture/youth films, but he is represented as overzealous and a slave to the bureaucracy, an impression that is amplified by Arlo’s narration. Throughout this sequence, Arlo, through voiceover and live action, treats the arrest and trial with sarcasm, poking fun at Officer Obie and the blind judge. In the scene when Office Obie is preparing to lock up Arlo and Roger after they have turned themselves in, he asks them to remove their belts before he puts them behind bars. Arlo mockingly asks, “You think we’re going to kill ourselves for littering?” Because it has already been established that Officer Obie knows Arlo, Alice, and her counterculture friends and generally perceives them as eccentric but harmless, Arlo’s sarcasm takes on more weight because it demonstrates that Officer Obie is denying his relationship with the group to follow the letter of the law. To a certain extent, Officer Obie is “rehabilitated” in the eyes of the audience later in the film when he escorts Shelly home to the “church” instead of arresting him for possession and distribution of narcotics. But he is the target of Arlo’s, and the film’s, mockery during the arrest sequence and is held up as yet another unthinking working-class enforcer of establishment rules.

The satirical induction scene—allegedly based on Arlo’s actual experience—takes place in New York. As the folk-guitar instrumental of the title song plays in the background, the human production line that is the induction center is presented in all its absurdity, with young men either waiting in line for a genital prodding by a doctor, producing urine samples to present to a collector, or searching the hallways for the next line to stand in. In contrast to the bright colors and warm earth tones associated with the counterculture venues, the

induction center is concrete block painted in muted colors of green and yellow, a sterile and cold environment. The surreal quality of the moment is enhanced by quick cuts and the bounciness of the music. In a pivotal shot, Arlo and the army psychiatrist are filmed from the hallway through a large glass window as they jump up and down yelling, “Kill, kill, kill,” the words Arlo thought would lead to his rejection by the Army. But his ploy backfires in an amusing twist as a uniformed officer opens the door and exclaims that Arlo is the kind of man they are looking for. But another twist comes, at the expense of the establishment this time, when Arlo is asked if he has ever been arrested and he recounts the story of his conviction for littering. After spending some time in a room with other undesirable Section W draftees, whom Arlo in voiceover describes as “killers, mother rapers, and father rapers,” he is deemed unfit for service. Arlo’s arrest for garbage dumping—and Officer Obie’s determination to follow the letter of the establishment’s law—turns out to be his ticket out of the Army.

As touched on earlier, the use of quick cuts and the incorporation of popular music into the narrative created a look, sound, and pace that appealed to a youth audience accustomed to the frenetic action of films like *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and television shows like *The Monkees* (1966-1968) and *Laugh In* (1968-1973). Two scenes that make use of frenetic cuts are the induction sequence and the sequence that captures the arrival of all the counterculture characters for Thanksgiving dinner at Alice’s and Ray’s converted church, which signifies their version of a place to gather and “worship.” Quick cuts from one arrival to another—one on a motorcycle, the next dressed in full flower-child garb—quickly introduce us to a cast of counterculture characters of various styles, from hippies to bikers. The action cuts from movement from the traditional left-to-right to movement from right-to-

left, back-and-forth until the characters all arrive at the church. These cuts not only add pace to the sequence, but they also serve to contrast members of the disparate group of counterculture characters who are gathering to share in Alice and Ray's bounty. The non-traditional editing of the shots, particularly in regards to left/right, right/left movement, underscores the non-traditional, traditional celebration that is about to ensue. As David Bordwell notes in *How Hollywood Tells It*, American filmmakers had begun to experiment with some of the "flagrantly artificial editing techniques" introduced in some New Wave films and in Beatles' films. One of these devices was rapid cuts. For example, *Bonnie and Clyde*, innovative and fast-paced, had an average shot length (ASL) of 3.8 seconds, very fast for its time. *Alice*, on the other hand, had what Bordwell calls a "remarkable 2.6 seconds ASL" (141). The technique not only held the attention of the youth audience, but it also helped to sustain the satirical tenor throughout much of the film, despite content like Shelly's death, the brief scene of a returning black veteran with a hook for a hand, and the depiction of the strained relationship between Alice and Ray.

Despite the rapid cuts and innovative editing in parts of the film, as the narrative proceeds it becomes clear that Penn has no intention of sustaining the satirical tone throughout. Arlo's satirical voiceovers and the light, quickly paced sequences of the early and middle parts of the film are replaced later by long tracking shots of a cemetery, scenes of loss at a hospital after Woody's death, and the silent and still picture of Alice at film's end. In fact, three deaths dominate the latter part of the film—Shelly's, Woody's, and the marriage of Alice and Ray. The fantasy of the counterculture, expressed in frenetically paced scenes, movement of characters and bright colors—all of which reappear temporarily at Alice and Ray's wedding near the end of the film—is replaced by the harsh reality of life and death in

the “real world” as the editing slows and the colors fade later in the film. Penn may be paying homage to the counterculture with his film, and he may have a heart-felt sympathy for it, but he also seems to be saying that “doing your own thing” does not inoculate you from the stark and practical realities of life. This message is most apparent in the theme of the absence of home. Arlo’s search for a home takes him almost coast to coast early in the film and later finds him “crashing” wherever he can find a bed. Likewise, it is not a coincidence that Shelly and Woody die homeless, Shelly in a lonely hotel room of a drug overdose and Woody in a sterile hospital room. Penn seems to be saying that you cannot count on others like Alice and Ray to provide a home for you, because you cannot count on that home being there when you go back. If you do not have a home, it is probably because you have not taken the time to build one.

Auster and Quart write, “Penn can grace us with scenes that catch both the absurdity—the dim, clichéd talk about getting one’s head together—and the sense of human possibility and community of the counterculture” (90). While Penn does offer a glimpse of the counterculture and moments of community, even at the lightest, most satirical moments in the film Penn never embraces the possibility of a sustained community within the counterculture or between it and the working class. The film is clearly lighter in tone in the beginning and middle than it is at the end, but the theme of absence of home is prevalent throughout. In Penn’s depiction, there is also a distinct lack of spirituality in the counterculture characters, as witnessed by Alice and Ray’s mocking of religion early in the film and the “costume wedding” sequence at the film’s climax. This lack of some form of a spiritual base, a communal purpose beyond having a place to gather and celebrate, appears to be a contributing factor to the theme of absence of home. Yes, Alice and Ray provide a home

for counterculture friends, but it is a home rife with strife, from their own tenuous relationship to the “troubled child” who is Shelly. One gets the impression that their service to the counterculture is the only thing that keeps their relationship together.

The satirical tone of the earlier part of the film may make light of the issues that are facing the counterculture and working class—it may even obscure those issues at times—but the subtext of the absence of home is always there. As the film proceeds and the satire moves to the background, these issues move to the forefront. Both the counterculture and the working class experience loss. Although some may see the “possibility of community,” there is nothing in the film that suggests this community will emerge. Even Ray’s impulsive decision to sell the church in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and buy a farm in Vermont to construct a new “commune” is met with little enthusiasm, either by Alice or the gathered guests. The decision does not connote community; it represents a likely break-up of the group. At the end of the wedding, everyone leaves and goes their separate ways. The counterculture characters go about “doing their own thing,” while working-class Ray and Alice are left to deal with the realities of their life—a damaged marriage and pressing decisions regarding property, home, and relationships.

Throughout the film we are introduced to working-class characters of all sorts, from the sturdy, no-nonsense draft registration center employee to the bigoted Montana locals to well-meaning but bureaucratic Officer Obie, and, most importantly, to Alice and Ray. While the film targets the working class at times with its humor and occasionally mocks its rigid devotion to the bureaucracy of the establishment, *Alice’s Restaurant* makes an honest attempt to show the complexities of working-class life through Alice and Ray, even if the working-class “brute” reappears. The film is not just a loving homage to the counterculture—if it

were, Alice would not be central to the film, nor would her story be the final one we see played out on the screen. Arthur Penn may have set out to pay tribute to the counterculture, but the results were more complex. If anything, the film is a loving, and sometimes troubling, portrayal of both the counterculture and the working class—blemishes and all. He shows in this film that one can appreciate, love, and even empathize with a group, but still recognize its faults and its potentially fatal flaws.

If seen only through the eyes of Arlo, the film takes on a different tenor—it becomes a smart-alecky, satirical look at the establishment and the working class. But Arlo’s point of view cannot go unchallenged. Despite Arlo Guthrie’s shortcomings as an actor—part of the character’s charm—the character Arlo is more complex than a first viewing might indicate. He is, to put it in the vernacular, still “a work in progress,” and his point of view as narrator has to be accepted in that light. His “smart-alecky” approach to authority—Officer Obie and the induction center scenes are examples—while defining his stand on the establishment, also indicates a certain immaturity. A more contrite Arlo, rather than one who chose to treat Officer Obie condescendingly when evidence of the garbage dumping leads back to him, might have gotten off with just a ticket, and not an arrest and a trial. Even the act of dumping a half-ton of garbage along a country road instead of waiting for the town dump to open in the morning is a sign of immaturity and a need for instant gratification. Not only does it fly in the face of the nascent environmental movement of the time, but it also shows a selfish and childish side of Arlo and the counterculture—a side that looked upon any restriction of personal freedom as an affront, even if it were in place to protect others.

The true “hero” of the film is Alice, even if the sympathies of much of the film appear to be with Arlo and the counterculture. Alice sacrifices for others, feels deep pain when one

of her “children” falls from grace, and works tirelessly to nourish and protect her brood. But she, too, is caught in a time of transition. Like the counterculture, with which she shares many values, she cannot, as a woman in her thirties during the late 1960s, declare her complete independence from the working-class male. Just as the counterculture youths need the working-class male to fight the wars they reject and to do the jobs they won’t do, she is still shackled in many ways to a patriarchal society. The final scene, while somber, is really a moment before a moment. It is the moment when Alice realizes the wedding has changed nothing, and that she has a tough and long road ahead of her if she is to become the woman she wants to become. But as somber and sad as the moment is, it is also hopeful. Even if her husband is not worthy of her, and her counterculture children only want to be around in the good times or when she can do something for them, this working class woman is ready for the next step in her life. She’s scared, but she’s ready.

It is impossible to believe that Penn did not see these complexities in Alice’s character or her potential as a bridge between the two cultures. Otherwise, why end the film with her story? She remains a bit of a mystery to us because we do not get inside her head, as we sometimes get inside Arlo’s. What we do learn about her is learned from observing her actions, not listening to her words. But that’s ultimately a good thing. Arlo’s narration, because of its glib nature, prevents us from getting to know him more deeply. But we don’t have the same burden with Alice. What we see is what we get, as they say. And with Alice we get a flesh and blood woman who represents a potential bridge between the counterculture and the working class—but a bridge that Penn seems to feel was asked to carry too heavy a load. Although one can feel some hope for Alice at the end of the film, despite the somber tone, it’s hard to feel the same hope for the relationship between the

counterculture and the working class. Arlo, despite recognizing that something is not right between Ray and Alice during the wedding sequence, seems incapable of helping Alice to carry that heavy load. Nothing in this final scene indicates that the counterculture and the working class can come together. The opposite, in fact, seems to be true.

Medium Cool

The final film to be explored in this chapter is *Medium Cool* by Haskell Wexler. *Medium Cool*, while offering a sympathetic look at the plight of the counterculture and the Black Power movement, also offers a complex, and predominantly sympathetic, portrayal of the working class. It, among all the films discussed here, may have offered the greatest opportunity for a wedding of counterculture and working class interests.

Of the films discussed in this chapter, *Medium Cool* is the most nuanced and multi-layered, offering a window to the epoch as it comments not only on the times, but also on what Wexler perceived as a certain callousness that was endemic in the media at the time. It is also, by far, the most experimental of the four films. Although Hollywood co-opted the counterculture moment for profit—unsuccessfully, as previously noted—some filmmakers tried to use film to expose the fissures in American society. Wexler was one of those directors. Ethan Mordden, writing about *Medium Cool*, a film that incorporated footage of the Chicago Police riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention into its narrative, says, “This isn’t just a movie; it’s a weapon . . . what *Medium Cool* tells of is hot stuff, all the feelings that came clashing together in the late 1960s and particularly in 1968 and mainly in Chicago” (238-239).

Medium Cool may have been a weapon, but it shot blanks at the box office when released in late August of 1969. The film about a Chicago TV cameraman who chronicles the events of 1968 and experiences an awakening of sorts was the target of government investigations even before it came to the screen. Although the film was no more “adult” than many films of its era, its content won it an initial X-rating (Morrdon 220), allegedly due to its sexual content, but more likely attributable to its strong leftist politics. As Paul Monaco notes, “at least four” government agencies kept the film under surveillance during production because of “suspected connections between the film’s producer and radical protest groups.” He adds:

The overt political seriousness of *Medium Cool* may have partially compromised its box-office popularity, even at a time when the interest of young people in politics was imagined to be at its height. Paramount, moreover, marketed the movie ineptly, most likely holding back its best efforts with a film that was widely known across the industry to have been under such close governmental scrutiny during its production. (178)

The film endures, however, primarily because of its documentation of a historic moment, the Chicago police riots in the 1968 Democratic Convention, and because of its critique of the media. But the film also provides a complex and multi-layered look at the working class, an aspect of the film that is often overlooked. Here the working class is seen as both a victim of the times and as an arm of the establishment. By following Chicago TV cameraman John Cassellis (Robert Forster) during the tumultuous year of 1968, the audience is introduced to the seminal events of the year as well as their effects on the working class.

Compared to other youth films of the era, Wexler's film is an anomaly. While other films privilege the counterculture point of view, Wexler explores the plight of the working class as well as the youthful protesters in Chicago and lets the audience draw its own conclusions about what is happening in America. Unlike Penn, whose "warm evocation" of the counterculture foregrounds the youth culture, sometimes at the expense of the working class, Wexler depicts both the counterculture and the working class as victims of a system that one is trapped in and the other is trying to change. Wexler does this in part by providing a protagonist who is on the periphery of the working class, a cameraman who appears to have a working-class background despite his white collar profession (he was an amateur fighter as a youth). Although foregrounding Cassellis, Wexler does not tell the story from the protagonist's point of view, as Penn does with Arlo in *Alice's Restaurant*. The film clearly has a point of view, but it is not one of any one character. While Wexler sympathizes with the youthful protesters, he demonstrates an equal sympathy for the working class, particularly Eileen (Verna Bloom) and Harold (Harold Blankenship), a young woman and her teenage son from Appalachia who have relocated to the Appalachian slums of Chicago. But he also does not hesitate to show the dark side of the working-class response to the counterculture, either. The violence of the National Guard and the Chicago police, serving in the roles of enforcers for the establishment, is graphically displayed.

The working class in the film, however, is most prominently represented by Eileen, Harold, and Eileen's ex-husband, Buddy, and the black working class. As a school teacher who has migrated to Chicago but cannot find a teaching job because she lacks Illinois certification, Eileen is stuck in a menial position, trying to support herself and Harold. Eileen's story serves as an important subplot that ultimately connects Cassellis with his better

self. Unlike other working-class characters we have witnessed in *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*, Eileen is virtually oblivious to the counterculture and its efforts to bring its issues to the fore. Like many in the working class of the time, she is too busy trying to survive in a hostile city to be concerned with war protesters. In fact, her life as a struggling working-class woman doesn't intersect with the counterculture until the pivotal final sequence of the film when she must risk walking through lines of police and protesters to find Harold, who has gone missing. Her only political "statement" of the film is the displaying of a Robert F. Kennedy poster in her apartment, which cleverly binds her with Cassellis, who has a similar poster. The presence of the posters is particularly powerful because that part of the film is set in the summer of 1968, shortly after RFK's assassination. In Cassellis's case, the poster most likely demonstrates his liberal tendencies, but with Eileen it is much more personal—a week before he announced his candidacy for president, Kennedy had made an emotional trip to Appalachia in early 1968 to bring attention to the plight of its people. So, while she does not have the time or energy to develop a position on the counterculture, she is clearly a woman who is aware of the effect of politics on her life.

When we initially meet John Cassellis, we are appalled. As the film opens, we see him shooting a car accident on a freeway with his sound assistant Gus (Peter Bonerz). As the camera pulls back, showing a desolate stretch of highway, the two men walk away from the accident and the audience sees that people are still trapped inside a car, one woman's body literally lying halfway onto the highway. Only after Cassellis has his shot does he call the highway patrol. Cassellis is immediately identified as a cool, even callous, observer of the human condition. Later, however, his humane side emerges when he realizes the consequences of his work.

As the narrative unfolds, Cassellis and Gus are shown shooting news footage for several topical late 1960s stories. They shoot film at Resurrection City in Washington, D.C., where poor blacks, whites, Latinos, and others have set up “shantytowns” to protest the treatment of the poor. They film the National Guard training in Illinois. They also cover the RFK campaign, including the aftermath of Kennedy’s assassination. Along the way, Wexler mixes fiction and real events by incorporating documentary film of several events into his narrative and by using direct cinema techniques. A film about television and its role in society, as well as a film about the events that provide the material for film, *Medium Cool’s* intercutting of actual documentary footage with fictional footage erases the line between fiction and reality. In the long, final sequence, Bloom, as Eileen, is filmed as she wanders through actual protesters and police lines in the search for her fictional son Harold, who has run away after hearing her argue with Cassellis. By intercutting these scenes of fiction and reality, and by inserting actors into real sites of conflict, Wexler crosses over from fiction to reality. This makes it easier for the audience to accept the brutality of some of the later fictional scenes—how can an audience become overwrought with grief about a “movie” hero after seeing a real college student bludgeoned by police—but at the same time it forces the audience to witness the actual brutality of the police action in Chicago with fresh eyes. The audience gets to see what the camera sees—police beating a young man bloody with a baton, college students kneeling beside fallen friends, trying to protect them from further harm, protesters scrambling as a heavily armed National Guardsmen march on them as they hold ups signs for the whole world to see—and it is pulled from its comfortable seat in a movie house into a real-life moment of violence and chaos.

Writing about this aspect of the film in *Camera Politica*, Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan say, “The purpose of these devices is to force the audience to identify less with the adventure or the hero and to think more about the documentary events. Yet the price paid for this strategy is an emotionally flat drama” (35). I agree in part, but while they seem to see the “flat drama” as a weakness, I believe Wexler wants us to view the violence that later visits the main characters dispassionately. He wants us to think, not feel, particularly when we see Cassellis’s car wrapped around a tree in the film’s final sequence. At the same time, he makes us focus on the real violence of the police and the National Guard, and not just see it as another installment of the nightly news. I believe he was trying to awaken that large part of the American public that had become inured to images of violence that were nightly broadcast into living rooms in the late 1960s. At a time when images of war, domestic protest, and human suffering had become commodities designed to draw viewers to television sets, Wexler was trying to encourage people to think about the realities behind the images they are drawn to, and at the same time he was telling the networks that their images must be more than just commodities to sell to advertisers.

I believe these devices serve another purpose, too. They demonstrate that all images are pregnant with ideology and that whoever controls the editing and distribution of those images controls the ideological message. In this case, Wexler, through his unusual access to real-life scenes, was able to not only film some real incidents missed by mainstream media, but was able to show them without fear of editing from a corporate boss at a network. He controlled the images, and thus the ideological content of those images. Those familiar with theorist Louis Althusser know of his theory of Ideological State Apparatuses. ISAs, as defined by Althusser, are social institutions like schools, churches, family, trade unions,

political parties and communications media that perpetuate the ideology of the ruling class (Leitch 1488-1489). In *Medium Cool*, the role of the media is apparent in the final sequence of the film. During the shooting of the Chicago police riot, Wexler's camera captures a sign that carries the iconic slogan, "The Whole World's Watching." As James Monaco writes, "The whole world is watching, indeed! And not doing very much about what it sees" (257). But maybe the world was "not doing very much" because it was only seeing the images the networks chose to show. In a telling moment at the end of the film, a businessman is being interviewed on the radio as the credits begin to roll and acknowledges that, based on what he had heard and seen on TV, he assumed that "the kids were a bunch of bums." But when he went to the site to see for himself, "I finally found out when I got down here that, goddammit, the kids are right." The story filtered through the media ISA left him feeling one thing; the reality another.

A turning point for the film and Cassellis takes place about a third of the way into the film. The cameraman is pulled aside by his station's news director and is told that his raw footage is being used by the FBI to identify "radicals," both black and counterculture. He objects forcefully, appalled that his work is being used for oppressive political purposes. Not long after his blow-up with the news director, he loses his job for a minor infraction of station rules and is given his severance. His dismissal is clearly a by-product of his ideological disagreement with the news director and suggests that the media ISA is too interwoven with the government (broadcast is licensed and regulated by the Federal Communications Commission) to tolerate an individual who questions that relationship. Prior to this, Cassellis has been oblivious to his role in the ISA that is television, and at this point his view of himself and his work changes. He can no longer define himself as just a

cameraman doing a job he loves, as he does in one of his early scenes with Eileen at her apartment. In this scene, as they watch a tape of Martin Luther King on TV not long after King's assassination, Cassellis turns to Eileen and says, "Gee, I love to shoot film." To him, it's an opportunity to do something he loves, not a national tragedy. Only later does he see that as a cameraman for a commercial television station licensed by the government he is more than just a recorder of events—he is a purveyor of ideology.

As Cassellis evolves politically, recognizing the import of his work, he also evolves personally. He makes a commitment to Eileen and Harold that he has avoided with his former girlfriend, a beautiful woman of the upper-middle class he shares sex and little else with. He serves as a mentor to Harold, teaching him how to box and protect himself, and a loving companion for Eileen, immersing himself in their lives.

Cassellis first meets Eileen almost by happenstance when he stops by her apartment to return a basket containing a bird that Harold left behind when Cassellis chased him away from his car. At the time, Cassellis assumed Harold was trying to break into the car to steal something. This scene also gives Wexler an opportunity to introduce the Appalachian community and the desolate circumstances under which they live. As Cassellis parks his car and walks up the rickety steps to the apartment and knocks on the tattered wooden screen door, the dilapidated condition of the buildings in the complex is obvious. Garbage is littered around the street and a courtyard. The buildings are gray and dirty. Cassellis's first reaction is to direct Gus to guard his car as he parks it in front of the apartment. As Gus "guards" the car, the Appalachian children, dirty and poorly dressed, crawl on and around it, treating it almost like an alien dropped into their midst. One of the children, maybe two years old, is

naked and alone on the street. Cassellis returns the basket and, after a brief conversation, leaves.

Despite the distressing surroundings, Cassellis is impressed by Eileen. Only later, however, when they run into each other by happenstance, does a relationship develop. Although the two make an odd couple—Vincent Canby commented on its unlikelihood in a 1969 review of the film—it is important not only to his growth as a character, but also to underscore the secondary plot of the plight of the Appalachian working class. Here, as with Wyatt and Billy and the counterculture in *Easy Rider*, Billy Jack and the runaways in *Billy Jack*, and Arlo and the counterculture in *Alice's Restaurant*, the theme of “absence of home” again surfaces. Eileen has escaped Appalachia and a dead-end life, but she and her son Harold have been forced to leave their home. She is either the widow of a war casualty or the wife of a misogynist who ran out on her—her husband Buddy's plight is intentionally left ambiguous in the film. We see Buddy only in a series of flashbacks—in one, he teaches Harold how to shoot a gun—not uncommon for an Appalachian father and son; in another, he gives him misogynistic advice about women, again, probably not uncommon. The flashbacks serve the purpose of giving Eileen and Harold a back story, but it is a back story about a lost home. Whatever has become of Buddy, Eileen is now a working-class woman trying to raise a teenage son without a father and without a job worthy of her in a city that is not welcoming. Her relationship with Cassellis brings some stability back into her and Harold's lives.

A bird not only brings Cassellis together with Eileen and Harold, but it also symbolizes freedom throughout the film. In one scene, clearly responding to Harold's love of birds, Eileen and Harold visit a site in southern Illinois to watch the release of hundreds of carrier pigeons. As the birds are released, they are photographed from a low angle to capture

their free flight. The grassy, open field also contrasts to the cramped quarters in which Eileen and Harold live their confined working-class lives in Chicago. Throughout the film, the presence of birds accentuates the lack of freedom in the lives of Eileen and Harold and other members of the working class. This is most obvious in one sequence as Wexler cross-cuts between a scene in the cramped apartment of a black cab driver and a scene that shows Harold and a friend freeing a pigeon on the roof of a house. The obvious implication is that a bird can be set free, but poor blacks and Appalachian migrants are trapped within the “unfriendly confines” of Chicago’s worst streets.

The scene in the cab driver’s apartment is significant for two reasons. It foreshadows Cassellis’s awakening about the government use of his film; and it demonstrates the black community’s deep distrust of the white establishment and the media that it feels is complicit in the oppression of blacks. Cassellis, smelling a story, tracks down the cab driver, who has turned in \$10,000 to the police that he found in his cab. Cassellis learns about the story only after the police refuse to believe the cabbie doesn’t know how \$10,000 got into his cab. The absurdity of this accusation—and its racial implications—is immediately apparent to the audience. Cassellis locates the cabbie in a ghetto apartment and attempts to do a positive piece on him for the television station. During the scene, one of the black men learns that the cabbie has turned in \$10,000 in cash to the police and asks, “Do you know how much guns and ammunition you could buy with \$10,000?” The cabbie responds, “I’m not there yet,” indicating that even a Good Samaritan like the cabbie could at least entertain the idea of rising up in arms against the white establishment. As Cassellis prepares to leave the apartment, he is first accosted by a black woman who claims to be an actress and thinks Cassellis, as a cameraman, can help her, and then by several black men. One by one, they

question his motives for doing the story. He is told in blunt terms that the media is not concerned with telling their story unless they can exploit it. During the scene, Cassellis's path to the door is blocked. The scene is shot in a tight frame using two- and three-shots, with Cassellis often pressed against the left corner of the frame. Close-ups of Cassellis and the "agitators" add to the sense of imminent violence. Cassellis defends his role in the media in a cliché, vanilla way, but his real motivation is to end the conversation and escape the potentially dangerous environment. Every time it appears that he will be able to leave, a new face pops into the picture and a new "discussion" about the media ensues.

Cassellis is eventually escorted from the apartment, but the sequence ends with a dramatic graphic match as a black finger becomes the barrel of a gun. As one black man looks directly into the camera, points his finger and says, "Why do you always wait until somebody gets killed, because somebody is going to get killed," the scene changes and the audience is suddenly looking down the barrel of a gun. As the camera pulls back, a middle-class white woman is shown shooting a pistol at a firing range where the manager (Peter Boyle) is being interviewed by Cassellis and Gus. He states that gun ownership has risen 46 percent in the city "since the riots last year." He adds, "We're getting our business from people who want to protect their families and their homes. . . . It's a personal choice." Ironically, it is the white working and middle classes that are arming, not the oppressed blacks in the ghetto.

Both of these scenes are frightfully real. The anger of the black men is palpable and understandable. They have seldom seen the media in their neighborhood, except to record negative images to broadcast across the city's airwaves. The scene at the firing range is just as frightening. Here, women and men are learning how to shoot people in defense of their

property, and the smiling range manager sees the upsurge in gun ownership as simply a boom for his business. The black and white members of the working class are turning their anger towards each other instead of towards the powerful elite, the same mistake the counterculture and working class are making. Although *Medium Cool* only touches on this misplaced anger in two scenes, the film's depiction of the tension was recognized as powerful. Critic John Simon called the apartment scene "perhaps the only instance in the American commercial film [of the 1960s] of racial tension caught root and branch on screen" (qtd. in Paul Monaco 178, Monaco's brackets). Just as the counterculture and the working class fail to see that they have a common enemy—the powerful elite—so, too, do the black and white members of the working class. As the 1970s arrived, this racial tension, as we will see in Chapter 2, helped to push the nation to the right.

That brings us to the most negative representation of the working class in the film—the police and National Guard involved in squelching the counterculture demonstrations during the Democratic Convention. Using the actual riots in Lincoln Park as a backdrop, Wexler shoots Verna Bloom, as Eileen, frantically searching through the park and around the convention center for Harold, who had run away the night before after witnessing an uncomfortable interaction between her and Cassellis. (She had resisted Cassellis's overtures for sex although she clearly had feelings for him.) This sequence serves to lessen emotional involvement with Eileen—she is now a "character in a movie" as the audience watches real riots take place around her—but it also heightens the involvement with the actual protests and riot. As the camera rolls, protesters sing, shout, and carry signs as police wade into crowds carrying shields and swinging billy clubs. Vivid documentary shots of actual youths

bleeding from their heads, being attended to by others and being carried on stretchers, are shown as Eileen searches frantically for Harold.

Eileen is clearly out of place in this scene—a working-class woman dressed in a bright, yellow dress (she had been searching all night for Harold and had not changed from the outfit she had worn on her date) scouring the periphery of the actual riot, occasionally wading perilously close to the real action, as tracking shots follow her every move. She remains almost oblivious to the activity around her. While the protesters “do their thing,” she is doing hers, being a mother to her lost child. Her physical distinction from the protestors is accentuated when she approaches an actual National Guardsman stationed in front of the convention center and convinces him to let her pass so that she can track down Cassellis, who, in the “guerrilla” spirit of the film, is actually shooting inside the convention hall as a freelance cameraman during the convention. The guardsman’s action shows solidarity with the working-class woman (he does not know she is an actress) in contrast to the conflict between the guards and the counterculture students. In an interview on the DVD, Wexler says that as he shot the scene in “guerilla” style, capturing shots where they could as real action took place around them, he did not know if the Guard would let Bloom, in character as Eileen, pass through their lines.

Eileen finds Cassellis in the convention center, but as they travel a road in a wooded area in search of Harold, the sun glares through their windshield, blinding them and foreshadowing their accident. A screech is heard, and then a thump. Cassellis’ car is shown smashed against a tree. We do not see the accident—only the aftermath. The audience is forewarned seconds before the accident by a voiceover radio news announcement that reports the death of a woman and the critical injuring of TV cameraman John Cassellis in a single

car accident. The accident, resulting in at least one horrific death, has been reduced to another commodity for the news industry to broadcast. As smoke rises from Cassellis's car, a lone car, carrying an average family, drives slowly past the accident scene and takes a picture, eerily replaying the opening shot of the film. The camera pulls back slowly and a cameraman is spotted on scaffolding, shooting down the street at the smoking car. The two cameras then turn towards each other, and the film ends with the camera on the ground zooming in to capture the cameraman on the scaffolding, played by Wexler himself. The distinction between reality and fiction is not just blurred; it is erased. Wexler has made his final comment on the role of film and the media in our lives. In the end, we only get a picture of a picture of what happened. A human tragedy is no longer a tragedy—it is just something that we capture on film and project into our living rooms until the next tragedy comes along.

As the film ends, Cassellis is critically, probably mortally injured; Eileen is dead; Harold is orphaned; the protesters are nursing real wounds in a last hurrah for the anti-war movement; the Chicago police and National Guard are vilified by many, including some press, for inciting the violence at the protest; the black community is angry, bordering on militant uprising; the counterculture has suffered a terrible defeat; the Great Society is breaking up; and Richard Nixon is headed towards the White House. As Vincent Canby noted at the time, "The result is a film of tremendous visual impact, a kind of cinematic "Guernica," [Pablo Picasso's classic mural depicting the German attack on the Spanish city of Guernica] a picture of America in the process of exploding into fragmented bits of hostility, suspicion, fear and violence." Perhaps more than any other film of the era, *Medium Cool* captures the complexity of the political and cultural environment in America as the 1960s ends. Wexler shines a sharp light on the working class, the counterculture, and the

powers that be in America, eschewing any filter that would soften the pock marks. But despite his success in bringing hidden secrets to light, he, too, fails to demonstrate how a lasting bridge could be constructed between the working class and the counterculture. Although he demonstrates clearly that both groups have a common antagonist—the establishment, which fails to provide for the working class as it sends its sons to war, and which tries to stifle protest at home through any means possible, including the use of the media ISA—he does not show the two parties joining forces. While that may be asking too much of a film that brings the seminal issues of the time to light, it is nonetheless something the film has in common with the other films in this chapter: *Easy Rider*, *Billy Jack*, and *Alice's Restaurant*.

In *Medium Cool*, however, by providing a working-class protagonist of sorts—at least one who has emerged from the working class—and by providing a generally sympathetic rendering of the working class, Wexler has at least reopened the dialogue between the two “cultures” that was promised in films like *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Although the two cultures do not literally “dialogue” in the film, Wexler, by foregrounding the working class and by offering a balanced view of that class, has made it clear that dialogue could supplant animosity if the two sides were to recognize that their mutual enemy is the establishment-run state, whose subtle control of the Ideological State Apparatus of television has made the “cool medium” a weapon to be used against them.

Despite its failure to attract large audiences, *Medium Cool* remains one of the most important films about the last years of the 1960s. It captures the epoch's most pressing issues, the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, more clearly and realistically than any other contemporary film. In doing so, it also offers something that most of the youth/cult

films of the era do not—it offers an honest, realistic, and sympathetic look at the working class. In some ways, it points towards the return of the working class as a protagonist in Hollywood, even if Haskell Wexler’s film is anything but a Hollywood film.

As noted earlier in this chapter, several films depicting counterculture values, mostly set on or around college campuses, were released during the period immediately following the success of *Easy Rider* in 1969. *The Strawberry Statement*, *Zabriskie Point*, and *Getting Straight* were three that arrived within a calendar year after *Easy Rider*, but they all failed at the box office. Howard Hampton writes that the brief period of campus-based counterculture films was Hollywood’s attempt to forge a “wedge” into the youth market: “It was in the truest sense a fashion statement: slap some indiscriminate rock, long hair, and love beads on that (middle-of-the-road) hegemony and presto, it would become ‘far out’, daring, radical” (260). That formula, as we have seen, did not result in the kind of box office that Hollywood expected—with the one obvious exception of *Billy Jack*, which, as noted, combined old and new forms to reach a broad audience. By the early 1970s, Hollywood, prompted by the changing cultural and economic environment in the nation, was ready to move in a new direction.

In Chapter 2, several films of the early 1970s that foreground the working class will be explored. Hollywood, always a year or two behind trends because of the time it takes an idea to reach the screen, was taking another look at the working class, this time as a victim of runaway inflation, rising unemployment, and a continuing overseas war that persisted in claiming working-class lives. In some ways this was a return to an earlier time in Hollywood as the working class again became a more sympathetic presence onscreen. In an ironic twist, Dennis Hopper’s independent film that by-and-large celebrated the counterculture actually

anticipated the emerging mood of the working class in the late 1960s and its reactionary potential. As we will see, whether coming from the Right or the Left, many Hollywood films of the early 1970s responded to the squeeze being felt by the working class as the sixties ended and the seventies began. The working class was angry, frightened, and ready to fight back, and Hollywood's brief flirtation with counterculture protagonists ended as it rediscovered working class "heroes" who could bring audiences back to movie houses.

ⁱ That is not to imply that Hollywood abandoned its traditional narrative style—films starring studio era stars like Rock Hudson, John Wayne, Katherine Hepburn, Charlton Heston, and Kirk Douglas were still being produced. But Hollywood realized that it needed to produce a product that appealed to a new and younger audience while it tried to retain audiences who still craved traditional fare.

ⁱⁱ *Easy Rider* editor Donn Cambern, interviewed in the 2005 film *Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing*, notes that the concept of what became known as "flash cuts" grew from the desire of director Dennis Hopper to create a new transition device. As Cambern explains, the flash cuts flash forward to an upcoming scene and flash back to the current scene three times in succession. Each flash cut was exactly six frames of film. Cambern said that the filmmaker and editor became a bit too enamored with the technique at one point. "It was becoming a device," he said. They then decided to use it only in the most important scenes when it served the narrative.

ⁱⁱⁱ The use of iconic landscapes also demonstrates the difference between Wyatt and Billy and the working-class characters in the film. While Wyatt and Billy are on the move, experiencing the freedom of exploring the vastness of America, the working-class characters generally appear to be static, stuck in place, almost part of the landscape.

^{iv} The choice of cocaine is important here because, despite its origin in nature, it was considered a chemical drug. Marijuana, peyote, and alcohol were considered natural and were thus less demonized.

^v It should be noted that the New Left, which in the early 1960s represented a break from the Old Left, is considered by many to be part of the “counterculture” movement. But the New Left, particularly the faction led by the Students for a Democratic Society, began primarily as a political movement, not a cultural one. Like the Old Left, however, it did understand the need to build coalitions. As Doug Rossinow notes in “The Revolution is about Our Lives,” New Left thinking evolved during the 1960s. He writes, “In the late 1960s, New Left radicals chose to pursue their own countercultural activities as a means of attracting and maintaining members and as a way of fomenting social change in America. We can think of these activities as constituting a second counterculture, separate from the one built by the hippies, or we may view them as forming the left wing of a larger white youth counterculture” (100).

^{vi} The concept of patriarchy is yet another theme that threads its way through the film as every man in Alice’s life expects her to fulfill all the domestic duties. Even Arlo, the enlightened artist and counterculture hero, demonstrates patriarchal tendencies when he stops by his girlfriend’s place of employment and expects her to leave work in the middle of the day to escort him on his journey to find a new home for the garbage he previously dumped.

CHAPTER 2

THE WORKING CLASS REVIVED AS PROTAGONIST

In this chapter we will look at how the changing economic climate in America during the late 1960s and early 1970s was reflected in the cinema of the time. As we learned in Chapter 1, Hollywood responded to the move to the Left in the country and the growing youth audience with a spate of films that highlighted the counterculture. That changed in the early 1970s, however, when the economy turned sour and the working class—generally ignored, oftentimes marginalized, and occasionally demonized in the youth/cult films of the late 1960s—once again became the focal point of a slew of American films. But before we can discuss the films, we need to take a look at the economic and political environment in which the films were produced.

The 1960s, particularly the early and middle years of the decade, were a boom time for the American economy. Despite the horrific tragedies that struck the nation during the decade—the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, and the divisions in the country over the Vietnam War—the economy treated the American people well. As William O’Neill writes, “The 1960’s saw the physical condition of America’s people improve. Real income went up substantially, especially among blacks. [. . .] Poverty, particularly among blacks again, declined” (420). This economic strength, along with the political skill of Lyndon B. Johnson and his ability to cash in on the country’s willingness to honor the wishes of its fallen president, JFK, led to the greatest expansion of federal programs since the New Deal. After defeating Barry Goldwater soundly in the 1964 presidential election, Johnson set forth an ambitious plan, which he called the Great Society.

Programs were designed to add another safety net for the elderly and less fortunate (Medicare) and to address wrongs that were endemic in the society for more than a century (the Voting Act, the War on Poverty). These were passed in the first year of Johnson's first full term, 1965. Gus Tyler, who at the time was an official in the International Ladies Garment Union, wrote in 1972 about the American workers' response to these new programs:

The year 1965 is also the mid-point of a decade in which America began to respond to poverty and discrimination. The Johnson years produced a spate of national legislation to provide income and opportunities for the poor, especially the blacks. . . . At all levels, America began to spend public money to resolve pressing problems. The American worker supported these social measures through the unions and the Democratic Party. He saw these bits and pieces of socio-economic legislation as a spur and parallel to his upward effort. (203)

But almost as soon as the social programs were pushed through Congress, the cost of the Vietnam War began to affect the national economy, leading to a sudden rise in inflation. O'Neill writes, "By 1969, it [the economic boom] was clearly over. The war produced an inflation that eliminated most income gains. In 1969 some fully employed workers had less real income than in 1968" (420). The social programs that passed Congress easily in 1965 during the high water mark of the boom now became sources of contention and controversy as workers struggled to survive in an increasingly hostile economy.

Writing in 1971, Michael Harrington stated, "This working class, both organized and unorganized, has a 'common situation and common interests,' experienced first and foremost

in the reality that it does not have enough money” (137). Harrington went on to say that more than half of American families in 1969 fell below the cutoff for the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ “modest” budget for an urban family of \$9,076. Harrington also noted that by 1971 the cost of living had risen a full twenty percent while real wages for workers had actually decreased (138).

When the economic downturn came in the late 1960s, and the working class began to feel the effects of high unemployment and rising inflation—the combination of which would lead to “Stagflation” in the 1970s, a lethal economic combination of stagnation and inflation—the good feelings of the 1960s reforms began to dissolve into bickering about who was paying for and who was benefitting from the Great Society. As the 1970s dawned, the working class was on the run. Its members were feeling the effects of paying for a war with no exit strategy and new social programs that benefitted others. This disillusionment with the Great Society led many heretofore staunch Democrats to look for alternatives on the political landscape. They were ripe for the populist (and racist) rantings of George Wallace and, for the first time in many of their lives, they were willing to turn away from the New Deal politics of FDR, which they believed had gone too far with Johnson’s Great Society. This disaffection with the Democratic Party of Johnson and his vice president Hubert H. Humphrey was reflected in the results of the 1968 presidential election when the Democrats (Humphrey) earned only 43 percent of the vote while the Republicans (Richard M. Nixon) earned 43.4 and Wallace received 13.6. Fully 57 percent of the electorate voted against the Democratic ticket of Humphrey and Edmund Muskie only four years after LBJ received 61.3 percent of the vote in the 1964 election (Phillips 28).

Among the disaffected and disillusioned who moved away from the Democratic Party at the time were many white, ethnic working class men who had been raised in the Democratic Party of FDR but now found themselves reacting against the use of their tax dollars to fund the war in Vietnam and the War on Poverty. Wallace, the former Alabama governor who first entered the national limelight in 1963 when he stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama in an attempt to deny admission to the first two black students at the university, found a way to tap into the racist tendencies of some of these men on his way to garnering 13.6 percent of the vote. Nixon used more subtle tactics to achieve the same result, calling for more law and order on the streets to quell student protests and race riots that plagued the country in the years from 1965-1968, and an “honorable” end to the war (O’Neill 380). Looking back at the era from 2008, Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny write:

Nixon and his fellow Republicans took advantage of resurgent ethnicity but directed it toward conservative ends. In doing so, they fashioned an atavistic cultural populism that stoked ethnic and middle- and lower-class white insecurities regarding race, morality, and patriotism. In the hands of Republican operatives, white ethnicity was a system of values that hearkened back to “tradition”—a romanticized past of hard work, discipline, well-defined gender roles, and tight-knit families. (174)

What, in fact, was beginning to happen was the creation of a new “historic bloc,” to borrow a concept from Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (Leitch 1136). By tapping into the fears of the white working class, which saw many of its inner cities burn in race riots of the mid and late 1960s, and by exploiting its insecurity in the job market, Nixon and the

Republican Party were able to begin what Reagan finished in 1980. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe write:

The defense of acquired rights founded on white, male supremacy which feeds the conservative reaction thereby broadens the area of its hegemonic effects. An antagonism is thus constructed between two poles: the “people”, which includes all those who defend the traditional values and freedoms of enterprise; and their adversaries: the state and all the subversives (feminists, blacks, young people and “permissives” of every type). (170)

Although they were speaking primarily of Margaret Thatcher’s Great Britain and Ronald Reagan’s America of the 1980s, the same can be said about the beginning of the move rightward in 1970s America.

Kevin Phillips, conservative pundit writing in his seminal 1970 work, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, claims this move to the Republican Party by ethnic whites was a natural development in American politics, equating the race issue with ethnic political alignments in the past:

Ethnic polarization is a longstanding hallmark of American politics, not an unprecedented and menacing development of 1968. [. . .] [E]thnic and cultural division has so often shaped American politics that, given the immense mid-century impact of Negro enfranchisement and integration, reaction to this change almost inevitably had to result in political realignment. (470)

While Phillips’s analysis serves the purpose of placing a nicer face on the movement of some ethnic whites to the Republican Party by placing it in the tradition of American politics, it ignores the racist appeals that Wallace and Nixon used to drive a wedge between working

class whites and blacks. But there is no denying that the reaction of many whites to the Great Society, both its economic and cultural components, was negative. Phillips writes:

The emerging Republican majority spoke clearly in 1968 for a shift away from the sociological jurisprudence, moral permissiveness, experimental residential, welfare and educational programming and massive federal spending by which the Liberal (mostly Democratic) Establishment sought to propagate liberal institutions and ideology—and all the while reap growing economic benefits. (471)

Suleiman Osman, writing recently about the decaying cities of 1970s America, touches on the backlash towards African Americans:

More than just a tale of economic collapse, the 1970s mark a political death, a decade in which the nation shifted rightward. As in-migrating African Americans clashed with an increasingly conservative and racially hostile white-ethnic working class, the fragile coalition that made up the New Deal urban liberal coalition ruptured. (109)

Gus Tyler, writing at about the same time as Phillips, saw the movement of white workers away from their political roots as a return to ethnic tribalism at a time when workers sought a safe haven in a world that seemed lined up against them: “As we move into the ‘70s, many workers fear that the Brass is using [the] Underclass to undermine the Working Class” (207). At the time, this was leading to a reawakening of ethnic pride and a reconnecting of ethnic ties, something Tyler says was always bubbling beneath the surface. But he also contends that the reaction of whites to the economic and cultural times was more than simply

“backlash” towards the black community, which many saw as the recipients of the benefits of the Great Society:

Racial suspicion turns into tribal war when people—no matter their color—are oppressed by their circumstances. Maldistribution of income and people must multiply strife. This strife, ironically, tends not to change but to continue the system that produced the conflict. So long as black battles white and poor battle not-so-poor, the establishment can continue to “divide and rule.” (207)

This is another facet of the divide-and-conquer strategy touched on in Chapter 1. As characters in the films *Easy Rider*, *Alice’s Restaurant*, and *Medium Cool* demonstrated, the working class and counterculture failed to recognize that both groups were being oppressed in different ways by the ruling, monied class. In the 1970s, however, the inability of the white working class (key members of Nixon’s “Silent Majority”) and the counterculture to find common ground took a back seat at times to racial and ethnic battles within the working class. It is this tribal war that both Wallace and Nixon tapped into in 1968. Writing in 2008 about the “Silent Majority,” the “decent and hard-working people” who helped to usher Nixon into the White House in 1968, Matthew D. Lassiter, says, “By the end of 1969, when *Time* magazine recognized the besieged Silent Majority as ‘Man and Woman of the Year,’ the celebration of Middle American values had turned into the perception that the American Dream was slipping away from millions of families” (16).

When *Time* magazine noticed, so did Hollywood. The working class, which had so often been marginalized and demonized by filmmakers in the late 1960s when counterculture protagonists were privileged in film after film, became a cause célèbre for Hollywood. Quart

and Auster acknowledge as much in their 2002 essay, “The Working Class Goes to Hollywood”:

Although the audience had not turned its back on the middle class, it was clearly now more willing to accept films with themes dealing with the working class. The reason for this change lies less with the films themselves than with the political, economic and social changes that the working class experienced in the previous decade. This includes a series of events that saw parts of the working class become the vanguard of the Nixon-Agnew silent majority, with the resulting change in image from strike-fomenting disrupters of the public equilibrium to upholders of the public order. (165)

Although Quart and Auster are writing primarily about the mid-1970s when a number of Hollywood films, some of which we will explore in Chapter 3, exploited and reinforced white working-class anxiety and helped define the new working class, films about the plight of the working class were also being made in the early part of the decade. While Hollywood was not ready to face the Vietnam War head-on, waiting until mid-decade to do so, it was ready to produce films for and about the working class. Ignored for much of the 1960s as Hollywood sought to broaden its fan base by reaching out to youth audiences, working class issues again could be found at the center of many Hollywood films as working class characters were shown reacting to the economic and political times. These films came from both the Right and the Left, but they had one thing in common—working class characters were again considered marketable protagonists in Hollywood film.

That is not to say that counterculture-themed films were not still being produced or that counterculture ideals did not find their way onto the screen. Films that explored the

cultural shift brought on by the counterculture in the late 1960s continued to be made. The protagonists, however, were not the college students and protesters who were at the center of films like *The Strawberry Statement*, *Zabriskie Point*, and *Alice's Restaurant*, but were often young adults and middle-aged adults who were experiencing the sexual and cultural revolutions for the first time after reaching maturity in the culturally repressive 1950s. Films like *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971) explored the newfound freedom discovered by adults who, while they may not always have been politically in tune with the student rebels of the 1960s, were interested in exploring the more permissive sexual mores embodied by the "sexual revolution," a reaction to the culturally conservative 1950s.

Carnal Knowledge, for example, follows the story of two college roommates who share the same woman during their 1950s college years, only later to find themselves going in different directions as the sexual revolution takes place in the 1960s. One man, Sandy, played by Art Garfunkel, "evolves" into an enlightened participant in the sexual revolution, complete with a much younger female partner. Although he still clearly carries the baggage of the 1950s with him, he has become a 1960s man. The other friend, Jonathan, played by Jack Nicholson, remains caught in the 1950s, unable to see women as anything but sex objects and equally unable to find any lasting relationship. In *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, three of the four protagonists have brief sexual encounters outside their marriages. When an "uptight" Alice, played by Dyan Cannon, discovers that her husband Ted, played by Elliot Gould, has had a brief fling, she demands that the two couples "swing" on a trip to Las Vegas. The "30-something" couples all climb into bed together but cannot go through with the spouse-swapping plan. The comedy struck a nerve with those who were experiencing, or

hearing about, the “sexual revolution” of the counterculture period. But while these films explored the world of the upper middle class and its dalliance with counterculture values, films about the working class and its struggle with survival in tough economic times were also being made. Unlike Bob and Carol, these protagonists were most concerned with what would be on the dinner table that night, not who would be lying beside them in bed.

In this chapter, we will look at four films, two from the Right and two from the Left, that foreground the issues most pressing to the working class during the early 1970s. In *Joe* (1970) and *Dirty Harry* (1971), we will discuss two films from the Right that explore the anger felt by many working-class whites during the economic downturn of the epoch. *Joe* is the story of a bigoted steelworker from New Jersey whose happenstance meeting with an upper-middle class businessman leads to tragedy on several fronts. As the title character, Peter Boyle provides a chilling and powerful performance as a reactionary who sees the counterculture as the source of not only his problems, but the ills of the nation. Much like the working-class characters explored in Chapter 1, he does not recognize that the “establishment” is the enemy of both the working class and the counterculture, but instead blames “blacks” and the counterculture for destroying the fabric of the nation. In *Dirty Harry*, Clint Eastwood plays Harry Callahan, a vigilante cop whose antagonist is a long-haired “hippie” type named Scorpio. The first of many vigilante films released in the 1970s as a reaction to the counterculture and the call for more “law and order” in the streets, *Dirty Harry* exploits the fear and anger of white working class America by demonizing minorities and the counterculture and blaming the current state of affairs at least in part on the federal expansion of prisoner’s rights, a popular conservative theme at the time.

On the Left, we will look at two buddy films that are much more complex than the genre may imply. *Scarecrow* (1973) and *The Last Detail* (1973) both explore the relationships between working-class men as they struggle to make their way in a hostile environment for the working class of the early 1970s. *Scarecrow* tells the story of an ex-con and a merchant marine who stumble upon each other as they both travel across the country to pursue their modest versions of the American Dream: Max, played by Gene Hackman, hopes to open a car wash in Pittsburgh, while “Lion,” played by Al Pacino, hopes to reconnect with his “ex” and their 5-year-old child. *The Last Detail* tells the tale of two “lifers” in the Navy who are charged with escorting a young seaman to the brig in Boston after he is found guilty of trying to steal money from an officer’s wife’s favorite charity. *The Last Detail* chronicles their journey from Norfolk, Virginia to Boston as the two older seamen determine to give the young seaman a taste of life before he goes away for eight years. The rebellious older sailor Buddusky (Jack Nicholson) is reminiscent of 1960s working-class protagonists who represented counterculture values in films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Cool Hand Luke*. Although he is clearly a man of the pre-counterculture era—one encounter with the counterculture in the film demonstrates his 1950s roots, as does his choice of career—his contempt for authority and his free-spirited approach to life make him more counterculture than establishment. Here, again, however, the ending of the film is a “downer” in the parlance of the time, as it follows the pattern of many New Hollywood films of the era by refusing to provide a tidy and upbeat resolution to its narrative. Times were tough, and New Hollywood directors did not try to spare filmgoers with pat, happy endings, particularly in films involving the working class. But unlike the films of the youth/cult era, when counterculture characters served as the protagonists and working-class men were

marginalized at best, the working-class protagonists in *Scarecrow* and *The Last Detail* are treated with dignity. Even their encounters with the counterculture are presented in a positive, albeit humorous, way.

This tendency of New Hollywood films in the early 1970s to provide more “realism” and less continuity in their narratives became part of the brief auteur period in American film as new directors like Hal Ashby, Peter Bogdanovich, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and others sought to leave their personal stamps on the films of the era. As used here, the term “realism” does not connote the concept of a generally objective camera or the use of technical tools like available light. It also does not connote cinema verite as practiced in the French New Wave or American films of the 1960s. It is used primarily to connote the use of more disjointed, slice of life narratives, as well as the often bleak endings to films that reflected a growing anxiety in the country about its future and its recent past. It also refers to the individual qualities brought to film by new and some re-born directors of the time. As Diane Jacobs writes:

What distinguishes certain films of the Seventies is neither artistic superiority nor administrative autonomy—but a happy combination of the two. [. . .] Someone got it into his head that an amorphous under-30 audience did exist out there, that it was tired of the costume drama and the safe situation comedy, and that with business so bad anything new was worth a try. As [director Paul] Mazursky pointed out, for the first time American directors were making “personal” films that were packaged as such. (4)

As Jacobs also notes, genre films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *American Graffiti* (1973), and *Badlands* (1973) also played major roles in the film

industry of the early 1970s. “If one becomes too intrigued with the prevalence of so-called realism and plotlessness in new director films, he has only to look at masterpieces of storytelling like *The Godfather* or scrupulously evoked myth like *Alex in Wonderland* for counterpoint,” Jacobs writes (18). But, as she acknowledges, the era seems to be defined more by its non-traditional narratives, even if some of its more successful films were examples of classical genres.

This experimental moment in film seems to contradict the generally held belief that the 1970s was a vast wasteland situated between the explosive 1960s and the cultural and political turn to the right of the 1980s. Both culturally and politically the 1970s get a “bad rap,” as they say. Coming on the heels of a decade that witnessed an emerging civil rights movement, an awakening of the women’s movement, a coalescing of forces to protest an unpopular war, and a questioning of virtually everything that reflected 1950s mores, the 1970s by comparison inevitably seemed tame. The decade is often looked upon as a time when collective action took a back seat to the pursuit of personal gratification, a time when people looked inward instead of outward, a time when style, particularly late in the decade with the arrival of the disco and Punk scenes, often trumped substance. As historians Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer write, “[Most Americans] regard the decade as a national joke—an era of outrageous fashions, vapid music, and cultural excess” (*Rightward* 4). According to Schulman and Zelizer, memories of a “paralyzed Jimmy Carter unable to resolve the crisis in Iran,” and cultural images like Travis Bickle, Martin Scorsese’s vigilante veteran in *Taxi Driver* (1976), and “glittering disco balls” helped to form the “conventional portrait of the 1970s as a decade when the country was frozen between the 1960s and 1980s, waiting to find itself and reestablish a national direction” (*Rightward* 4).

To some observers, 1970s America was a nation simply worn down by the seemingly sleepless sixties. But, while the move to the right politically in the decade is often seen as an inevitable turn following a decade of turmoil, Schulman believes the political did not necessarily jibe with the cultural. As Schulman and Zelizer note, not only was the shift to the Right not inevitable, but it was also not complete, particularly in regards to culture and the arts. While it is clear that the political Right rose to power in the late 1970s and has dominated politics for the past 30 years, it is equally clear that the cultural revolution that began in the 1960s has continued, unabated by attempts to quell it on the Right. Because of that, the 1970s, instead of being a “national joke,” and a decade of nothingness and self-absorption, was actually a decade when both the political and cultural direction of the country was highly contested. Jacobs, speaking specifically about film, puts it this way:

It is not entirely farfetched to speculate that the political energies of the Sixties were cathartically channeled into the arts—and particularly the popular arts—of the Seventies. As with the movie boom in the Thirties, a period of cinematic “rebirth” seems to have been gestating within the frenetic activity of the previous decade. What the advent of sound and the stock market crash were to the Thirties, Woodstock and Watergate have constituted to the Seventies. (1-2)

That is not to say that the cultural landscape didn’t change in the 1970s, just that the political energies of the 1960s were channeled into new expressions in the arts. Culturally, this move inward and away from counterculture ideals was noticeably reflected not only in film, but also in the music of the decade. The 1960s was a decade of protest music from Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and Joan Baez; of early soul music from Motown; of British pop from the British

invasion; and of homegrown psychedelic rock from San Francisco. The 1970s that followed was a decade of singer songwriters who looked inward instead of outward; “art rock,” heavy metal, which was produced primarily for a “discernibly white working-class male market” (Martin 130-131); and disco, which midway through the decade gave everyone the right to “dance the night away.” Compared to the 1960s, which was like a trip to Woodstock with your crazy Uncle Billy, the 1970s was often like a trip to your inner self with self-reflective Uncle Jim, particularly when the work of the singer/songwriters is examined. But, as Bradford Martin notes, the personal expressions of the singer/songwriters of the era, as well as other artists operating within popular culture—New Hollywood directors would be an example—still retained some of the political edge of the 1960s, even though the music was primarily geared towards the white middle class:

Though never completely eschewing the politics—of egalitarianism, nonviolence, and ecology—of their 1960s predecessors, the singer/songwriters, along with like-minded counterparts in 1970s art and popular culture, forged a new kind of political message that was more informal, gradualist, and outside the scope of institutional change than the previous decade’s expansive utopian strivings had been. (133)

Many of the new directors of the New Hollywood were imbued with this same energy of the 1960s as they were given the reins during the brief auteur period in Hollywood. When critics and film theorists look back at the 1970s, they see a decade that had a little of everything—a renaissance led by the new auteurs, a rebirth of the classic Hollywood form, a re-emergence of the blockbuster, and finally a nostalgia for an imagined past. They see films from the Left that carried the cultural changes of the 1960s into the 1970s, and they see films

from the Right that reflected the economic and cultural anxiety of Richard Nixon's Silent Majority. We will explore the re-emergence of the classic Hollywood form and the period of nostalgia for the working class that came late in the decade in Chapters Three and Four. In this chapter we will concentrate on the early years of the decade as Hollywood rediscovered the working class.

The first film that we will examine bridges the period between the late 1960s and early 1970s when the counterculture fell out of favor with Hollywood as protagonists and the working class began to reappear as something more than foils for the counterculture. The film is *Joe*, a disturbing look at an extreme example of the insecure white working-class man of 1970. In *Joe*, for the first time since the youth/cult era began, Hollywood explores the anger and resentment that some in the white working class felt towards African-Americans and the counterculture as the 1970s dawned. *Joe* also provides an example of how the historic bloc of the white working class and the upper middle class came together in opposition to the counterculture and others who threatened the "American way of life." The film is a "bridge" because it simultaneously provides a negative view of the working class, middle class, and counterculture, although the middle class fares better than the others. Unlike earlier films that privileged the counterculture, this film privileges no one. Although the working class again comes off as vile and murderous, much as it did in counterculture films of the late 1960s, the counterculture and middle class are also shown in the dimmest of lights. After *Joe*, Hollywood began to take a more sympathetic look at the working class. But as we will see, it was not quite ready to do that in 1970.

Joe

Director John G. Avildsen's *Joe* is a film that directly exposes the anger and resentment felt by a segment of the white working class towards the counterculture and African-Americans in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. But, although the racial divide is bitterly and pungently expressed by the title character, it is the conflict between the counterculture and the white working class, with support from the upper-middle class, that is played out in the film to a murderous end. In what would presage the political marriage of the white working and middle classes in the late 1970s, Joe (Peter Boyle) Curran, a steelworker, and Bill Compton (Dennis Patrick), an advertising executive, form an alliance that in another time would have been unthinkable.

Avildsen uses *mise en scene* and camera work throughout the film to establish character and to draw distinctions between the working class, the upper-middle class, and the counterculture. The working-class home of Joe Curran and his wife, with its small rooms, tight hallways, and modest furnishings, is contrasted to the large and richly furnished home of the Comptons. Both are contrasted to the living spaces of the counterculture, which range from a dingy one-room "crash pad" to a sprawling farm house with virtually no furnishings except mattresses on the floor. The camera also often shoots Joe from low and tight angles to capture his anger and to presage his turn from bigot and misogynist to cold-blooded murderer.

The film opens with scenes from the life of Compton's daughter Melissa, played by a young Susan Sarandon in her first screen appearance, a life that includes drugs and a despicable drug dealer boyfriend, Frank. He is a minor dealer, and he specializes in dealing to the young. When Melissa overdoses on speed and is rushed to the hospital after having a

breakdown in a drug store, Compton and his wife come to her aid. After arguing with his wife about parenting choices, Compton goes alone to Melissa's apartment, which she shares with Frank, to collect her belongings. It is here where an unplanned confrontation takes place that sets everything into motion.

As his wife leaves the dingy apartment building in anger, Compton is shot from a high angle as he climbs a narrow set of stairs, tightly framed to show the claustrophobic and decaying surroundings. He finds Melissa's apartment and begins to gather her things while, through a cross-cut, Frank is shown dealing drugs to two young girls. After the deal "goes down," the cross-cutting prepares the audience for a confrontation between the two men at the apartment. After Frank comes upon Compton in the apartment, he tosses several taunts the older man's way, eliciting a violent and deadly response. Enraged by Frank's callous remarks about his daughter, Compton slams Frank's head against a wall repeatedly and then beats him with his fists, killing him. All the shots in the apartment of the two men are tightly framed, capturing the personal and violent nature of the confrontation. After killing Frank in a rage, Compton is shot from a low and tight angle as he gathers up the remaining belongings and tosses some drugs into his bag to give the impression of a burglary. The tight shots represent not only his concern about being caught, but also his fear that his comfortable and free world has suddenly shrunk and changed forever. As he descends the narrow steps and exits onto the street, the film cuts to a new location and the audience is introduced to Joe Curran.

In one of the most startling introductions to a title character in film history, the film cuts to a full-frontal shot of a blue-collar worker sitting at a bar, a pork-pie hat atop his head. The first word that comes out of his mouth is "nigger." The audience has met Joe Curran,

angry bigot, approximately twenty-six minutes into the film. For the next several minutes, Curran carries on a diatribe about welfare, riots, hippies, government programs, and lawlessness in the streets, placing the blame squarely on blacks, hippies and liberals, who he claims, in a moment of absurd humor “are forty-two percent queer.” This “fact,” Joe notes, came directly from the George Wallace camp. He also expresses anger that his “kid” can’t get into college, but the rich kids can, and then they spend all their time smoking dope and demonstrating. If Joe’s rant was not common to a certain segment of the working class at the time, it would have been low comedy. But it did capture a real, if minority, point of view. In racist and brutal terms, it clearly showed the anger and frustration felt by some members of the white working class who were tired of getting a “thirty-cent raise,” while “blacks stayed home and made babies” and cashed government checks, in Joe’s words. As he continues his rant, a visibly shaken Compton walks in off the street and takes a seat at the bar.

It should be noted that Joe’s rant is not well-received by the other blue-collar workers in the bar. It is merely tolerated. At one point, after Compton enters the bar, the bartender even asks Joe to “give everyone a break” and play some music. This is an important moment, but one that has generally been glossed over by critics. Joe is marginalized by members of his own class in his own local bar. Although his fears about race and the counterculture may run deep in his blue-collar world, his extremist point of view is not the norm. Some may take the silence of the other bar patrons as tacit approval of Joe’s extreme views, but I do not. His views are tolerated because to argue with Joe, or to offer any counter to his invective, is to take the side of the “other,” and that is not acceptable in the blue-collar culture. But as a representative of the working class, Joe’s words, and later his actions, are what the audience remembers, and he becomes a vile symbol of his class.

Compton and Joe get together in a most unlikely manner. After almost inadvertently confessing to killing a “hippie” to Curran in the bar, obviously needing to purge himself of Frank’s murder, Compton realizes what he has said and claims he is just joking. Compton’s telling of the story earns Joe’s respect, though, because, as Joe says, “He had me going.” But when news reports surface about the killing, Joe tracks down Compton and the unholy alliance is born. The two men become uneasy “friends,” each introducing the other to their parts of the world. Compton at first fears he is being blackmailed, but then he clearly begins to draw some perverse pleasure from the relationship with the crude, working-class steelworker.

In one telling sequence, the Comptons visit the Currans for dinner. During this sequence, Joe’s misogyny and potential for violence come to the fore as he belittles his own wife, threateningly telling her to “shut up.” Later, he pats Compton’s wife on the derriere. While this effectively shows Joe’s misogyny, I believe it is over the top. A working-class man would not show disrespect for another man’s wife, particularly in a domestic setting. It’s part of an unwritten code. It simply would not be done. This is another example of Hollywood’s inability to portray the working class in a realistic way, as Quart and Auster say in Chapter 1. But in order to paint Joe as vile and extreme—and to cast the working class in the same light—this foul moment is incorporated into the film. Curran’s wife is also portrayed as a pleasant but slow-witted, uneducated woman. Particularly disturbing are her table manners, caught in close-up. She speaks with her mouth full and she eats with her fingers, licking them afterwards. The camera captures close-ups of the Comptons trying uneasily to avoid any reaction to her table manners or their cramped surroundings.

Throughout the sequence in the Curran home, the working-class milieu is captured in a series of tightly framed shots of the dining room, living room and basement, many of them from low angles to give a sense of confinement. The Curran dwelling is contrasted later to the spacious surroundings of the Compton home, signifying the difference between the claustrophobic and restrained world of the working class with the mobile world of the middle class.

After dinner and some uncomfortable attempts at conversation, the two men retreat to Curran's basement. The room is adorned with American flags, knotty pine paneling, and a gun cabinet. Joe demonstrates his gun collection and racism to Compton as he proudly points out that one of the guns was retrieved from "a dead Jap" at Okinawa. This scene harkens back to an earlier one in the film when Joe retreated to the basement to drink a beer and clean his rifle as the song "Hey, Joe," played. In that scene, the lyrics, "Hey, Joe, don't it make you want to go to war, once more?" ring out as Joe caresses his rifle. In this scene, Joe and Bill Compton are shown for the first time together among Joe's mini-arsenal, a foreshadowing of tragic events to come.

One other telling exchange takes place during dinner when Compton's wife mentions the "culture" of the young. Joe, who has felt left out of the conversation to this point, chimes in, although it's not clear that Joe understands the meaning of "culture" in this context: "They're all screwed up, so they're screwing up the culture . . . fuckin' A." Not only does this exchange point to the culture wars that dominated the 1970s—and many would say continue to this day—but it also presages the violent confrontation between Joe and Compton (representing the joining of the working and middle classes) and the counterculture in the final scene. As Peter Lev writes:

Joe presents a rather convincing alliance between classes. The film [pre]figures not only the “Silent Majority,” but also the Republican alliance that has dominated American politics since 1968. Joe and Compton are unlike in speech, dress, and income, but alike in conservatism, patriotism, and their definition of masculinity. Both fear social change and demonize the “other”—in this case, the hippies and drug dealers. (*American* 25)

While I agree in large part with Lev, I don’t believe Joe and Compton have as much in common as he does. I see their relationship as a marriage of convenience, not necessarily ideology. While Joe and Compton may have some of the same inclinations towards the counterculture, they have them for different reasons. Joe’s are purely ideological; he sees the counterculture as attacking the American way of life, which he fought to preserve in World War II. Compton’s reasons are personal—his daughter has been claimed as a victim of the dark side of the counterculture. Although he may have had reservations about the counterculture before, it is the victimization of his daughter that he is reacting to. Based on his career as an advertising executive and his comfortable lifestyle, his life has not been altered by the counterculture; if anything, it has been enhanced by a consumer society that was continuing to grow, even into the 1970s. As the final scene of revenge shows, Joe is a willing and enthusiastic participant who courts Compton’s partnership; Compton is a reluctant participant who is drawn into the fray by circumstances that overwhelm him. Even here the working class is portrayed as the initiator of violence while Compton emerges as a victim of sorts.

As the plot moves forward, Melissa learns that Compton has killed her boyfriend when she overhears a conversation between her parents the night they return from the

Curran's. After confronting them, she runs away. The rest of the film is dedicated to the search by Compton and Curran for the missing Melissa as they comb through counterculture and drug haunts. Curran revels in the chase. As he says, "I've wanted to see the animals where they live." Compton, too, seems thrilled by the hunt as it takes him into a world that is foreign and exciting to him.

The search takes Compton and Curran to a drug paraphernalia or "head" shop, a coffee house, and ultimately to a party with several hippies. Although clearly "square," they are invited to the party by one of the "hippies" as a lark—and because Compton has volunteered that he is carrying drugs, the ones he took from Frank. The party scene is shot with a red filtered lens to give it a psychedelic feel. Psychedelic rock plays throughout the scene as silhouettes of naked bodies often occupy the screen. The "free love" aspect of the movement literally reveals itself as a young lady disrobes. (Although tame by today's standards, these scenes were extreme in a mainstream film of the time.) Joe shows his naivety and ignorance as he turns to Compton and comments, "This is an orgy, isn't it," using a hard "G" to pronounce the word, as he had done in his earlier rant in the bar. (This, of course, is another less than subtle jab at the "ignorant" working class.) It is here that Curran and Compton show their hypocrisy, as both copulate with young women—women who, we will soon find out, are as young as Compton's daughter. Their hypocrisy is punished, however, as they are both robbed by three of the "hippies" as they sleep. It is the sharing of this moment that binds them ever more tightly.

Upon learning of the "rip-off," Joe exhibits his penchant for violence as he repeatedly slaps one of the girls until she tells him the location of their commune in the country. Aerial shots then track Joe's car as it travels the highway through a gray, snow-covered countryside,

the harshness of the landscape foreshadowing a violent confrontation. The next scene shows the two men pulling into a rural driveway towards what looks to be an old farmhouse. As they disembark from the car, Joe opens the trunk and pulls out two rifles. Compton protests, but Curran says he just wants to “give ‘em a little scare, shake them up.” As they walk towards the house, a long, deep focus shot of them approaching the porch—shot from inside the house—captures Joe tossing a rifle to Compton.

Once inside the house, Joe demands the return of his “stuff.” When the young man can’t produce the money, only the wallet, he runs towards the back door, chased by Joe, the camera tracking them. The door flies open, the young man jumps off a small porch towards the camera, and a gunshot is heard. The first murder has taken place.

Back inside, Joe shoots two more commune residents trying to get to the door. The two men then climb the stairs, shot from a low angle. As they find two more residents, Compton tries to reason with Curran to stop the bloodshed as two “hippies” cower in a corner, pleading for their lives. The audience sees the “hippies” from Joe’s perspective in an over-the-shoulder shot. Cut to a close-up of Joe, now in full combat mode. “Look, Compton, there’s only one way out now. Clean. And that means everybody. At this point it can get to be fun.” He then shoots the two as Compton yells, “No, no!” Joe then delivers his final rant in an effort to complete the bond between the working and middle classes: “These kids, they shit on you. They shit on your life. They shit on everything you believe in. They shit on everything. You hate ‘em as much as I do.” With that, Joe Curran clearly and concisely presents the bigoted view of the counterculture held by a segment of the white working class.

The camera then tracks Joe to the next room, where he confronts a solitary young man who is pleading for his life. Again the camera shot is from Joe’s point of view. Click.

His rifle is out of bullets. He turns to Compton as the young man tries to escape and says, “It’s your ass now, Compton.” With those five words, he seals the fate of the commune resident. Compton turns and shoots the young man in the back. The bond between the classes is now complete. Compton then looks down the stairs and sees three young people entering the front door, the high-angle shot coming from over his shoulder. He shoots the two in the doorway and then runs down the steps to finish the job. Just before the final gunshot is heard, the camera shows a close-up of the face of the young lady fleeing the home. It is Melissa, his daughter. The shot freezes as a voiceover in Melissa’s voice is heard, “Are you going to kill me, too?” This was Melissa’s question to Compton when she first discovered that Compton had killed Frank. A gunshot is heard and Melissa’s body spins around, now facing Compton. The frame freezes and the final line of dialogue is spoken by Compton: “Melissa!” The camera pulls back to a long shot of her falling face down in the snow.

The brutality of the final sequence, despite the foreshadowing throughout, still catches the audience by surprise. Joe is not the blowhard he appeared to be—he’s not just a misogynistic loudmouth who rants when he’s drunk and slaps women around when they don’t follow orders. He is a cold-blooded killer. This final sequence is so disturbing, and compelling, that some contemporary audiences, aware of the tone in the country, responded verbally to the assault. As Lev writes, “The young New York audiences who stood up and talked back to the screen (‘Next time we’re going to shoot back, Joe’) did not miss the point; they correctly interpreted *Joe* through the filter of current events” (*American* 25).

Current events were pointing to a marriage of the working and middle classes during the 1970s and eventually to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. This is clearly represented in the film. But the depiction here of Joe, as the standard-bearer for the working

class, along with the unflattering portrayal of the counterculture, creates a disturbing caricature of the times. Joe Curran is an extreme version of the white ethnic male who truly was being squeezed by both the dominant culture and the counterculture in the early 1970s. Were there blue collar workers out there who shared his views? Absolutely. But they didn't take up rifles against the counterculture. They dished out verbal abuse and threw more than a punch or two, but they left the heavy lifting to the government, which acted through the police and the National Guard in places like Chicago, Kent State, and Jackson State.

The rendering of Joe's wife (K. Callan) is also disturbing. She is presented as a simple—in more than one meaning of the word—appendage to Joe, cowered by his many moods, unable to speak for herself. While this depiction alone would not set her apart from other working-class women in film, in *Joe* it establishes a clear distinction between the working-class woman and the middle-class woman, represented by Mrs. Compton. Just as disturbingly, the unnecessary depiction of her as a woman with no table manners is demeaning to all working class women.

Two visions of the film are offered by David A. Cook and Peter Lev, and while they begin from somewhat different premises, they wind up in the same place. First, Cook:

But the year's ultimate expression of youth-cult fear and loathing for the Establishment was probably Cannon Film's *Joe*, in which a hardcore blue-collar bigot and a weak-willed business executive go on a murderous rampage against a hippie commune that harbors the latter's daughter . . . suggesting an unholy alliance between working class and bourgeoisie to exterminate the counterculture. (*History* 164-165)

Lev, calling Joe “an interestingly incoherent film,” recalls that actor Peter Boyle originally envisioned the film as a “critique of blue-collar conservatism and a call for an end to violence—both in Vietnam and at home,” and later says he was disturbed when it was adopted by conservatives as a film expressing the concerns of the Silent Majority. But, as Lev rightfully notes, “A text with several possible meanings is interpreted in one main direction because of current events.” He goes on to repeat Cook’s contention that the film represents the alliance between the working and middle classes (*American* 24-25).

While I agree in principle with the conclusions of Cook and Lev regarding this burgeoning alliance of the two classes, I do not believe the film is an expression of “youth-cult fear” for the establishment, but rather a film that exploited a latent desire for a conservative backlash against the counterculture. Filmmaker Avildsen manipulated a conservative response from the audience in at least two ways. His first attempt to influence the audience in an anti-counterculture direction was his decision to show the dark side of the counterculture world through his depiction of Frank, the despicable drug-dealing boyfriend, whom critic David Denby described as “perhaps the vilest character in recent American Films” (qtd. in Lev 24).

The second, and probably more important manipulation of the audience, came in the rendering of the commune residents. Instead of the Haight-Ashbury, flower-child version of the counterculture, or the New Left, politically savvy version, Avildsen chooses instead to portray the counterculture as devious, thieving, drug-addled, and ultimately the enemy of the working class. I believe Avildsen tries to have it both ways, engaging in a perverted form of relativism. On one hand, he elicits a visceral reaction from the left-leaning audience by having the “unholy” alliance of Curran and Compton murder counterculture characters in

cold blood; on the other hand, he appeals to a more conservative mindset when he suggests that the “dirty hippies” brought the murderous rampage upon themselves through their shameless and dissolute lifestyle. While Lev’s New York audience threatened Joe with violence from their theater seats, other audiences in other locales may have just as likely responded in the opposite manner, cheering the eradication of the “scum” that was ruining their country. They may not have cheered Joe, a despicable, twisted character, but they may have cheered his actions. Finally, by positing Compton as an almost sympathetic victim of his own actions—having been pressed into the murderous orgy that claims his own daughter’s life—Avildsen almost exonerates the middle- class character for the murders, placing the blame primarily on Joe, the working-class “crazy.” Compton is portrayed as a victim of the counterculture, which has taken his daughter from him; of the working class, whose violent representative has bullied him into an act he would never have conceived or perpetrated on his own; and of his own weak character. Avildsen thus elicits both a left-wing and a right-wing response without doing permanent damage to the image of the middle class.

Although Avildsen’s film seems to want it both ways, the film does represent a transition of sorts from the youth/cult films of the late 1960s that privileged the counterculture to films that utilized working-class protagonists in the early 1970s, despite its negative portrayal of Joe Curran and, by proxy, the working class. During this period, the working class again found itself at the center of many Hollywood films, a place that had become foreign to it during the youth/cult era. The character of Joe Curran, while clearly a vile rendition of a working-class white male, helped filmmakers to rediscover the working class protagonist in 1970s Hollywood and paved the way for more films about the working class from both the Left and Right.

Dirty Harry

Released about eighteen months after *Joe* exploded onto American theater screens, Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* represented a response to the late-1960s films that privileged counterculture values, offering a working-class protagonist who, through "police vigilantism," would make the streets safe for those victimized by the liberal policies of the 1960s. Arriving just before the 1972 election campaign got underway, a campaign that would reinforce the law-and-order program of the Nixon White House, *Dirty Harry* became what many believe is the first of the right-wing reactionary films of the era that often privileged the working class and found fault with the counterculture and liberalism of the sixties. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner write in *Camera Politica*:

The conservative reaction against the liberal programs of the Great Society and the radical agenda of the New Left appeared in cinematic representations that challenged the predominantly critical outlook of many late sixties films. It promoted values that were more counterrevolutionary than countercultural. Whereas blacks and the poor were victims with whom one empathized in the sixties, they became disturbers of the order in early seventies films like *Dirty Harry*. (9)

In the film, Clint Eastwood plays San Francisco cop Harry Callahan, nicknamed "Dirty Harry" because, in Harry's own words, he gets "every dirty job that comes along." Saddling Harry with all the dirty jobs is clearly an attempt to evoke sympathy for the lone cop who patrols the streets of San Francisco in search of a killer of women and children, Scorpio (Andy Robinson), and other felons, with little regard for the rights of the accused or concern about collateral damage. It is this approach, however, that endeared Harry to the

right wing and to members of the working class whose fear of lawlessness and social change was fueled by the Nixon and George Wallace campaigns of 1968. As Ryan and Kellner write, “These ‘law and order’ thrillers transcoded the discourse of the campaign against crime and drugs waged by Nixon and Agnew in the early seventies. They are also vehicles for conservative counterattacks against the liberalism that many conservatives blamed for the crisis in domestic order brought about by the sixties” (41-42). *Dirty Harry*, in short, was one of the first shots fired in the culture wars that defined the 1970s and shaped politics in America for the next thirty years.

As a working-class hero of sorts, Harry Callahan is portrayed as the one man who can bring down the serial killer who is not only terrorizing the town, but also blackmailing the city in the process. With each killing, Scorpio taunts the police with letters and demands for ransom when he first kidnaps a fourteen-year-old girl and later hijacks a school bus. As Lev notes, these actions are designed to identify him with the real-life serial killer known as Zodiac who terrorized Northern California during the late 1960s and early 1970s and was “a notorious figure who wrote taunting letters to the newspapers and was never caught” (*American* 31). Here, the film taps into the real fears being felt by a populace, while creating a character that is designed to be identified with the counterculture, but not until the film establishes the city of San Francisco as a cesspool of criminal and sexual activities, tapping into the fears and suspicions of the working class which was being told that the counterculture and civil rights movements of the 1960s had led the nation down a path of cultural, moral, and economic destruction.

Several scenes of the film are shot in the red-light district of San Francisco to demonstrate the decaying of the city. In one early scene, Harry and his partner Chico

Gonzalez (Reni Santoni) are riding through the dirty streets at night in search of Scorpio after receiving a call that a man with a suitcase like the one in which Scorpio is carrying a rifle has been sighted. As the camera captures the tawdry, dirty buildings and suggestive marquees, Harry turns to Chic and says, "I'd throw a net over all of them." Shortly thereafter, the two men see a man with a suitcase entering a building and Harry goes around back to climb onto garbage cans to look in the window. Instead of a serial killer, he witnesses an Asian man opening a suitcase full of clothing and a prostitute whom we later learn is called "Hot Mary." Although Harry and Chico haven't found a serial killer, they have exposed the underbelly of the district.

In this same scene, Harry is attacked by several white men who come to the aid of "Hot Mary" when they assume Harry is a peeping Tom. They pull Harry down from the garbage cans and his perch as he looks in the window, and beat him with their fists. Only Chico's appearance from around the corner of the building with a gun pulled stops what would have been a savage beating. While Chico wants to arrest the men, Harry tells him to let the men go. This act makes two clear ideological statements: 1) vigilante justice is acceptable, even if the perpetrators are mistaken and the victim is a police officer; 2) white working-class men are privileged. This response by Harry is in stark contrast to his reaction to black men, represented in the early scenes of the film by bank robbers halted by Harry, and to the counterculture, represented in a twisted and exploitive way by Scorpio. Like many members of the counterculture of the time, Scorpio is long-haired, and like some, he is homeless, a drifter on the fringes of society. As Lev notes, "Scorpio is a character without back-story, but his long hair and peace symbol belt buckle identify him with the hippies, the antiwar movement, and the social changes of the 1960s" (*American* 31). Although his

background is never explained in the film, actor Andy Robinson notes in the DVD extras that in the written script Scorpio was actually a disgruntled Vietnam Veteran. That would explain his sharpshooting ability with a rifle, on display in the opening scene of the film as he sights-in an unsuspecting young woman who is swimming in a rooftop pool and shoots her from a distance. If Scorpio's back-story had been given, it may have shined a more sympathetic light on the killer, creating a more complex character and a more ambiguous message. But that would not have served the film's purpose. By portraying Scorpio as pure evil, not a damaged soul, the right-wing, counterrevolutionary message epitomized by Harry Callahan comes across much more clearly.

Scorpio's connection to the counterculture is heightened by his wearing of a peace symbol belt buckle, a counterculture sign of the times. In a calculated effort to demonstrate disdain for the counterculture, the camera focuses on the peace symbol only after the most disturbing sequence in the film. The sequence begins when Harry is chosen to deliver \$200,000 to Scorpio as ransom for a fourteen-year-old girl, Ann Mary Deakin, whom he has buried alive and who will die if not found quickly. In the process of delivering the money—shot with the giant white cross of Mt. Davidson as the backdrop, establishing Harry as a Christ figure according to Lev (*American* 35)—Harry is kicked and beaten by Scorpio when he agrees to turn his back to the killer. His life is saved only when Chico again comes to the rescue. This time Chico is wounded for his efforts, but Harry is able to stick Scorpio with a knife that he had previously taped to his leg. The sequence continues when Harry, pictured from a high angle shot beaten and lying on a couch, discusses the case with Lt. Al Bressler (Harry Guardino) in Bressler's office. This scene is cross-cut with a scene of a limping man—we learn it is Scorpio when he arrives at a doorway—entering what we later discover

is a park emergency first-aid service. When the police learn that the man has sought treatment, they question the doctor and discover that Scorpio lives as a squatter at Kezar Stadium.

In the next scene, Harry is shown pulling up to a cyclone fence at night in his car. Harry climbs the fence and quickly enters the stadium. Shortly thereafter an eyeline match is used to show that Scorpio has spotted Harry. A foot chase ensues through the stands of the stadium, with Scorpio hobbled by a knife wound and Harry nursing broken ribs. As the chase continues, Harry's new partner flips on the lights at the stadium and, in an extreme long shot, Scorpio is shown in the middle of the football field. Harry yells "Stop!" and Scorpio puts up his hands. But Harry ignores the surrender and shoots Scorpio in the leg. As Harry walks over to Scorpio, the fallen man issues a cry that would resonate in a negative way with a working-class audience in the 1970s: "I have the right to a lawyer . . . I have rights." Harry rejects his pleas and grinds his foot into Scorpio's wound in an effort to force him to tell the police where Ann Mary Deakin has been buried. In this scene, Harry's brutality is meliorated by the use of the camera. Instead of showing a close-up of the brutal interrogation, the camera pulls back to an extreme long aerial shot of the action. Music that has accompanied Scorpio's attacks in the past plays as the cries of the villain are heard. But the audience is spared the most brutal aspects of the encounter, which serves to preserve Harry as a doer of good, not a perpetrator of violence.

In an interview, Clint Eastwood, who rejected the notion that the film made a grand political statement, acknowledged that the film mined a growing sentiment in the country that the legal system was more concerned with the rights of the accused than the victim. This was accentuated in the scenes that followed. First, in a night shot, Harry is shown in silhouette

against the San Francisco sky as the camera looks down upon the Golden Gate Bridge. Still in long shot, the camera shows the excavation of a body from a hole—it is the body of the dead Ann Mary Deakin, who could not be saved in time even with the efforts of Harry to secure the confession. This scene dissolves to an establishing shot of a government building. Another dissolve shows the inside of the building, and a sign in the right of the frame reads “District Attorney.” As Harry walks into the district attorney’s office, he is shot from a low angle and from behind in order to show the DA at work at his desk. The DA does not immediately look up, but when he does, he says, “Does Escobedo ring a bell? Miranda? I mean, you must have heard of the fourth amendment.” Harry does not respond, and the DA continues, “What I’m saying is that man had rights.” Harry’s response symbolizes the rising concern about victim’s rights. “Well,” Harry says, “I’m all broken up about that man’s rights.”

At this point in the scene there is a quick cut to an older, academic-looking man who is sitting on a couch across the room with a folder in his lap. Through the DA, we discover that he is a judge and teaches constitutional law at Berkeley. The reference to Berkeley, a hotspot of student unrest in the 1960s, is another attempt to tap into working-class anger towards intellectuals and students who protested instead of fighting in the war fought almost exclusively by children of the working class. While acknowledging the concerns about the imminent danger to Ann Mary Deakin, the judge and DA indicate that Harry’s failure to get a search warrant and his brutal tactics tainted any evidence he may have uncovered. The prisoner’s rights were violated, they conclude, to which Harry responds, “And Ann Mary Deacon, what about her rights? I mean she’s raped and left in a hole to die. Who speaks for

her?” The DA’s only response is, “The District Attorney’s office. If you let us.” But the response seems weak and impotent.

This entire sequence points directly to anger in America, and among the working class in particular, about the emphasis on the rights of the accused. The sequence manipulates the emotions of the audience because it clearly presents an extreme case where the rights of the accused could place a young woman’s life in danger. In doing so, it distorts the law. As Ryan and Kellner note, this was a common ploy in conservative police dramas of the time. Discussing *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*, they write:

Both films contest the liberal theories of criminal justice, exemplified in the Miranda decision, that gave more rights to criminal suspects and curtailed the powers of the police. In this vision, liberal criminal justice is unjust because it prevents good cops from doing their job, and it lets criminals go free to commit more crimes. Cops are portrayed as heroes whose zeal to protect the innocent and society is misinterpreted as brutality by liberals. (42)

Christian Keathley, discussing the Left and Right film cycles of the seventies, put it this way in his essay, “Trapped in the Affection Image”:

The Fascist Cop films were those right cycle films that most explicitly staged the ideological conflict in American culture at the time. Like the left cycle films of this period, *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* diagnosed American society as diseased and corrupt, but saw radical liberalism as the problem. (304)

But in order to demonize the “liberal” legal system, an extreme case and an extreme result were necessary—and *Dirty Harry* provides both. In a real case where imminent danger to a potential victim was obvious, a search warrant would not have been required. As Lev notes,

“Even Eastwood’s sympathetic biographer Richard Schickel notes that the film overstates its case—in emergency situations like this, the suspect’s right to remain silent (as guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment and the Miranda decision) might not apply” (35).

It is only after Scorpio is released from custody because of Harry’s transgressions that the peace sign appears in the film. Immediately following the scene in the DA’s office, the film cuts to a close-up of a peace symbol painted on a wall. The camera pans left to capture the legs of a limping man approaching. As the camera focuses on a peace symbol belt buckle, the camera tilts to show that the limping man is who the audience suspects it is—Scorpio. The peace symbol could be interpreted as an ironic move—here is a man of unwarranted violence wearing a symbol of the rejection of violence, and the Vietnam War in particular. Initially, that’s how I interpreted the sign. But it cannot be taken out of the context of the film or the time. By associating this symbol with Scorpio the film is making a direct connection between the counterculture and lawlessness on the street, even if it is unlikely anyone believes Scorpio is truly a “peacenik.”

What follows the shot of the peace symbol further draws a spurious, albeit damaging, connection between the counterculture and the worst society has to offer—the child-molester/killer. The shot of the peace symbol belt buckle and Scorpio is followed immediately by a low angle shot of him looking out over a playground as young children play in the park. This scene represents the second time in the film that Scorpio is shown watching children at play. At this point in the film, Scorpio has already shot and killed the young woman at the pool and a ten-year-old black boy, and has raped and buried Ann Mary Deakin alive. What the audience knows of the heinous nature of Scorpio’s recent past at this juncture in the film clearly trumps any thought that the peace symbol was meant to be ironic.

The scene at the park is followed by two important scenes that set up the final confrontation between Harry and Scorpio. As Scorpio scours the playground for what may be his next victim, the scene cuts to Harry, who is also in the park watching Scorpio. In the following scene, Scorpio is shown in a dark and dingy strip joint, seemingly enjoying the show in the underbelly of the city. A pan of the bar shows Harry sitting on its other side, watching Scorpio. The message is clear—Harry is following Scorpio. As Scorpio leaves the bar, the camera again pans the red light district that was shown earlier in the film when Harry and Chico were tracking the tip they had received. The sequence then cuts to a daylight shot of Scorpio, who is shown from a low angle as he steps from daylight down a set of concrete steps into what appears to be the basement of a damaged and abandoned structure in a bad part of San Francisco. As Scorpio enters the basement, he is greeted by a large black man, shot in low angle and dim light to appear menacing. The audience quickly learns that Scorpio has paid this man to beat him, which he does with enthusiasm after Scorpio taunts him with the “N” word. In the scene that follows, as Scorpio is shown being wheeled on a gurney in a hospital, we learn that his strategy all along was to blame his beating on Harry and to sue the city—enriching himself and eliminating his menace.

This scene with the black man and Scorpio represents an overt effort to draw a connection between the counterculture and the black community. It also serves to designate the two groups as the “other” to those who live in Harry’s working-class world. The thug hired by Scorpio could just as easily have been a white man. By making him a black man, the filmmaker links the counterculture, represented by Scorpio, and black men, represented by the thug, in a conspiracy to undermine Harry and undercut the power of the police, the final bastion of hope against a lawless society. In order to blame the counterculture and black

community for the lawlessness in the streets, and to blame their emergence on sixties liberal policies, the thug had to be black.

This scene also represents the second time in the film that we encounter black males who are operating outside the law. The first encounter takes place early in the film, not long after the shooting of the girl in the rooftop pool. As Harry walks into a diner to get his lunch, he notices a suspicious car parked across from a bank. As the scene begins, rhythm and blues music emanates from the car and the camera focuses on the street where several smoked cigarettes have collected on the ground by the driver's door. After ordering his "usual," Harry tells the diner owner to call the police and to tell them a 211 (bank robbery) is in progress. He is handed a hotdog and begins eating it when the sound of a gunshot pulls him into the situation at the bank. The scene, as written, seems to be designed to show that Harry is not a conventional cop—why didn't he intervene before the gunshot?—and to establish him as fearless and relentless when he has a criminal in his sights. Harry leaves the restaurant, still chewing his hotdog, holding his .44 magnum to his side as he walks deliberately across the street towards the bank. He calmly shoots the one robber fleeing the bank and then turns his attention to the car. When the driver tries to run him down, shown in a point of view shot from over Harry's shoulder, Harry calmly shoots out the windshield and continues to fire until the driver loses control and hits a fire hydrant.

With the bank alarm sounding and water shooting into the air from the hydrant, Harry, in a tracking point of view shot, again walks calmly to the man he shot leaving the bank. As he approaches the man, he notices a gun lying within arm's reach of the wounded bank robber. It is here that Harry delivers his famous cinematic speech about the power of the .44 magnum, "the most powerful handgun in the world." He acknowledges that he

doesn't know if he has fired all of his bullets or not, but finishes with a taunt. "You've got to ask yourself, 'Do I feel lucky? Well, do you, punk?'" The robber resists reaching for the gun, and then in a line of dialogue designed to draw a clear line between the white detective and the black bank robber, the black man says, "I gots to know." This is an unnecessary use of the vernacular, designed again to establish the black man as "other." Harry then points the gun at the man's head and pulls the trigger on the already emptied gun, smirking when he hears the "click" of the gun. The entire sequence serves the purpose of establishing Harry's credentials as an unorthodox cop, but it also does something else. It establishes the white, working-class cop as the protector of a society that is falling prey to lawlessness, represented here by black men who smoke too much, listen to loud music, and rob banks. As if to justify the previous scene, the next scene shows Harry in a hospital being treated by a young black doctor who is obviously on friendly terms with the detective. This scene serves two purposes—it deflects charges that Harry is racist, and it also establishes his working-class credentials when he refuses to let the doctor cut off his pants, which have been stained with blood. When the doctor says it will hurt to pull the pants off, Harry responds, "[For] \$29.50, let it hurt." Harry's fear of ruining a pair of pants in the face of a possible gunshot wound clearly establishes Harry as working class and as someone with whom a working class audience suffering from hard economic times would empathize.

After Scorpio successfully forces Harry to stop trailing him, the film briefly provides some back-story for Harry. By this time in the film we know that something bad has happened to Harry's wife (or ex-wife, it has not been made clear yet), but we don't know what. From the hospital the editor cuts to Harry on a roof again—this is a recurring motif in the film as Scorpio sights his victims from roofs and Harry is often called upon to seek him

out on those roofs. Along with Harry is Chico, in a wheelchair recovering from his earlier wounding, and a young woman we discover is Chico's wife. They are apparently on the rooftop of a hospital where patients are taken to get fresh air. During the scene, Chico indicates that he probably will not come back to the force. His wife chimes in, saying they are tired of the constant "pig this and pig that," referring to the derogatory counterculture reference to police common during the period. The message is that even a good and heroic detective like Chico can be driven from public service by an ungrateful community and police force handcuffed by liberal laws. Harry and Chico's wife are shown in long shot walking down the outside steps from the roof to the ground, conversing as they go. When they reach the ground, she asks him how his wife deals with his being a detective, and we learn through Harry that his wife is dead, killed by a drunk driver who crossed the center line. In a calm voice he says, "There's no reason for it, really." This little piece of back-story offers some explanation for Harry's life of solitude and his willingness at times to take unusual risks. It also humanizes him. He is no longer just a laconic, sometimes angry, sometimes smirking hunter of criminals. He is a victim of a crime himself, and the audience has no choice but to respond to that sympathetically.

The final chase of the film takes place after Scorpio robs a liquor store by smashing a whiskey bottle on the head of the owner and stealing his gun. Prior to the robbery, the camera shoots Scorpio from a low angle, showing his legs and his pronounced limp as he walks the dirty street on his way to the liquor store. The low-angle shot of Scorpio is a common motif throughout the film.¹ In the next shot, it is daylight, and a school bus is shown pulling up to a stop. Scorpio hops onto the bus, initially engages the small group of young children on the bus, and then holds a gun to the female driver's ribs and tells her to drive. This is at least the

sixth time in the film that Scorpio is shown preying on the weak and defenseless—he has already killed two young women and the ten-year-old. Unlike Harry, who has been established as a complex, rounded character through his brief but powerful back story, Scorpio remains a one-dimensional character, the incarnation of unexplained and unfathomable evil. This juxtaposition of the two characters serves the purpose of justifying Harry's actions, many of which are outside the law, while stacking the deck against Scorpio in the audience's eyes.

After a dissolve, a low-angle shot of flags and a government building appear. Lieutenant Bressler is shown in the left of the frame, and the camera pans to the right to capture in a long shot Harry's car pulling up from the right and parking at the curb. Another tracking point-of-view shot of Harry follows him into the opulent building, down the hall to the mayor's office. The mayor announces that Scorpio has called and demanded a ransom for the kidnapped children, and that he has agreed to pay it. Harry refuses the assignment, saying, "You can get yourself another delivery boy," and walks out of the room.

In the next scene, a close-up of a small buffalo herd is shown in a medium shot as a school bus passes from left to right in the background. It is clear that Scorpio is headed out of town with the children. A shot from inside the bus shows that Scorpio is losing patience with the children. He slaps one young boy when he begins to question what is happening. To this point it is clear that Scorpio has entertained the children with sing-alongs and has hidden the fact that he is kidnapping them. As the journey continues, the audience sees an extreme long shot of a man standing on an overpass where the bus is turning. A closer shot shows that it is Harry, who, despite being told to stay away from the ransom drop scene, has anticipated

where it would take place. Harry jumps onto bus. From inside the bus the camera captures Scorpio shooting through the roof of the bus at Harry as the children scream and panic.

Scorpio takes control of the bus and runs it through a fence at an industrial site as Harry is thrown into a large pile of what appears to be ground limestone. Scorpio escapes and runs towards the raw materials plant as the scene cuts back and forth between the pursued and the pursuer. A foot chase ensues through the plant as conveyor belts of raw material crisscross the various levels of the plant. After several shots are fired, Scorpio escapes out the back. A point of view shot shows a young boy fishing near the river behind the plant. Scorpio is shown hobbling in his direction, again shot from a low angle as his limp is accentuated. After grabbing the boy, he turns to Harry and demands that he drop his gun. Harry feigns doing so and then rises up in the best “man with no name” tradition and shoots Scorpio in the shoulder, barely missing the boy, who runs to safety.

As he did in the scene at the bank, Harry deliberately walks toward the fallen Scorpio, who has tumbled onto a small dock. Here Scorpio is shot in a high angle to demonstrate his vulnerability, while Harry, arriving at the bank of the river, is shot in low angle throughout the scene to demonstrate his dominance. Again, as in the scene at the bank, Scorpio’s gun is within arm’s reach. And again, Harry delivers his speech about the power of the .44 magnum, explaining that it could “blow your head clean off.” This time, however, anger and bitterness are in his taunt. He wants to provoke Scorpio, and that is clear by the derisive way in which he says, “Do I feel lucky? Well, do you, punk?” As Scorpio reaches for the gun, Harry fires, knocking the serial killer off the dock into the river. The last shot of Scorpio is a high angle shot of him floating face up in the river. For once the audience sees his face first.

Not only is the shot more personal than it would be if he were face down, but it also demonstrates that Scorpio, once exposed, is just flesh and blood.

As the camera returns to Harry, he is shown in close-up pulling his badge from his coat pocket. After he looks at it, shown in an over-the-shoulder shot, the camera captures his badge number in extreme close-up. As the camera pulls back, Harry rears back and sails it into the river. Cut to an aerial shot and Harry is shown walking away from the river, and the camera, as the credits roll. In a scene reminiscent of several westerns, the most obvious being *High Noon*, Harry has tossed away his badge in disgust. But while Will Kane's tossing of the badge to the ground in *High Noon* is born out of disappointment with a community that has turned its back on him in his hour of need, Harry Callahan's action seems overdetermined. His anger and disgust are seen as equally determined by the community, represented by the mayor; by the police, who he feels have been neutered; by the liberal society, which has created the conditions in which a Scorpio could flourish; and by the entire counterculture, which he sees as having sowed the seeds of the moral decay of America. In a way, he is acting for all the working-class white men in the audience who cannot walk away from their jobs or fight back against the system. These men, for a few moments, live vicariously through Harry; not only has he eliminated a hated enemy of the "America" they want to believe in, but he has also stuck it to "the man."

Unlike the films of the late sixties that privileged the counterculture and often portrayed the police (read working class) as oppressors, *Dirty Harry* offers a modern-day sheriff who cleans up his town by whatever means necessary. At the time, there was a segment of society, part of which was made up of working-class white men, who were ready for just that kind of justice. After years of protest about the war and riots in the streets by

people in search of their civil rights, Nixon's Silent Majority had been convinced by his law-and-order campaign that the counterculture, anti-war protesters, and African-Americans were responsible for the deterioration of the cities and the nation's moral decay. In 1971, following several years of films from the left that criticized law enforcement, the government, and authority of all kinds, a backlash was almost inevitable. The anger that *Joe* exposed and exploited was just the beginning. *Joe* represented the joining of the working class and the upper middle class—members of Nixon's Silent Majority—in their opposition to the counterculture. But *Dirty Harry* takes resentment of the counterculture even farther. He uses the power of society—even if he is operating outside acceptable parameters—to exact revenge on those who would bring down America. Although critics blasted the film—Pauline Kael called it “fascist medievalism” and “right-wing fantasy” and Andrew Sarris described it as “one of the most disturbing manifestations of police paranoia I have seen on the screen in a long time” (Lev, *American* 35)—audiences responded to it. Although it was not as successful as its sequels, it was popular enough to spawn several Harry Callahan films. And, as Ryan and Kellner note, while their studies showed that most people rejected the message of the film—that police vigilantism was acceptable and that constitutional protections for the accused went too far—many surveyed accepted the film's premise:

While our survey suggests that many viewers rejected the film's vision of the world, we should also note that in our oral interviews we encountered a number of people who fully held the position of the film, and in a number of cases where people disagreed with the solution to crime, they nonetheless confessed to buying in temporarily to the action format and the plot premises of the film. (45)

Ryan and Kellner go on to say that some audience members who did not have right-wing views were able to enjoy the film because they were able to reserve judgment and participate in the “spectacle” (45).

The time was clearly ripe for this particular kind of “spectacle.” Many people, liberals included, probably found themselves pulling for Harry Callahan to end the terror perpetrated by Scorpio. By creating a character of pure evil and pitting him against an overreaching but complex character like Dirty Harry, a man who in the words of his partner Chico “always gets the shit end of the stick,” the filmmaker makes it easy for the audience to suspend belief in the Bill of Rights for a couple hours. Two years earlier, the film could probably not have been made. But in 1971, as Robert B. Ray writes, the Left and Right cycles in American film were in full bloom. Although other Right-leaning films had come before, the “angry” Right films didn’t come along until the early 1970s, and *Dirty Harry* led the way. As Ray writes, “Almost all the Left movies . . . used outlaws or outsiders to represent the counterculture’s own image of itself as in flight from a repressive society. The Right films, in contrast, typically centered on cops or vigilantes engaged in war against criminals” (299). America’s Silent Majority was angry and ready to fight back, and many, particularly members of the working class who had suffered the most in the difficult economic times and in the administering of the war, were willing to have Harry Callahan fight that battle for them, if only for a couple hours on the screen.

Scarecrow

The next film to be discussed, *Scarecrow*, is an almost forgotten film about two men who live on the margins of the working class, one recently released from prison after serving

six years for assault and battery and the other returning from five years on the road, and the sea, as a merchant marine. *Scarecrow* came during a period when the “buddy” picture was a burgeoning genre. Following films like *Easy Rider*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (1970) and the lighter *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1968), *Scarecrow* explores the relationship between two men, Max (Gene Hackman) and Francis, or “Lion” (Al Pacino). While some have discussed what they perceive to be the repressed homosexuality inherent in this and other buddy pictures, that issue is not our concern (nor, in this case, do we ascribe to that particular view). We will be exploring these men as members of a working class that is struggling to survive in a world of shrinking wages and diminishing opportunity as the mid-1970s approach. In contrast to the counterculture characters of Billy and Wyatt in *Easy Rider*, who are operating outside the mainstream, these are men who are tethered, albeit tenuously, to the working class. In some ways they are reminiscent of Joe Buck and Ratso Rizzo of *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), but they are more grounded and reflective of working-class values. Whereas Joe Buck wants to hustle women and Ratso simply wants to hustle, Max and Francis have a plan—they are going to be partners in a car wash in Pittsburgh. They have not given up on the American Dream—they are still pursuing it, in their own small way.

Max Millan (Gene Hackman) and Francis Lionel “Lion” Delbuchi (Al Pacino) are two men who operate on the margins of society. One, Max, has just been released from prison, and the other, Francis (Lion as Max calls him), has just left the Merchant Marines. By chance, the two men meet on the road as they hitchhike east—like Wyatt and Billy in *Easy Rider*, they travel from West to East, again symbolizing the closing of the western frontier—to find lives they had either left behind or had not yet found. In “Lion’s” case, he is headed to Detroit to see the woman he left behind five years earlier and the child that he has never seen.

As for Max, he is headed to Pittsburgh to claim money he has deposited in a bank there with the intention of opening a car wash in that city. Shortly after the two men meet, they make plans to become partners in pursuing Max's dream.

When the film arrived in theaters at the end of the summer of 1973, the Watergate investigation was in full bloom and America was still extricating itself from Vietnam. Films about the counterculture were being replaced in part by films about the lives of working-class men and women. These characters, primarily men, were being victimized by a recession, were recovering from the Vietnam experience, either personally or as a member of the working class that fought it, and were struggling to understand a world that was changing too quickly. They were looking at futures that were, at best, uncertain, at worst, bleak. Speaking of *Scarecrow* and other "buddy films" about the failed pursuit of dreams, David Denby writes in his 1973 essay, "Men Without Women, Women Without Men," "In these films, despite the dithering, aimless quality, defeat is built into the basic structure; we know from the beginning that the two heroes of *Scarecrow* aren't going to make it, and we know the same about the other down-and-outers who have recently become the ironic models of American ambition and idealism in our movies" (170).

While some of what Denby says rings true—his cinematic experience at the time told him that these two men would ultimately meet with defeat—his pejorative language about the "dithering, aimless quality" of these films tips his hand. He doesn't see these characters as representative of a greater American story, but instead sees them as isolated slices of life. As he notes, "Despite all the adventures, all the experience, these movies take place in a vacuum, an America more mythical and metaphysical than actual" (170).

Here is where I disagree, particularly in regards to *Scarecrow*. While the two men are clearly outside the mainstream, their quest is to become part of that mainstream. Where Denby sees a film about men whose “reality isn’t our reality” (170), I see a film that explores the realities of lives led on the edges of the working class, lives that seek to escape the “quiet desperation” that Henry David Thoreau wrote about. And doesn’t every life take place in a vacuum of sorts? What else is a “slice of life” film but the exposure of a common life lived outside the headlines of the daily news. *Scarecrow* is a slice of American life that many may want to ignore, but it is a reality for many who live on the margins of the working class.

Coming four years after *Easy Rider*, *Scarecrow* explores some of the same issues that Dennis Hopper’s film explored—a search for “America,” the quest for a more comfortable material life, albeit a modest quest in this case, and the search for belonging—but always from a working-class perspective, not the counterculture perspective. In what is a generally positive 1973 review of the film, Bruce Williamson refers to Max’s “pitiful lifelong dream of opening a car wash in Pittsburgh” and notes that the “seedy milieu” of the film represents a “crippling state of mind” (206). Again, while I agree with his description of the milieu, I strongly disagree that it represents a “crippling state of mind,” or that Max’s dream is “pitiful.” While the milieu is seedy and the world that Max and Lion know exists on the edges of society, it is their quest to leave that world behind that makes the film a purely American experience, and in particular a working-class experience. Although Lion is reduced to a catatonic state by the film’s end, unable to contend with what life has thrown at him and some of the decisions he has made, *Scarecrow* is not a bleak film despite its reputation as such. Despite being denied access to his five-year-old child by the child’s mother, Lion still has Max at the end of the film, which is more than he had at the beginning. He has a true

friend who has agreed to stand by him, someone who represents loyalty, a virtue found at the heart of working-class values. While that may not seem like much to someone more firmly established in the mainstream of American life like Williamson, to someone on the edges it represents hope that a better day might come along, which is all many working-class people were wishing for in the early 1970s. Max's hope, of course, is that Lion's state is not permanent. The film does not answer that question, but it doesn't have to. Max's willingness to hope and sacrifice for his friend is what matters here.

Like *Dirty Harry*, *Scarecrow* is a product of the early 1970s, the post youth/cult period. Like *Dirty Harry*, it provides working-class protagonists who are struggling to make sense out of a world that has become alien to them. But while Harry Callahan sees the underbelly of San Francisco life as a seeping sore on the city's torso, Max and Lion see it as simply a stop along the road to a better life. Unlike *Dirty Harry*, which is angry and seeks to offer a cathartic experience for its working class audience, *Scarecrow* does not offer any easy solutions to this complex world. While *Harry* demonizes the counterculture much like *Easy Rider* demonizes the working class, *Scarecrow* demonizes no one. It refuses to blame the counterculture and African Americans for the state of the nation or the state of its protagonists' lives. It doesn't even absolve the protagonists from blame for their own conditions. It simply tells a story of two men on the periphery of the working class who struggle to find their path to the American Dream.

Scarecrow begins with an extreme long shot of a male figure making his way down a barren brown hillside towards what appears to be a barbed wire fence. As the figure approaches, the tall man (Hackman as Max), wearing a hat and several layers of clothes and carrying a suitcase, slips under the fence, catching his coat on the wire at one point. He then

stumbles, slipping down the bank of the hillside to a road. As this is happening, the film intermittently cuts to a man (Pacino as “Lion”) watching the action from behind a tree. An eyeline match cuts back to Max as he tumbles down the embankment, standing to wipe the dust from his clothes in disgust. In this first scene, we meet the protagonists as they, themselves, meet. Within a few minutes on screen, with little dialogue exchanged between the two men, they develop a bond that will carry them across the country in search of their dreams. But the initial introduction is not smooth. In the film’s first line of dialogue, Lion, using the pretext of Max’s fall to begin a conversation, says, “How you doing? You okay? . . . Hi, I’m Francis.” He is met by silence from Max, however, and the two jockey for hitchhiking position on the road for several minutes until threatening skies and high winds indicate that time has passed, a storm is approaching, and night is imminent. It is at this point that Lion does everything he can to draw Max’s attention as the two station themselves on opposite sides of the road. Lion first imitates an ape, and then he pretends to conduct a conversation with an imaginary phone. None of this has any effect on Max. But one thing finally does—when Max attempts to light his cigar, he burns out his final match. Lion comes to the rescue with a match. The film then cuts to a scene indicating darkness has arrived. Just as quickly, honky tonk music introduces a new scene and Max and Lion are on the back of a truck as daylight is breaking.

This first scene accomplishes two things: it establishes the relationship between Lion and Max, and it sets up the narrative of two men on the road to somewhere, even if they never get there. Technically, tracking shots are used liberally as the men jockey for position on the road and as they eventually procure a ride. This technique is used throughout the film as the men move from town to town, from railroad to highway, and from one experience to

another. Tracking shots are juxtaposed with static shots of the men as they temporarily stop in towns along the way to earn some money for the trip, find a honky tonk bar to quench a thirst in, or stop to visit a friend. But when they are outside on the road or the tracks, the tracking shot is the shot of choice, demonstrating their inexorable march east.

The indoor shots best illustrate the working-class milieu. The bars are honky tonks, and the restaurants are truck stops. The bars are often shot with a red-tinted filter, providing a musty look to the environs. The bar rooms are often smoke-filled, and the clientele are always working class. The bars are places where you can find a drink, a woman, a fight, or all three. They are boisterous places that people frequent with one purpose in mind—to drink until the world outside the smoky room disappears. Throughout the film Max and Lion find experience after experience through a simple stop for a drink—one time finding a loudmouth woman played by Eileen Brennan, who becomes Max's first woman after prison; and another time leading to a fight over another woman that lands both Max and Lion in jail and ultimately leads to Lion's mental breakdown.

The second major scene in the film establishes the relationship between the two men, more firmly establishes the character of each, and sets them on their way towards Pittsburgh and Max's dream of opening that carwash. This scene takes place in a truck stop diner. As they take seats at the counter with honky tonk music playing in the background, Max speaks his first line of dialogue in the film as he turns to Lion. "Wanna go into business?" he asks. Lion responds in the affirmative, indicating that he has to stop in Detroit on the way to Pittsburgh to see his child, and the partnership is sealed over breakfast. It is here where Max gives Francis his nickname of Lion (short for Lionel) because he cannot bring himself to call him Francis. During the scene, the two men are captured primarily in a two shot, but at the

far right of the frame a local is occasionally shown paying peripheral attention to the two men. In another moment that defines Max's demeanor, the local walks behind the two, and Max turns abruptly and asks the man if he has nothing better to do than listen to other people's conversations. The man does not respond to the hulking figure on the diner stool, and then retreats to his seat. It is clear to the audience that the local was not eavesdropping, and Max's accosting of the man says much about Max's paranoia, having just been released from jail, and his inability to trust anyone. That trust issue adds even more weight to his decision to trust Lion, whom he has just met.

This scene also establishes a humorous tone that carries through most of the film. For example, Max orders an inordinate amount of food for breakfast, at one point sarcastically addressing the middle-aged waitress, who can't seem to keep up with his order, "You're first day?" While sarcastic, the line is delivered in such an off-handed way that it reinforces his rugged persona without alienating the audience. The scene ends with Lion unable to restrain a laugh when Max, having already ordered half of the menu, turns to the waitress and for dessert orders "a bottle of beer and a chocolate donut." Although it is Lion who intentionally tries to make Max and others laugh during the film, it is Max who often elicits laughter through his rugged, abrasive, and occasionally over-the-top personality.

In the following scene, as the men shower and wipe the grit of the road from their skin in a seedy hotel, Lion offers his theory of the scarecrow, from which the film gets its title. In doing so, he explains his approach to life, and survival, as a man small in stature. The scarecrow, he tells Max, does not scare crows—it makes them laugh. That is why he has chosen to be a scarecrow, not a fighter like Max. Later in the scene, as Max lies on the bed in the cramped hotel room and Lion dries his hair across the room, Lion asks him why he chose

him as a partner despite the fact that Max has already told him that he “isn’t playing with a full deck.” Max replies, “Because you gave me your last match. [pause] You make me laugh.”

That line not only summarizes the relationship between the two men, but it also represents the film’s attitude towards the working class. It is not a bitter or angry working class, as presented in *Joe* or *Dirty Harry*. It is a working class that can still laugh, and still wants to laugh, even during the toughest of times. Just as importantly, it is a working class that cherishes friendship and camaraderie, and honors selflessness. It is a working class that believes in the value of the individual even when that individual operates on the periphery of society. And it is a working class that believes in work, even if *Scarecrow*’s protagonists are not currently operating within the mainstream of the economy. It is a working class that was generally missing from the Hollywood screen during the late 1960s.

The working-class value of hard work is best illustrated in one scene at the home of Coley, Max’s long-time female friend whom we meet a little more than halfway through the film. Coley (Dorothy Tristan), who runs a small junkyard out of her backyard, is inside her home with Lion and Frenchy (Ann Wedgeworth), when Lion walks into the backyard to help Max rearrange some of the larger appliances situated throughout the property. Max, without prompting, says, “You know, work. You gotta work.” He is clearly not impressed with Coley’s organizational skills: “When we get the car wash, everything’s going to be in order.” When asked by Lion what he intends to do at the car wash, Max’s work ethic and capitalist tendencies come to the fore: “Keeping things in order. Washing them cars, and walking over to the bank.” Here is a man who has just served six years in jail for assault but who has retained his working-class values and his working-class dream.

The film's choice to judge neither the working class nor the counterculture is exemplified in one short but humorous, as well as telling, interaction between the two men and a "hippie" family. About twenty-five minutes into the film, Max and Lion are shown reclining on the back of a pickup truck when the truck stops, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and lets the men off. They have hitched a ride with an older Native American couple who have arrived at their little hamlet, and they now find themselves several miles outside of any significant town. The film cuts to a deep focus shot of a crowded highway with two young boys riding a bicycle towards the camera and a small bridge in the background. The next shot is a close up of Max inside one of the vehicles. The camera pulls back a little to show Lion to his right and a young woman holding a baby in the front seat. The vehicle is stopped, and the driver, a long-haired young man, is shown in a three-quarter turn towards Max. Two young boys are also in the vehicle, which is shot in a tight frame, with movement restricted and the sound of traffic and the young boys prominent. The woman and man are clearly a young hippie couple. As we pick up the conversation, Max, hulking and confined in the back seat, says to the young woman, positioned in a three-quarter turn towards him, "So you've been eating rice for a year. My system couldn't handle that." She responds, saying, "It's very good for your system. Look at my baby." With that, she hands the baby in a trusting way back to Max, who holds the child out in front of him in the awkward way a hulking man would hold a child. As he gingerly sits the child on his lap, it is clear almost immediately from Max's expression that the child has wet on him. At that point he hands the baby back to the mother and says, "This is it. This is our spot." Lion questions the decision, but Max insists that this is the spot, despite the fact that the vehicle has not moved. The moment takes on a comic feel when Lion and Max get out of the Volkswagen

Van—the stereotypical vehicle of choice for the hippy crowd—and begin to walk up the road. Nothing stands in front of them but a gridlocked highway and miles of road.

The scene, played for humor, contrasts sharply with scenes that depict interactions between the working class and the counterculture in films like *Easy Rider*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Joe*. Although Max is clearly uncomfortable with his cramped quarters in the van, there is never any hint of antagonism between the two groups. The decision of the couple to pick them up, and their acceptance of the ride, depicts a spirit of cooperation between the two groups. This is reinforced by the attempts of the young couple to engage Max and Lion in conversation. It is clear from their wardrobes that neither the young couple nor the two men have much in material wealth. But the willingness to share is there, and while the ride is a short one, it is short only because of Max's discomfort with holding a wet child. In a similar scene in *Alice's Restaurant*, when Arlo is picked up by a trucker, Arlo has to hide his long hair beneath a hat in order to get the trucker to stop.

The visit to Coley and Frenchy in Denver leads directly to the beginning of a downward spiral for Lion. One night when the four of them are out dancing in a smoky, dimly lit bar, Max gets into a disagreement with one of Frenchy's admirers. Max and Frenchy, who is best described as a vacuous and curvaceous brunette in her thirties who is not shy about showing off her body, have become an item. Lion diffuses the situation before it evolves into a fistfight and engages the entire bar in his antics, eventually leading the crowd in a line dance into the street. But Max and the admirer have not forgotten each other, and when the line marches past the bar towards the front door, a medium shot of Max, dancing behind Frenchy, shows him motion towards the door to the admirer, who is sitting at the bar. Once the men are on the street, a fight ensues, and during the fight Max accidentally

punches a police officer. The incident lands both Lion and Max in jail for 30 days, but once they get there Max refuses to have anything to do with Lion, blaming him for the incident. For the first time in the film, the two men separate—neither can protect the other either with humor or with brawn.

Prior to the prison sequence, the two men were regularly shown in two-shots. Once in prison, however, the two men are shown either in one shots or, in the case of Lion, in two shots with inmate Jack Riley, who steps into the vacuum left by Max. But he is not Max, and when he attempts to rape Lion and Lion fights back, he beats the smaller man nearly to death. Lion and Max are reunited when Lion makes his way back to the barracks-style room where the inmates sleep and he calls out Max's name. Even here, Lion has not lost his sense of humor. As Max kneels down to tend to his friend in the first two-shot of them since their initial transport to the barracks, Lion, seated on the floor just inside the barracks door, his face distorted with swelling and blood, says, "Riley tried to fuck me, so I had to kick the shit out of him." Max's only response is, "Ah, Jesus Christ." Coming from a man like Max who has brutalized others in his time, this expression of fear and concern carries additional weight. Although Max exacts revenge on Riley later, beating him senseless when he gets the opportunity, Lion never truly recovers from the beating he received. In subsequent scenes he is increasingly shot in one-shots, standing alone in contemplation, a stark contrast to earlier scenes when he was either shot in two-shots with Max or was shot doing something to make someone laugh. Max takes on the role of the scarecrow in these scenes, but it is clear that Lion is not the same.

The end, or what appears to be the end, comes to Lion shortly after the two men leave prison and arrive in Detroit. Contradicting his earlier decision to not call the mother of his

child before he visits her, he decides to call first, clearly fearing he may not be welcomed at the door. The following scene, played out primarily in close-ups of the man and woman on the phone, she in her small apartment and he on a pay phone, devastates Lion. Before Lion makes the call, Max, sensing his friend's apprehension, says, "Just remember you're a person. And you were a kid before and you made mistakes and you ran . . . now you're a man and you're going to straighten it all out." This is another example of the spirit of the working class that the film exalts. Unfortunately, Max's pep talk can't wipe away five years of pain on the other end of the line.

As the phone rings, a shot of a cramped and messy apartment is shown. A little boy plays on the floor in the left of the frame as a woman in hair curlers answers the phone. Excited at first to hear the voice of "Francis," she instinctively touches the "rollers" in her hair as if to tidy her appearance. Shown in a medium close shot, from a low angle, a crucifix is apparent on the wall in the right corner of the frame, establishing her as Roman Catholic, which will play a key role in the climax of the scene. As the conversation continues, a close up of the child on the floor illustrates his dramatic resemblance to Francis (Lion). The conversation quickly turns angry and ugly when it is clear that Francis is not going to stay. Although disappointed to hear that she has married, he tries to joke about it, but by now she has recovered from the initial shock of the call and is remembering the pain. "Why'd you leave?" she asks him. He has no answer, but says he did send money. "Yeah, I got it. A big fat nothin'. You just left." Throughout this part of the scene she is shot in a consistent close up. Suddenly, she seems to have an epiphany. The audience can almost see her constructing the tale as she tells Lion the baby was stillborn because she fell and no one was around to help her. "It would have been a boy, Francis," she says. At this point, a series of close-ups of

her, Francis, and the young boy are shown. But she is not done inflicting pain on the man who hurt her. “Never got baptized. You know what that means. That soul cannot go to heaven, Francis. That’s what you did for your son’s soul, you bastard. You sent it into Limbo. That soul cannot go to heaven.” The scene cuts to Francis as he hangs up. “Francis? Francis?” she says, but he is gone.

Lion gathers himself for a moment and then steps out of the phone booth to where Max, who has been shot in deep focus in the background intermittently during the scene, awaits. “It’s a boy,” Francis yells. Max, fooled by Francis’s exuberance, replies, “You’re a man now. I mean. Goddamnit you’re a man.” To Max, Francis is now a man because he has accepted his responsibility and has “faced the music” with his ex-girlfriend, not because he has fathered a son. This exclamation by Max illustrates another working-class value, the value of responsibility, and it again reinforces the film’s generally positive view of the working class. But it is clear to the audience as the two men walk away that Francis’s life has taken a dramatic turn. The camera lingers on the trunk of a car to capture a shot of a shoebox that Francis has been carrying with him since the first scene of the film—a shoebox that contains a lamp that he bought for his child because it was one gift that would be appropriate for a boy or a girl.

The end comes shortly thereafter when the two men are shot standing in front of a large city fountain adorned with several sculptures, including a lion, which at one point is ironically shown in juxtaposition to a shot of Lion. In this scene, Max is always shown in the background or on the far right of the frame as Lion plays games with four children in front of the fountain. He’s reading the palms of the four young children, who appear to be between 6 and 8 years old, and he entertains them with his Long John Silver imitation. It is clear that

Max senses something is wrong and that Lion has suffered a trauma. But Max appears willing to let Lion work through his issues, partially out of loyalty and love, but also partially because he does not know what to do. But when Lion picks up one of the children and steps into the fountain, wading up to his thighs in water on a cold, gray winter day, Max jumps into the fountain to help his friend and to rescue the frightened child. The camera captures two women sitting along the wall of the fountain, assumed to be mothers or babysitters, panicking as they watch Lion wade into the fountain and begin rambling unintelligibly.

The film cuts next to a dimly lit interior as an elevator opens and two nurses step towards the camera pushing a gurney. Max, seated down the hallway in an equally dimly lit corridor, is shot in a medium shot as he turns, and his eyeline match makes it clear that he is looking at Lion. As he approaches the gurney, a doctor tells him that Lion is catatonic, but Max is in denial. “He’s foolin around. He’s foolin’ around,” Max says. He then walks to the gurney and the camera tracks him. Here there is a low angle shot of him talking downward to the prone and unconscious Lion. He tells him he can’t open the car wash without him, and then says something that demonstrates that he sensed something bad happened to Lion in that phone conversation. “I’m going to take you back to that phone booth and find out what she said to you,” he says, as if the booth itself held the answer to Lion’s sudden demise. He shakes his friend, trying to awaken him from his catatonic state. As Lion is wheeled away, he says, “I’m going to take care of you, Lion.” The scene ends with a medium shot of Max, shot from the front, standing alone in the hallway as he watches his friend wheeled away.

The film then cuts to a shot of Max standing in line at what appears to be a bus terminal. As he reaches the front of the line, he speaks to the ticket seller:

Max: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Ticket seller: Round trip?

Max: Yes. Round trip.

It is in this brief scene that we learn that Max indeed is going to give up his dream in order to take care of his friend. But while this scene could be played solely for its pathos and could easily devolve into melodrama, humor again comes to the rescue. When Max discovers he does not have adequate funds in his pocket, he takes off his shoe and twists the heel to uncover what appears to be a \$10 bill. He then hands the bill to the ticket seller to complete the transaction and proceeds to pound the heel of the shoe on the counter to reattach the nails as he and everyone in line watches.

As sad as Lion's demise is at the end, the film does not end on a sad note. As the credits roll, upbeat New Orleans jazz plays. The bond between the two working-class men has not been severed by one's precipitous decline. Max, who was hopelessly cynical and unable to trust anyone in the early part of the film, has been transformed by his relationship with Lion. This is evident in several scenes where he avoids violence at Lion's urging, but it is most evident in the final scenes of the film where he stands by his friend and gives up his long-held dream in order to care for him. Hope remains that Max will return from Pittsburgh and that Lion will climb out of his catatonic state. The light moment at the end at the bus terminal helps to lessen the effect of Lion's decline. It also demonstrates that Max retains what makes Max unique, but that he has grown beyond that caricature by film's end.

In all, the film portrays the working class in a sympathetic and realistic manner. Max is not perfect—he is irascible in the best of times and violent in the worst—and Lion is clearly flawed, but they are men who know who they are and who have come to value what is precious in life. By portraying these men on the edges of the working class in a

sympathetic and understanding manner, the film presents a working class that is more than the stereotypical southern bigot or the fascist cop that too often represented it in youth/cult films. In the one brief but significant encounter between Max and Lion and the counterculture, the film also moves away from the cinematic binary of counterculture versus the working class. While scenes like this made occasional appearances in films like *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*, they were obscured in the youth/cult films by other portrayals of an intolerant working class. Here, for one of the first times in the 1970s, the counterculture and working class are portrayed as different, but not incompatible. Unlike the anger and hatred spewed by Dirty Harry Callahan and Joe Curran at the counterculture, Max and Lion have no time or energy for that. They are busy trying to live their lives as they pursue their own modest version of the American Dream.

The Last Detail

In the next and final film to be discussed in this chapter, *The Last Detail*, we will continue to explore the renaissance of sorts of the working class in American film. Among other films of the era like *Five Easy Pieces* and *Chinatown*, and I would include *Scarecrow*, this film represents a brief moment in American film history between the youth/cult era and the new blockbuster era of the mid-1970s “when movies mattered,” in David Thomson’s words (*The Decade 73*). *The Last Detail* belongs among the group of films that Thomson is alluding to. In this case, what “mattered” was the positive representation of working-class men, lifers in the Navy, who are doing their best to survive in a world that constricts their every movement.

Citing Thomson's work on the era, Noel King asserts that this brief era of "personal films" became the aesthetic "path not taken." He writes, "This exciting cultural moment is lost as mainstream genre filmmaking is re-established, often by the very young Turks who supposedly were moving away from traditional forms of cinema" (29). In addition to celebrating the director as auteur in American film, many of these early 1970s films tended to be character-driven rather than plot-driven. As David Bordwell writes, "Character-driven films of the New Hollywood like *Carnal Knowledge* (1970), *The Last Detail* (1973), and *Shampoo* (1975) made filmmakers aware of alternatives to the 'externally' driven protagonist" (*The Way* 84). This character-driven moment in Hollywood is obvious in a film like *Five Easy Pieces*, which tells the story of a well-to-do concert pianist, Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson), from an artistic family who tries to find real meaning in his life by exploring the working class. Bobby Dupea's self-exploration leaves him without answers, but three years later in *The Last Detail* the same actor, with the help of director Hal Ashby, explores the working class from the position of a Navy grunt. The result is a film that treats its working class protagonists with sympathy and understanding while exploring the rigidity of military life and the limits of the American Dream for those caught in constricting working-class lives.

The Last Detail is the story of two "lifers" in the Navy who are assigned the task of transporting a young sailor from Norfolk, Virginia to Boston to serve eight years for attempting to steal \$40 from a collection box of the admiral's wife's favorite charity. The disproportionate punishment for the minor offense sets the stage for a raucous trip north as the two lifers, Bill "Bad Ass" Buddusky (Nicholson) and "Mule" Mulhall (Otis Young) decide to help the young sailor Larry Meadows (Randy Quaid) experience life during the

week they are given to deliver him to the brig and return. Their trip consists of a drunken stay in Washington, a visit to both a bordello and a counterculture party in New York, a brief journey to Meadows's working-class home town in a failed attempt to see his mother, and a cookout on one of the coldest days of the year in Boston. During the journey, the audience is introduced to the simple lives of all three men as they attempt to carve out lives of dignity in a world that gives them little room to operate.ⁱⁱ

As "lifers" in the Navy, Buddusky and Mulhall live what Diane Jacobs refers to as "constricted" lives. Comparing the film to Ashby's earlier *Harold and Maude* (1971), a film about the romance between a free-spirited 80-year-old woman and a teenage boy, Jacobs writes, "If life's possibilities are limitless in the earlier work, the lives we see here are unremittingly constricted; and the sanguinity of the martial parade music that accompanies the three sad Navy men on their voyage is a counterpoint that underscores this bitter reality" (225). Jacobs is referring to the familiar marching music that plays intermittently during the film to indicate another move on the trip north to Boston. The marching music also conveys another message—the regimented lives that the three men lead, particularly Buddusky and Mulhall. Despite the rigid quality of their lives in the service, these working-class characters, like earlier working-class protagonists Luke Jackson of *Cool Hand Luke* and the title characters of *Bonnie and Clyde*, represent a link to the counterculture of pre-1968. As Christian Keathley writes, referring to these early 1970s films and their new heroes, "An important characteristic of these films is that their heroes exist in a middle position between the "official hero" and "outlaw hero" favored by classical cinema. [. . .] While most of these figures do not directly challenge the established system as the figures of the counter-culture cycle did, all are at least partly alienated from it" (299). (See Introduction endnote V.)

This alienation, palpable in *Scarecrow* as well, establishes a connection between the working-class heroes and their real-life counterculture counterparts, as it did in films like *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. For that reason, these films in some ways represent a brief return to the pre-youth/cult films that established working-class heroes as surrogates for the counterculture at a time before the counterculture became the subject du jour in Hollywood. One major difference here is that, unlike in the earlier films, the counterculture makes an appearance here. Also, while the working class is portrayed as the intolerant “other” in youth/cult films, by contrast the counterculture is depicted in this film with sensitivity and a little humor, in much the same way that it was treated in *Scarecrow*. Although it is clear in the “party” scene that the working-class sailors and counterculture Greenwich Village inhabitants have little in common, the film chooses to look critically, and humorously, at both groups. In doing so, the film also demonstrates that while the two groups may at times speak different languages, they can converse. Later in this chapter we will explore the scene where Buddusky, Mulhall, and Meadows encounter the counterculture to illustrate how the interaction between the two groups differs greatly from the interaction between the working class and the counterculture in *Dirty Harry* and *Joe*.

The Last Detail is an ironic title because the central point of the film is that there is no last detail for men like Buddusky and Mulhall short of retirement from the service. As lifers their lives and their activities are determined by the Navy and their own superiors. In the first sequence of the film the camera tracks a messenger from the “chief” (the M.A.A.) as he scours the base at Norfolk for first Buddusky and then Mulhall to give them their assignment to take Meadows to the brig. The tracking shots set the template for similar shots throughout the film as the three men are often shown walking three-aside through city streets, bus

terminals, and train stations. These shots not only display movement, but they connote the inexorable march towards Meadows's imprisonment. We quickly learn that Buddusky and Mulhall share more than a career—they share an attitude towards authority. Upon hearing that the “M.A.A.” wants to see him, Buddusky, shot reclining in a comfortable chair as the messenger stands in the background of the deep focus shot, says, “Tell M.A.A. to go fuck himself.” He then proceeds to pick up a clearly warm bottle of beer, rinses his mouth out with a swig, and spits it into a bucket next to his chair. After a dissolve, another tracking shot follows the messenger to a room where a black sailor is ironing his uniform.ⁱⁱⁱ In an over-the-shoulder long shot, we meet Mulhall for the first time. Mulhall's response to the messenger, like Buddusky's, anticipates the worst. As lifers, they know a messenger from the M.A.A. rarely means good news. “I ain't going on no shit detail,” Mulhall says. After some brief pleading from the messenger, the scene ends in a dissolve as Mulhall says, “Now tell that M.A.A. to go fuck himself. I ain't going on no shit detail.” On the other side of the dissolve, however, Buddusky is shown walking down a dim and tight hallway, now fully dressed. This opening sequence clearly demonstrates that, despite their differences in race, there is much in common between the two working-class men.

This first sequence introduces several important elements for the film. First, it establishes the film as a realistic narrative through its coarse language and its stark and gray visual look. David A. Cook writes that the film contains “forty-seven mother-fuckers,” according to screenwriter Robert Towne (111), capturing the salty language of the sailors. The film takes place in the winter, and everything from the gray skies to the brown grass around the squat brick buildings connotes the meager quality of the sailors' existence. As Jacobs says, “The world looks ugly and cold; the colors, especially the institutional yellows,

reinforce the tawdriness of these men's lives" (227). The sequence also establishes the film's tone as Buddusky's irascibility is contrasted to Mulhall's more cautious approach to the service, hinting at conflict to come along the journey. Finally, the sequence also establishes not only the toughness of the men, but their attitudes towards authority after serving their adult lives in the service—although neither man tells the M.A.A. to “fuck himself” in person. This kind of realism in look and in tone would ring true to anyone who has ever served in the armed forces or any regimented lifestyle for any length of time. The language, as Cook notes, might still shock a film audience of 1973, but it would not shock those who lived the life of a sailor.

Arriving in the theaters as the Vietnam War was winding down, *The Last Detail* makes only one mention of that war, and that takes place during the visit to the counterculture party in New York. It is clear from the start that although this film is about men in the military, it is not a military film. It is also a film that could not have been made a year or two earlier because of the public backlash against the military as a result of the war, although much of that was unfairly placed on the shoulders of returning soldiers. The scene at the counterculture party, which we will explore, would have played out much differently if the film had come out in the midst of the war protests of the late 1960s. More precisely, that scene would not have been shot. Conversations between working-class military men and members of the counterculture did not take place in 1969 films—unless one counts violent arguments.

The Last Detail is a film about men trapped in a comfort zone, so to speak. While neither “Bad Ass” nor “Mule” is particularly happy with his life, the regimentation of the service seems to suit them, despite their complaints about “shit details.” The irony is that

neither quite understands that about themselves, but they do see it in Meadows. In a telling piece of dialogue in the film, also touched upon by Jacobs in *Hollywood Renaissance*, Buddusky turns to Mule and says, “Let me tell you something about a kid like Meadows. He’s the kind of guy who’s going to the brig and secretly he’s probably glad. On the outside too many things can happen to him. All of it bad. This way, the worst part’s already happened. He’s probably glad.” While the brig may be Meadows’s safe haven, the service has become theirs. As working class men growing up in the 1950s, as both men were, the military must have seemed like a legitimate and safe choice when they enlisted. A decade and a half later, however, that life has become a comfortable prison for both men, one who is divorced (Buddusky) and the other who has never married because he still takes care of his mother (Mulhall).

Despite the cold grayness of the film about the constricted lives lived by its protagonists, *The Last Detail* is in large part a film about relationships. Audiences can walk away from the film feeling angry and disconsolate over the plight of Meadows, Mule, and Buddusky, or they can choose to celebrate the humanity demonstrated by these men. Throughout the film, despite the anticipated grim ending of the journey, the two older men teach Meadows how to be a man—at least how to be a man in their image. A young man who has been abandoned by a father and raised by a disinterested mother—the trip to New Jersey to see her home unveils a “home” that is in disrepair and unkempt—Meadows is in desperate need of male mentors. Buddusky and Mule offer that mentoring, teaching Meadows more life lessons in a week than he has learned in a lifetime. Most importantly for our purposes, they teach him working-class values—how to stand up for yourself, how to accept responsibility

for your actions, and how to demand to be recognized as a man even when your power is limited and your life is constricted.

The early part of the film is peppered with two-shots of Buddusky and Mule and one-shots of Meadows, even when they sometimes seem contrary to common sense. For example, in one scene in a train headed north to Washington, Buddusky and Mule are sitting on one side of booth-like seating and Meadows is on the other. While this positioning works for the dialogue and demonstrates that the two lifers have each other and the Navy in common, while accentuating that Meadows is on his way to a lonely place, in the real world the prisoner would be blocked from entering the aisle by one of the “chasers,” as the two men taking him to the brig are called. As the film proceeds and the men get to know each other more, however, these shots tend to vary, with Meadows becoming part of the group. But as the trip comes near to its end, the two-shots of the chasers and one-shots of Meadows again become prominent in preparation for the “break-up” of the trio.

Not long after the men begin their trip north, Meadows shoplifts some candy from a counter while handcuffed. The audience is let in on the little caper as it is shot from behind Meadows, but Buddusky and Mule are kept in the dark. Meadows engages in another shoplifting caper shortly thereafter, and when Mule asks him where he got the candy that he is eating on the bus, he says, “I had it with me.” The shoplifting scenes do two things—they paint a sympathetic portrait of a young man who can’t seem to control his kleptomania, and they lead to a major turn in the story. As they travel on the train to Washington, the passage of time demonstrated by a series of dissolves, Meadows falls asleep. When he does, some of the candy he has stashed in his coat sleeves slides down and Buddusky notices it, pointing it out to Mule. Meadows awakens, appears to suddenly realize that he is headed to jail, leaps

from his seat, and runs up the aisle. The two chasers catch him and bring him back to his seat. Despite his aborted attempt to run—a senseless act inside a moving train—the aftermath of this moment brings the three men closer together. As they get Meadows back to his seat he says tearfully, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. . . . I had money.” In short, he is headed to eight years in the brig not because he wanted to steal, but because he could not control his impulses. Because of his fragile emotional state, the two chasers decide to take him off the train in Washington to “let him cool off.” It is here that the three men begin to bond and the life lessons begin.

The stopover in Washington and subsequent journey through New York to Boston not only reveal the character of the protagonists involved, but they also reveal a new attitude towards working-class characters in New Hollywood films. In each of the sequences to be discussed below, the working-class characters are portrayed as men of principles and values. Even when those values clash with counterculture ideals, or with more politically correct mainstream ideals, the protagonists are never made to look foolish. Their innate intelligence, particularly in the case of Buddusky and Mule, are always on display, as is their ethical foundation. Buddusky, despite his volatile temperament and “bad ass” attitude, something he has by his own admission cultivated, is never mean-spirited or abrasive to anyone who does not deserve the “bad-ass” treatment. In Mule’s case, his dignity is evident throughout, even when his conservative approach to the journey clashes with Buddusky’s. It can never be forgotten that Mule is a black man in the service of “the man,” in this case the Navy. His options are even narrower than Buddusky’s, and his reluctance to accommodate Meadows’s needs and desires must be seen through that prism.

In two key scenes in Washington, D.C., Buddusky exposes his working-class values. In the first incident, he teaches Meadows a life lesson. In the second, he makes a stand against racism. In the first scene, as the two chasers sit on the right side of a restaurant booth and Meadows sits on the left, the young man orders a cheeseburger. When his sandwich comes and the cheese is not melted, Buddusky insists that he send it back. "Send the goddamn thing back, Meadows. You're paying for it. Have it the way you want it," he says. It is not the sandwich Buddusky is concerned about here. It is Meadows's passive demeanor. Buddusky knows that Meadows will not survive in lock-up unless he toughens up. In a second scene, the three men encounter a racist bartender as they try to buy the young sailor a beer. As they sidle up to the bar, the bartender demands an identification card from Meadows. He then points at Mule and says, "The law says I have to serve him," adding that he won't risk his license by serving an underage drinker. When Buddusky challenges the bartender, the bartender begins to reach beneath the bar, implying that he has a gun there for protection. When Buddusky challenges him to produce it, he threatens to call the shore patrol. At this point, Buddusky takes out his firearm, slams it on the bar and says, "I am the motherfucking shore patrol, motherfucker." The next shot, following a straight cut, shows the three men running across a busy street towards a stationary camera. They are laughing. After reaching the sidewalk, they are picked up in a dolly shot, walking towards the camera. Throughout, Buddusky is imitating the "cracker" as they move briskly down the street. He then turns toward Meadows and says, "You ain't leaving D.C. until you've got a belly full of beer."

The scene is important because it demonstrates a white working-class man confronting another white working-class man on behalf of a black man. Scenes of white

bigotry were common in the youth-cult films, so this represents a welcome cinematic departure. While the “cracker” bartender clearly represents a negative depiction of the working class, Buddusky’s reaction to the racist more than counters that impression. Despite his flaws—his crudity, his misogyny, and his temper—his values are generally commendable, and they are presented as such throughout the film.

In a later sequence in Washington, after the three have missed the train because of their drinking and have checked into a hotel, the men bond and Buddusky continues his role of mentor to Meadows. Filmed in a cramped, sparsely decorated hotel room, the editor uses a series of dissolves to express the passage of time. This editing technique also demonstrates the marathon nature of the drinking session and shows how the men move from “chasers” and prisoner to mentors and young man. Its comic elements aside, it also offers a genuinely affectionate look at three working class men trying to get by in a world generally lined up against them. During the long sequence, the men are shown in a series of one and two shots, for the most part, with Mule and Buddusky shown several times conversing about Meadows like proud parents rather than chasers as Meadows sits on a bed or chair with a silly grin on his face.

As the young sailor’s mentor/parent, Buddusky decides, in grand drunken fashion, to teach Meadows a useful skill—ignoring that Meadows will never get a chance to use it. In a humorous scene, Buddusky, clearly full of himself, shows the young sailor the arm signals used by a signal man, emphasizing the difficulty of the skill. In a humorous twist, Meadows perfectly mimics Buddusky’s arm signals during a “quiz,” and Buddusky has to take a new tack: “Must have a flair for this sort of thing. Some people do, you know. I do. I have a flair for this.”

In a more serious moment, Buddusky tries to teach Meadows a survival lesson, knowing that the brig will not be kind to him. The short scene, which changes the tone of the hotel sequence from humorous to potentially violent as the men get more and more drunk, begins with Meadows asking Buddusky a question:

Meadows: Why did you get mad at the bartender? [Referring to the “cracker” bartender from the earlier scene].

Buddusky (incredulous): Don’t you ever get mad at anyone?

Meadows: Not someone who’s just doing his job.

Buddusky: You don’t ever get mad at nobody. You’re just a pussy.

After stomping and clenching and trying to get Meadows angry, telling him that another person who was “just doing his job” is sending him away for eight years, he still can’t get a rise out of the young sailor. It is then that the older sailor briefly snaps, punching a lamp and insisting that Meadows punch him. When Meadows refuses, he tries to goad him into an attack by saying, “I’m taking you to jail, motherfucker,” but to no avail. In the next shot things have settled down, and Mule and Buddusky are again shown in a two-shot talking and laughing and pointing at Meadows, who is shown in a long shot standing at the toilet relieving himself.

The significance of this scene is two-fold. Within the context of the story, it shows that Buddusky, although his approach is crude, is protective of the young man. That revelation exposes the conflict within Buddusky about taking the young man to the brig and anticipates a difficult ending to the journey. Within the context of the cinematic era, it is a positive depiction of the working class. Although Buddusky’s approach is one of tough love, it is love nonetheless, and the film recognizes this as a virtue.

Another key sequence takes place in New York at a party being thrown by a woman in the record business and her counterculture friends. Meadows and the other two are invited to a party after Meadows has been overheard chanting “nam myoho renge kyo” in a bar. Meadows has picked up the chant after hearing a Nichiren Buddhist group chanting as the three men walked past a brick structure in the Village. Such groups were common in the 1970s in arts communities like Greenwich Village. As the party drags on, Mule and Buddusky are often shown in a two-shot on a couch, laughing and pointing at Meadows, who is engaged in conversation with Donna (Luana Anders), the woman who invited them to the small party. But more telling are the interactions both Mule and Buddusky have with the counterculture characters. Buddusky spends a great deal of the evening trying to seduce a young woman with tales about “doing a man’s job” on the sea. Her reaction, bored but not condescending, allows him to act foolish without being a fool. He is clearly out of touch with the new world that exists outside the naval base, but the scene is treated with light humor instead of smugness. In a youth/cult film, this scene would have almost certainly ended in a confrontation or in the ridiculing of the sailor. But here, it just ends after several dissolves as the young girl quietly walks away from an incredulous Buddusky.

Mule’s experience with the counterculture at the party is even more telling. Cross-cut with Buddusky’s attempted seduction and Meadows’s quiet conversation with Donna, Mule is shot sitting on a couch with a young woman as a young man, clearly an agitated liberal, leans into their conversation from a chair at the left of the frame. They are all sharing a “joint,” a common communal act in the seventies. The audience is introduced to the three on the couch with a direct cut from Buddusky’s attempted seduction. The young angry man on the right leans in and says abruptly, “There’s got to be one thing you don’t like about Nixon.”

The brief dialogue sets the tone for the conversation and also introduces a major issue of the day—Nixon and the specter of Watergate. Mule does not respond. Again, confrontation is avoided. The scene cuts back to Buddusky and then returns to Mule on the couch as the young woman asks, earnestly, “Why don’t you see more black officers?” Mule’s response is the closest he comes to a political statement in the film: “Because you’ve gotta have a recommendation from a white, usually.” The serious nature of his response is immediately disrupted when the young man leans in again and says, “Nothing that Nixon says disturbs you. Is that right? Just tell me. Is that right?” This lightens the moment and again the scene cuts to Buddusky’s flailing attempt at seduction and back to Mule on the couch. Now the young lady on the couch asks, “How did you feel about going to Vietnam?” Mule responds, “Man says go, you got to do what the man says. We’re livin’ in this man’s world, ain’t we?” he asks. The young girl, taken in by his sincerity, looks at him and says, “Oh, wow.” Mule can only laugh.

This sequence demonstrates the wide gulf between the “lifers” and the counterculture, but it does so in a gentle way. At no time does Mule lose his temper and lash out at the counterculture characters who, while sincere, do not understand that his choices are limited while theirs are not. Mule is doing what he can to survive and take care of his mother. He doesn’t have time to philosophize about the world and question it. It is what it is, and he’s trying to navigate it the best he can. But most importantly, none of the characters are treated meanly. Although the young radical comes close to parody, his passion is not dismissed by Mule or the film. And while Mule clearly has nothing in common with these young “bohemians,” he demonstrates no animosity towards them. Again, here we have dialogue, even if it is only the early stages of real dialogue. These two groups, the working-class sailor

and the counterculture youth, might not understand each other, but they are not yelling at each other or bashing in each others' skulls. Four years earlier, that would have been the case in a youth/cult film.

The film ends on a somber note as Meadows, finally learning the lessons that Buddusky has taught him, tries an aborted escape as the three men have a cookout in freezing weather in a Boston park. As the sequence unwinds, Mule and Buddusky are shown almost exclusively in two shots as Meadows is often shot alone. In one scene, shot in deep focus, the two men are sitting at a picnic table in the foreground and Meadows is at a table behind them as the park, covered in snow, spreads out behind him. At this point, Buddusky and Mule are lamenting their "shit detail," with Mule trying to keep focused on their responsibility:

Buddusky: He doesn't stand a chance in Portsmouth, you know. Goddamn
grunts kickin' the shit out of him for eight years.

Mule: I don't want to hear about it.

Buddusky: Maggot this, maggot that. Marines are real assholes, you know
that? Takes a certain kind of sadistic temperament to be a Marine.

As this conversation carries on, the camera cuts to a one-shot of Meadows. He is in deep thought. Standing, he starts to slowly wander off. The scene cuts back to Buddusky and Mule at the table. In an eyeline match, Buddusky looks left and the scene cuts to Meadows, walking away from them. "What the fuck's he doin'?" Buddusky asks. Meadows, using the signaling signs taught to him earlier, signals "Bye bye," and takes off running. He is chased down by Buddusky, who has pulled his pistol from its holster, with Mule following. Buddusky gets to Meadows first and knocks him down, beating him about the head with the butt of his gun. A long shot of the three men rolling in a snow-covered leaf bed dissolves to a

shot from the inside of a moving bus, and this is followed by another dissolve as the bus pulls up to a base not dissimilar to the one at Norfolk. Again squat, brick buildings are situated on flat land with no shrubbery, except now the land is snow covered.

The film ends with Meadows being escorted by two “grunts” to his cell, followed by one final confrontation between Buddusky and Mule and the captain (Michael Moriarity) they are reporting to at Portsmouth. As Jacobs notes in *Hollywood Renaissance*, Meadows’s walk up the stairs, supported on either side by a marine, is “disconcerting” at best (227). As Meadows and the marines walk up the stairs, a deep focus shot shows them moving towards the metal gate that will close behind Meadows for eight years. The steps are narrow, and as the men climb we see only their backs. The five-day adventure is over, and, as the prisoner is taken through the gate and the sound of the metal doors clang behind him, reality sets in. The camera lingers on the gate for a second and then cuts to a high-angle shot of Mule and Buddusky at the bottom of the stairwell, looking forlornly towards the gate.

The final confrontation takes place in the young captain’s office. The age of the officer helps to set up an imminent conflict with the older veteran sailors. When the captain sees that Meadows has been beaten, he asks whether the prisoner tried to escape. Both men say no. He then accuses them of abusing Meadows. When he then tries to catch them on a technicality—“You haven’t left yet,” noting that their papers were not properly signed in Norfolk—the two veteran sailors stand together and say they want to see the commanding officer. When he reluctantly signs the papers and sends them on their way, Buddusky gets in one final jab as he quickly checks the papers and then drops some on the captain’s desk, telling him, “You’re supposed to pull a few copies.” This final show of solidarity and defiance demonstrates both courage and a sense of class consciousness. The young officer

has rank on them, and he most assuredly has graduated from the Naval Academy, but in this case the working-class sailors are in the right, and they are not willing to roll over for “the man.” It’s a small victory, but a victory for the working class.

The film concludes with both chasers walking away from the base as naval marching tunes play again. Although they are initially tracked, the shot ends with them walking into the distance and around a corner. The scene and film end as the men first express their disdain for the captain and the detail, and then turn their attention to the trip home. Both men decide to go different ways. Mule is going to see his mother, and Buddusky, who has no family, is “probably headed back to New York” for a day or two. But although they go their separate ways here, their final destination is the same. They will both end up in Norfolk in a couple days, and they will resume their constricted lives once more.

Conclusion

The New Hollywood era of the early 1970s, in particular, proved to be a transition period in more than one way. In addition to providing opportunities for young directors with creative new ideas, it also introduced a new kind of working-class protagonist to American cinema. Unlike the working-class heroes of previous decades—before the youth/cult era—these characters were often on the margins of society as the American Dream seemed to drift beyond their reach. But the era does represent a welcome movement away from the binary of counterculture vs. the working class, particularly in the Left leaning films. While, as noted above, the counterculture was being demonized by some on the Right in Hollywood in the early 1970s as vigilante films like *Joe* and *Dirty Harry* hit the screen, that rendering of the counterculture was counterbalanced by films like *Scarecrow* and *The Last Detail*, which

chose to take sympathetic looks at the working class without demonizing the counterculture in the bargain.

As the nation moved towards its bicentennial year of 1976, however, these early auteur films of the Left began to disappear as the blockbuster era of *Jaws* (1975), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), and other films claimed part of the Hollywood landscape. But unlike the late 1960s, when the working class virtually disappeared from the screen as protagonists as the counterculture emerged, the working class remained at the center of many Hollywood productions. Now, however, as the nation began to emerge from Watergate and the Vietnam War era and approached the bicentennial year of 1976, the American Dream again became a source for film narratives. America wanted to celebrate and leave the bleak years of the early 1970s behind, and that desire to celebrate was evident in the films of the mid-decade.

In the next chapter we will explore this period and its treatment of the working class in Hollywood film. We will look at films like *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), *Hard Times* (1975), *Jaws* (1975) and *Rocky* (1976), taking a particularly detailed look at *Rocky*, the film that directly celebrates the bicentennial. We will also take a brief look at Black films of the era, touching on the Blaxploitation period but concentrating on *Blue Collar* (1978). Finally, we will briefly explore *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Bloodbrothers* (1978), and *F.I.S.T.* (1978), which followed *Rocky* to the screen and borrowed from its narrative of the white male ethnic. In doing so, I hope to show how Hollywood began to shape how the working class looked at itself as the film industry began to bring working-class “heroes” to the screen instead of just working-class protagonists.

ⁱ When the audience is first introduced to Scorpio in the opening sequence of the film, a similar motif is followed. From a low angle, the camera focuses on the barrel of a rifle, with only long hair and no face visible as the rifle appears to sight in a target. This is also a common motif in the film. Scorpio is almost always shot from a low angle, often from behind. His face is never the first thing we see of him. He is a thing of the night and occasionally the day, and his movements are what make him menacing, not his face, which could be described as boyish. As that first sequence proceeds, the rifle, not the face, becomes the focal point of the shot. Only after Scorpio shoots the young lady in the pool from a perch high above her do we see his face.

ⁱⁱ As working-class men with no post-high school educations, except for the training provided by the military, the lives of men like Buddusky, Mulhall, and Meadows are by nature constricted by certain parameters.

ⁱⁱⁱ The dissolve is also used liberally in the film. It not only conveys the passage of time as their deadline to deliver Meadows approaches, but it also serves to blend one scene into another to demonstrate the unchanging quality of their lives.

CHAPTER 3

WHITE ETHNIC PRIDE TAKES CENTER STAGE

As the winter of 1973 approached, Richard Nixon faced two major threats to his presidency. On the domestic side, the investigation into the break-in at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., had found its way to the Oval Office, and the president had been ordered to hand over secret tape recordings. After months of claiming executive privilege, the president agreed to hand over tapes on October 23, one day after members of the House of Representatives had begun to draw up articles of impeachment. On the international side, OPEC, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, announced an oil embargo in October that dramatically cut the size of oil reserves in the United States. This led to long lines at the gas pumps, additional government intervention into the oil and gas business, and a dramatic increase in the costs of gasoline and home heating oil. An energy crisis that had begun earlier in 1973 reached its apex in December of that year as Nixon, in a symbolic gesture, ordered the lights on the White House Christmas tree to be dimmed. As Jay E. Hakes, administrator for the Energy Information Administration, wrote in 1998 on the 25th anniversary of the oil embargo:

Through 1972, Americans had become accustomed to expanding energy consumption with minimal concerns about the constancy of supply or sharp price escalations. In 1973, however, expectations about energy supply changed dramatically. . . . Throughout the year, energy stayed at the forefront of public attention. Interruptions in energy supplies were also closely related

to other issues of national importance—a weakening of the economy and a reassessment of America's strategic position in the world. (Hakes)

As Meg Jacobs notes in “The Conservative Struggle and the Energy Crisis,” these two crises compounded the effect on the Nixon White House and the American people. Watergate essentially left Nixon weakened and unable to address the energy crisis in an effective manner. This weakness led to his capitulation to the politics of the Left—government intervention in the energy sector—while he quietly moved farther to the Right to seek shelter from criticism leveled at him by his Watergate critics. His choices to establish price controls and ration gasoline flew in the face of his position as a free market proponent. While not the cause of the 1970s phenomenon called stagflation, stagnant growth accompanied by rising prices, his actions did little to bring the nation out of the economic doldrums exacerbated by the energy crisis. As Jacobs writes:

The energy crisis was not the sole cause of these economic woes, but energy prices compounded inflation, and to the public, the gas lines were emblematic of a declining economy, complete with a cast of villains to blame and hold accountable. The vast majority of Americans believed that Big Oil companies artificially engineered the crisis to jack up prices. (199)

On August 9, 1974, Nixon resigned from the presidency and was replaced by Gerald R. Ford, who had served less than a year as vice president after replacing former vice president Spiro Agnew, who resigned in October of 1973 amidst bribery allegations. Less than eight months later, Saigon fell into the hands of North Vietnam, effectively ending the longest war in American history, a war that had torn apart the nation by generation and class for more than a decade. These two events, Nixon’s resignation and the loss of the war—

peace accords were signed on January 27, 1973, but Saigon did not fall until 15 months later—had a profound effect on the American psyche. As Lester D. Friedman writes, “Both our vast military complex and increasingly imperial presidency, symbols of America’s strength and power, were goliaths struck down by schoolboys flinging stones, be they Vietcong in black pajamas or crusading young reporters for the *Washington Post*” (7). If you add the energy crisis, Agnew’s resignation, the “brutal prison riot” at Attica State Correction facility in New York, and the “persistent stagflation of the economy” to the mix, “One quickly sees why the decade was characterized by a pervasive sense of insecurity spread broadly across the American landscape” (7).

The times had become too much for people to bear. People lost faith in their institutions. As Morris Dickstein writes in *Gates of Eden*, “One effect of Vietnam and Watergate was that the official organs of our society lost much of the respect and credence they had commanded. Even middle Americans began to live with less of a mystified and paternalistic sense of Authority” (118). Later in his treatise on the 1960s and 1970s, Dickstein notes how these multiple cracks in the American facade led to a crisis in confidence that permeated society:

In Vietnam we lost not only a war and a subcontinent; we also lost our pervasive confidence that American arms and American aims were linked somehow to justice and morality, not merely to the quest for power. America was defeated militarily but the “idea” of America, the cherished myth of America, received an even more shattering blow. (271)

With the American psyche damaged as it was after a decade of turmoil, government deceit, and the loss of a war, people wanted to be lifted up instead of reminded about the difficulties

of their lives or the problems their nation faced. As it had so often done in the past—notably during the Great Depression with its “screwball comedies,” *Andy Hardy* films, and Shirley Temple vehicles, Hollywood responded to the times by providing the kind of entertainment people desired—escapism. Audiences wanted to set aside the “realities” of life depicted in films like *Scarecrow* and *The Last Detail*. They wanted to be taken to a place that didn’t remind them of the present. As a result, the “realism” of the early part of the decade gave way in large part to blockbuster entertainment vehicles and uplifting films about the working class. In looking back at the era, David A. Cook writes:

Thus the vaunted “Hollywood Renaissance”—the European-style auteur cinema that prevailed briefly in America from 1967 to 1975—was an aberration in the film industry’s sixty-year history to date, one that came into being mainly by default at a time of economic and political crisis. (xvii)

As Cook notes, Hollywood was doing two things simultaneously during the early and mid-1970s. It was producing blockbuster films to appeal to the masses and was also continuing to produce auteur films that tended to be socially conscious and self-critical of the American way. But even as these auteurs were producing what Cook, Peter Lev and others have called a golden age of cinema, Hollywood was still learning important lessons from people like Roger Corman and Tom Laughlin about marketing film and entertaining an audience. But that dual identity would not last. Cook continues:

Hollywood reconceptualized its product as the franchise, rather than the individual motion picture. That an aesthetically experimental, socially conscious cinema d’auteur could exist simultaneously with the burgeoning and rapacious blockbuster mentality was extraordinary, but it became the

defining mark of the 1970s cinema. That the two could coexist for long, however, was an illusion as ephemeral as the notion of a liberal ideological consensus. (xvii)

Noel King, looking back on the first half of the 1970s dominated by New Hollywood directors like Hal Ashby, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, Jerry Schatzberg, Bob Rafelson and others, writes:

This early 1970s moment becomes the aesthetic “path not taken.” . . . This exciting cultural moment is lost as mainstream genre filmmaking is re-established, often by the very young Turks who supposedly were moving away from traditional forms of cinema towards more “personal” films. In one of the paradoxes of the decade, the already existing practice of “blockbuster cinema” is taken by the movie brats to new levels of profitability. (29)

Auteur films like *Nashville* (1975, Robert Altman), *Chinatown* (1974, Roman Polanski), *Bound For Glory* (1976, Hal Ashby), *Coming Home* (1978, Hal Ashby), and other works by directors like John Cassavettes and Terrence Malick continued to be made throughout the decade, but blockbusters and other escapist fare reclaimed the mantle in Hollywood. Although the new era of the blockbuster began with the overwhelming success of *Jaws* in 1975, blockbuster films were dominating the box office even at the height of the auteur period in the early 1970s. Even as New Hollywood filmmakers were experimenting with realistic fare about the working and middle classes, disaster films, Mel Brooks comedies, and films about gangsters still reached the largest audiences. For example, the domestic box office for the top-grossing film of 1972, *The Godfather*, was \$133.7 million, followed by the disaster film *The Poseidon Adventure* at \$84.6 million. Both dwarfed the

third-place film, *What's Up Doc?*, which brought in \$28 million (Bordwell, *The Way* 206-207). Although it can be argued that *The Godfather* was not light fare, that it simultaneously critiqued a corrupt capitalist system while reaffirming conservative ideas about patriarchy (Ryan 66-67), it was also escapist fare in the tradition of the Warner Brothers gangster films of the 1930s. In 1973, three genre films headed domestic ticket sales—a psychological horror film, *The Exorcist* (\$193 million); a con-man, buddy picture “dramady,” *The Sting* (\$156 million); and a coming of age youth film, *American Graffiti* (\$115 million) (Bordwell 207-208). These films were followed in 1974 by four escapist blockbusters and the sequel to counterculture favorite *Billy Jack*. *The Towering Inferno* led the way in domestic sales (\$116 million) followed Mel Brooks’s *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein*, *Earthquake*, and *The Trial of Billy Jack* (\$31.1 million).¹

Writing in *Movie-Made America*, Robert Sklar notes that the epoch leading up to the resignation of President Nixon in 1974 “makes one of the strongest cases for the link between social turmoil and creative dissidence in film” (325). But this time of dissidence in Hollywood would not last long, he notes, because just as America wanted to move beyond Watergate, it also wanted to embrace escapism. Sklar writes, “In the light of the shark film [*Jaws*], a directors’ cinema was revealed to be a cinema of niches—of small, defined spaces within the entertainment matrix; of specialized audiences; of, with few exceptions, modest profits” (325). People definitely wanted to be entertained again, and films like *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) gave them that opportunity. Just as *Rocky* in 1976 represents the triumph of an Italian-American in a system white ethnics believed was stacked against it, *Jaws* celebrates a working-class hero who represents the return of the “father” to a society that is in dire need of leadership. Both will be explored in this chapter.

By mid-decade, responding to the mood of the nation, Hollywood not only accelerated its production of the blockbuster, but it also began to take a new look at the working class that had been hit hardest, both economically and psychically, by the failure in Vietnam, the resignation of a president, and the economic threat posed by Japan and others. Whereas characters like Max and Lion in *Scarecrow* and Buddusky and Mule in *The Last Detail* were trapped in lives of limited opportunity with no escape, new working-class characters began to emerge who could now see beyond the parameters of finite opportunities. As noted in the Introduction, and worth repeating here, Sylvester Stallone, nominated for Oscars for both his script and his acting in *Rocky* (1976), put it this way in an interview in *The Christian Science Monitor*: “I believe the country as a whole is beginning to break out of this . . . antieverything syndrome . . . this nihilistic, Hemingwayistic attitude that everything in the end must wither and die.” (qtd. in Leab 265). It should be noted that not everyone was pleased with the trend away from social realism. David Thomson recognized this movement towards a more artificially sanguine cinema, and he lamented the end of the New Hollywood epoch: “I look back on the time of first seeing them [New Hollywood films] as one of wonder, excitement, and passion. It was bracing to face such candid, eloquent dismay; enlightenment does not have to be optimistic or uplifting” (qtd. in King 28).

Americans wanted to feel good about America again, and Hollywood responded. The approaching bicentennial gave everyone a reason to feel nostalgia for an often mythical past. Daniel J. Leab writes that after years of difficult and trying times, people wanted to embrace the spirit of the bicentennial and the original promise of America:

American audiences, influenced by the bicentennial’s strong emphasis on the validity of the American Dream, had lost interest in downbeat themes, in

bleak reality, in attacks on old-fashioned values—all subjects which as films of one sort or another had recently done well at the box office. (265)

But this new look at the working class did not begin with *Jaws* or *Rocky*. It began at least a year earlier with *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) and later *Hard Times* (1975). These films and others began to tell positive stories about Americans, particularly white working-class Americans, a group that felt forgotten. This rising spirit spurred on by the bicentennial was most obviously on display in *Rocky*. As Leab writes:

Suddenly, in 1976, with the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the United States, the nation's mood changed perceptibly. Bicentennial America, almost overnight, put behind it Watergate, Vietnam, stagflation, and many other problems. . . . *Rocky* is an integral if somewhat unusual part of that bicentennial binge. (258-259)

The nation still had unresolved issues in regards to civil rights of all kinds, and was still mired in difficult economic times, but people were longing for a respite from the day-to-day grind that blew cold air onto the raw nerves of American society. One Hollywood response to this longing was the production of escapist blockbusters that left society's woes at the entrance to the multiplex and drew record crowds to loud and boisterous theaters. Another response was the development of a Black cinema that primarily served the Black community by offering an alternative to White Hollywood. Although this moment preceded the white-ethnic revival in films and faded out about the time the latter emerged, it served a similar purpose for the Black community as the ethnic films did for the White community.

The response we are most concerned about here, however, is the reworking of the white working-class film character. Instead of bleak lives with no escape hatches, the new working-class character of the mid-1970s was given the opportunity to transcend the “dreary lives” of the working class. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* demonstrates that working-class women do not have to live the constricted lives of their predecessors, even if the film does not go as far as many on the Left would have liked. *Hard Times* shows a man surviving the toughest of times, the Great Depression, as a street fighter who demonstrates the kind of strength and character generally associated with heroes of the western genre. *Jaws* offers an uncommon common man who finds a way to overcome his fear of nature and save a community from a killer shark. Finally, *Rocky* celebrates the bicentennial onscreen and off as Everyman meets Horatio Alger and the white, ethnic working-class American male is uplifted. How the white ethnic male is uplifted is problematic, however, as we will see later in this chapter as we take closer looks at these films.

One could argue that this movement began earlier with films like *Dirty Harry*, which certainly celebrated the triumph of one “rogue” white cop over a system that he, and large segments of the population, believed had enabled the “counterculture” to lead America down a path of degeneracy. But, while Harry Callahan “triumphs” over the evil represented by Scorpio, it is an unsatisfactory triumph. As Harry throws his badge away at the end of the film, the audience is left with a feeling of helplessness, not a sense of the world being righted. He may have eliminated one “animal” from the scene, but the message is clear that the system will continue to produce Scorpions as long as the liberal policies of the 1960s dominate the political and law enforcement landscapes. The working-class heroes of the mid-seventies and beyond seem to promise the potential for all in the white working class to

triumph over those who would bring America down, no matter how the system stacked up against them. But as we will see, this false promise was generally extrapolated from the triumph of one extraordinary, ordinary white man.

Hollywood's look at the working class in the mid- and late seventies also dovetailed with the Nixon white ethnic strategy of his second term. Nixon saw an opportunity to pull ethnic whites into the Republican Party fold by exploiting their fears and anxieties over their economic and cultural places in society. These ethnics saw affirmative action programs geared toward minorities and women, but saw no such programs instituted for them. Many of them were second- and third-generation Americans—some were first generation—and they did not understand why they were not considered oppressed peoples. This disaffection was recognized as far back as June 1969 when George Schultz, Labor secretary, wrote in a memo to Nixon:

They are immigrants, or sons of immigrants, and feel insecure about their own place in mainstream American society. They tend to live in neighborhoods that blacks are most likely to move into, and whose schools blacks' children might attend. They sometimes have jobs that they feel blacks aspire to attain, and they get wages that are only slightly above liberal states' welfare payments. They suffer a real sense of "compression" on both the economic and social scales. (qtd. in Sugrue 187)

Kim Moody, in *U.S. Labor in Trouble and Transition*, notes that 54 percent of union households voted for Richard Nixon in 1972 in part because labor leaders like George Meany of the AFL-CIO opposed Democratic nominee George McGovern's stance on the Vietnam War and on social programs that labor felt hurt the white working class. He writes:

It was a *de facto* endorsement of Nixon. This rightward gesture certainly played into the hands of Nixon and all those who hoped to split the blue-collar vote along racial lines. Watergate drove the white working class and union household voters back to the Democrats in 1976 in droves . . . but as the Carter years would make clear the Democratic Party was already moving to the right. (158)

As the decade wore on, films depicting this white ethnic disaffection came to the screen, first with *Rocky*, and then with films like *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Bloodbrothers* (1978), *F.I.S.T.* (1978), and *Paradise Alley* (1978), the final two also products of Sylvester Stallone. Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, in *American Film and Society Since 1945*, write:

Rocky not only revived the Alger myth, it made ethnic, working-class Americans the prime actors and agents of the dream. . . . For the general film-going audience, working class lives had, for the moment, become a preserve of spontaneity, warmth, and masculinity. In fact, the success of *Rocky* made the white working class briefly fashionable in Hollywood again. (115)

This “ethnic revival,” as Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny call it, lasted throughout the 1970s. It did not last as long in Hollywood, however. As we will explore later in this chapter, the era of the white ethnic male working-class protagonist didn’t last any longer than the youth/cult era of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Yet this era had a profound effect on America. As Sugrue and Skrentny write, “Even if the ethnic revival proved to be ephemeral in many respects, it was both cause and symptom of the political, cultural, and economic fragmentation of the United States that was full-blown in 1980” (175). This fragmentation moved the nation further and further to the right as

the decade wore on, and Hollywood played a cultural role in the movement through its depiction of the working class. Ethnic Americans began to move to the Republican Party as factories and steel mills closed, leaving them without jobs or with jobs that paid a fraction of their previous salaries. Although Watergate temporarily slowed and even reversed this process, as Moody noted above the country was clearly moving to the right. As the political wave crested in 1980, bringing Ronald Reagan to the White House, the white working class continued to be part of the Hollywood narrative. As we will see in the films to be discussed in detail here, the move to the right in Hollywood's depiction of the working class was subtle. Disguised as escapist entertainment, these films reaffirmed traditional American values and a rebirth of the American Dream. Ultimately, however, these films helped to define the working class in a narrow way—privileging white ethnic males—and by doing so they seemed to justify the working-class backlash to the counterculture movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including a backlash against social programs designed to uplift minorities. Film's role as an Ideological State Apparatus, as defined by Louis Althusser, was easy to spot in these films that celebrated the American Dream.

Although we are primarily concerned with films depicting the white working-class reaction to the economic and cultural upheaval of the mid-1970s—particularly those whose protagonists are white males—it is also important to acknowledge that a Black cinema briefly flourished in the 1970s. Generally shaped as entertainment products, these films can be viewed as counterparts to films about white ethnics, offering a Black perspective on the times. Some of these films fit into the category of Blaxploitation, which we will further discuss below, but others served as vehicles for black stars with proven box-office appeal like Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby. As James Monaco notes, Blacks were able to “gain a

foothold in Hollywood” in the late 1960s, in part because of the Black Power movement. Monaco writes, “The birth of the Black film of the late sixties and early seventies—with Blacks, by Blacks, and for blacks; written, directed, and acted by Blacks (and sometimes even produced and financed by Blacks), was the major success of the Hollywood Renaissance of 1968-1970” (187). According to Monaco, the failure of the Black Cinema in the mid-1970s is illustrative of the fact that “the Hollywood Renaissance died in its infancy and that we have reverted to the historical norm, in which the industry is controlled by a relative handful of people, and propagates a prescribed and often distorted image of the American scene” (187).

By the mid-1970s, several films starring Richard Pryor also crossed over to attract more mixed audiences, although they remained popular in the Black community. These films, which capitalized on Pryor’s popularity as a stand-up comedian, included *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976), a look at Negro League baseball and a barnstorming black all-star team; *Greased Lightning* (1977), a biopic of Wendell Scott, the first black stock car champion; and *Which Way is Up?* (1977), a generally Left leaning film that tries, but too often fails, to bring humor to the subject of the organizing of migrant workers. One of Pryor’s more controversial films, *Blue Collar* (1978), which explored labor relations and race relations, was produced within the Hollywood studio system and received mixed reviews and a mixed reaction from social critics at the time. It will be discussed in some detail later in this section because of its somewhat unique position as a Hollywood film about both the white and black working classes.

Like the counterculture films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of the “Black” films of the era presented the white working class in a poor light. While it is understandable

that films coming from a Black perspective would offer an alternative view of America to the one peddled by a Hollywood dominated by Whites, these films often chose to demonize the white working class, generally represented by corrupt street cops, instead of attacking the root of the problem, the white power structure. Even when the power structure was criticized, it was done metonymically through a single corrupt government official of one kind or another. These filmmakers generally chose to offer a commercial Black Cinema based on the reworking of old genres, with the Black man wearing the white hat, instead of a cinema of social protest. As James Monaco writes:

These followed the dominant patterns of white action genres—urban private eye, cop, drug, and caper movies, together with the occasional western or “biopic”—simply substituting Black actors for White, reversing racial stereotypes, and occasionally (at their best) even injecting a little Black sensibility. (191)

In choosing to be capitalists first, however, these filmmakers often reinforced stereotypes about working-class whites—particularly the White man as dirty cop or racist redneck—that had become tropes in counterculture films of the late 1960s and didn’t begin to recede from the screen until the mid-1970s when the New Hollywood was unseated by the “Old.”

Despite their flaws, “Blaxploitation” films played an important role within the Black community. Films like *Superfly* (1972), *Shaft* (1971), and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) provided a cathartic release for Blacks who had been emboldened by the Black Power Movement. The protagonists of these films were generally “super” black men and women who exacted revenge on white males and the white power structure. In *Superfly*, for example, a black drug dealer decides to get out of the drug business, but before he can make that one final score, he

is caught in a web of dirty white cops and corrupt white city officials. He outsmarts them in the end, dishing out a few beatings along the way, and survives by forging a bond with what appears to be the local Mafia. I say “appears,” because when these apparent Mafia-types appear in a scene late in the film with “Superfly” Priest (Ron O’Neal), the scene is shot from outside a restaurant window and the dialogue is not heard. *Shaft* and *Cleopatra Jones* chronicle the exploits of a private detective and a government agent, respectively, who prove to be smarter and tougher than their opponents, both black and white. *Cleopatra Jones*, in particular, exploits the trope of the corrupt white cop while also making a strong statement about the power of black women. These films played to large black audiences and offered a release for the Black community at a time when America’s inner-cities were crumbling following the major city riots of the mid and late 1960s. But as social observer and critic bell hooks notes in the documentary *Badass Cinema*, these films were made “to make money,” and became politically relevant only after the fact.

The political significance of two Black films of this era was evident from the start, however. *Sweet Sweetback’s Badaasssss Song* (1971) and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973) were recognized immediately for what they were—calls to action. The white establishment considered these films dangerous because both pointed to and encouraged collective action by the Black working-class against the White power structure. In *The Spook who Sat by the Door*, which unlike *Sweet Sweetback’s Badaasssss Song* has been mostly forgotten, protagonist Lawrence Cook (Dan Freeman) is trained by the C.I.A. as a “token” black agent to meet a “quota” for minority hiring. Although the agency tries to bury him in a desk job “by the door,” he has other ideas. He uses his agency training to return to Chicago and gather an army of local black men to foment revolution in that city and others across

America. In an interview on the DVD extras, Sam Greenlee, whose novel the film was based on, claims the government pulled the independently financed film from circulation shortly after its release because of its potentially incendiary nature. Black Power in this film becomes a direct threat to the White power structure.

In Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Badaasssss Song*, "Sweetback" (Van Peebles), who is employed in the live sex entertainment business, is arrested by white police officers simply so they can claim an arrest has been made for a particular crime. With the complicity of the black club owner, Sweetback is taken into custody as he entertains at a private club with the understanding that he will be released once the police can say an arrest has been made. But the plans go awry when the police are called to a real crime scene and they proceed to viciously beat the black suspect of that crime. Sweetback, who to this point has been compliant and even docile with the police, is incensed and uses his handcuffs to beat the police and escape. For the remainder of the film he is shown outsmarting the corrupt police, who make him their number one target. He does this, however, only with the aid of the Black community. This support is dramatically shown in one montage sequence when documentary-style interviews of members of the black community demonstrate their backing of him. Sweetback eventually escapes Los Angeles and makes his way towards the Mexico border despite nursing a wound of his own. He outsmarts the cops and a bounty hunter, killing several trained hunting dogs and a few men along the way, and escapes across the border. The film ends with an admonition to the white power brokers (and maybe the white community as a whole) on an intertitle that reads, "Watch out. A Baadasssss Nigger is coming back to collect some dues."

In addition to its radical message, the film is also shot in a radical, or formalist, style, often eschewing classic Hollywood techniques. The film includes the aforementioned documentary-style montage, the use of “guerilla” cinema tactics, a significant number of superimpositions, and the repeated juxtaposition of long tracking shots that, through editing, often break the 180-degree rule. Dialogue is also sparse, as the protagonist, Sweetback, mouths only a handful of words throughout the film. His actions speak for him, and those actions are revolutionary, as is the final intertitle.

The depiction of the black “super heroes” is problematic in many Blaxploitation films, however. While these films offer some insight into the black community, they often do so at the expense of both the black community and the white working class. The heroes of Blaxploitation films are often pimps and drug dealers who operate with impunity within black communities. These films also play on the stereotype of the black male as sexually potent and violent. As Mark A. Reid writes in *Haile Gerima: Sacred Shield of Culture*, “*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* established a new heroic paradigm for the black cinematic hero as sexual, individualistic, and violent. Sweetback’s violence links him to the black community, while his sexual activity is a means by which to escape life-threatening encounters” (145). But this characterization also reinforces the stereotype of the highly sexual black male. Even when the protagonists are operating on the right side of the law, like John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) or Cleopatra Jones (Tamara Dobson), they often operate within black communities where pimps, drug dealers, and other gangsters are the dominant forces within those communities. Although directed at the Black community as an alternative to White films, these films often offered a skewed view of Black America and exploited the same kind of stereotypes that were prominent in white law and order films like *Dirty Harry*.

Gloria Hendry, one of the stars of Blaxploitation, believes these independent Black films would have evolved into a more meaningful Black cinema if Hollywood had given the black filmmakers a chance to reach broader audiences: “Black films saved Hollywood . . . and when they got through with us around ’75 or ’76 they dropped us. The door slammed. Almost literally” (*Badass Cinema*). If Hendry is right, and many black filmmakers share her belief, when the door slammed to Black cinema, the door to films about the white-working class opened.

Blue Collar

One studio film that tried to show both Black and White perspectives is *Blue Collar*. Released in 1978, *Blue Collar* stars Richard Pryor, fellow black actor Yaphet Kotto, and Harvey Keitel. Written and directed by Paul Schrader, the film masquerades as a film about the working class, but is primarily an anti-union drama about corruption in an auto-workers’ union and the frailty of interracial friendship between working-class men. Although this film touches on the possibility of collective action by workers of all races, it is anything but a film from the Left. Instead of blaming corporate America for its failure to anticipate the changing world marketplace and to treat its workers with dignity, it chooses instead to fall back on the old Hollywood trope of the corrupt and exploitive union.

Blue Collar, despite its gritty feel and look, is nothing more than a right-wing, Hollywood film that exploits the stereotypical assumptions many Americans have of “hardhats” and the world in which they operate. It utilizes virtually every trope and stereotype offered in films about oppressed workers since Hollywood emerged as a commercial enterprise—the corrupt union connected to the mob; the unfeeling corporation;

the hard-drinking and unfaithful worker; the family man caught in a financial bind; the ineffectual union steward; the loudmouth, racist, misogynist foreman; the union members who turn their back on an informer; and on and on. To this time-worn mix, they add the black “super stud.” Although the factory foremen are generally unsympathetic, any significant critique of the corporate system is absent. In *Blue Collar* the real villain is the A.A.W., the fictional autoworker’s union, the very entity that is supposed to fight for oppressed workers. While the corporation is negatively rendered as profit driven, the union is painted as corrupt, thieving, racist, misogynist, and ultimately murderous.

The film creates a complex inter-racial relationship between three workers, Zeke (Richard Pryor), Smoke (Yaphet Kotto), and Jerry (Harvey Keitel), in order to set up a final confrontation between Zeke and Jerry that is designed to show how “the man,” in this case the union, keeps the black man and white man from ever truly trusting each other. The three men, best of friends, decide to rob the union local when Zeke realizes during a visit to the union hall that a safe is guarded by only one unimposing security guard. Zeke contemplates the theft only after he learns he is in debt to the IRS for more than \$2,000 because he falsely claimed six child dependents instead of three. Smoke, upon hearing Zeke’s proposal to rob the local, immediately signs on. He is presented as an ex-con who has no conscience about illegal activities. Jerry, the only white member of the group, declines at first to participate in the theft. He later agrees to take part only when he learns that his daughter, who needs braces, has temporarily injured herself trying to construct home-made braces out of wire.

Even the set-up is false and racist. Zeke, who claims to be a family man, has created his own problems by lying to the IRS and squandering his money on booze and the occasional cocaine party with Smoke and Jerry. Smoke is an ex-con who lacks a moral or

legal compass. To his credit, he later protects Jerry's family from two thugs sent by the union to Jerry's house, but he is generally portrayed as someone who is willing to engage in illegal activities as casually as Jerry bowls. He is also portrayed as a "super stud" and a misogynist, as he always has a couple "bitches" around to service his needs. Only Jerry, the white man, is ever conflicted about the theft, and he is the last to come on board.

The theft of the safe, which takes place about halfway through the film, sets in motion a series of events that will lead to Smoke's death and the dissolution of Zeke and Jerry's friendship. The men find only \$600 in the safe, but when the theft is reported on the news, the union claims it has lost "more than \$10,000" in cash, pointing again to the corrupt nature of the local, which has already been shown to be callous towards its members' needs. When Zeke realizes that an illegal loan ledger is in the safe, the three friends decide to blackmail the union to get what they believe is owed to them, although it is unclear why they think the union owes just them and not their fellow workers. When the union learns that the three men are involved in the plot, they determine to handle each man individually. Smoke, because of his past, is targeted for elimination, and he is killed when he is locked inside a car painting room and suffocates. Zeke, because of his prior activities with the union—he has been vocal in union meetings—is considered someone who can be bought off. That is confirmed when he later accepts the job of union shop steward. Jerry is viewed as someone who may have to be "convinced" to back away. After Smoke's death, Jerry is targeted for a similar fate when it becomes clear he won't "play ball." When he is chased by two thugs after leaving the local bar the factory workers frequent, he turns state's evidence against the union, contacting an FBI agent he had met earlier to seek protection. (The FBI agent attempts early in the film to infiltrate the union by posing as a doctoral candidate working on a labor relations "thesis.")

Jerry is the only one who has more than one contact with him, despite Jerry's insistence that he is no "snitch." This continued contact accentuates Jerry's conflicted nature throughout the film.)

The climactic scene takes place on the factory floor as Jerry, escorted by federal agents, is jeered by his fellow workers for turning state's evidence against the union. Because none of the men had expressed any real love for the union before this moment, the scene only makes sense as a trope borrowed from previous films about labor corruption.ⁱⁱ As Jerry is ushered through the factory, he and Zeke engage in a violent argument filled with invective and racial slurs. As the two workers, and former best friends, square off with wrenches in their hands in a freeze frame in the film's final shot, a voiceover of a brief speech Smoke gave earlier in the film is heard: "They put the lifers against the new boy, the young against the old, the black against the white. Everything they do is to keep us in our place."

While an eloquent speech, it is never clear whom Smoke is talking about. Who are "they"? Are "they" the corporate bosses, the capitalists who control the workers, or are they the corrupt unions that line their own pockets with workers' dues and engage in illegal loan sharking? Or, are "they" both the unions and the capitalists? If the answer is both, the film fails to make that point. It reserves almost all of its invective for the union and its corrupt leaders, while painting its protagonists as either weak, criminal, or both.

Shot on location in a gritty factory setting, the film opens with promise, at least visually. The look of the film and the working-class characters is generally authentic. Welding sparks regularly enhance the low-key lighting as the sound of the factory floor drowns out conversations between hardhats. Men and women are shown working side-by-side on the assembly line, common at the time and equally common today. Hard blues music

adds to the ambience. The outside shots of the plant are also convincing, capturing the feel of an urban industrial site, replete with cracked asphalt, harsh, gray concrete, and cinder block structures. The bar that the workers frequent also has an authentic look and sound with its simple wooden facade on the outside and its low-key lighting and hard-driving juke box on the inside. But looks in this case are deceiving. Instead of seizing an opportunity to make a relevant statement about a system that oppresses all workers, black and white, Schrader chooses to blame a corrupt and ineffectual union for substandard and oppressive working conditions. At a time when white workers feared losing jobs to black workers, and black workers were losing their jobs at an even more alarming rate than whites, there was an opportunity to make a film that made sense of the working-class struggle. There was an opportunity to tell a story that would channel white anger towards Blacks and black anger towards Whites in the right direction—towards those who would exploit working-class fear and anger to serve corporate and political ends. Instead, the film takes the easy way out while attempting to pass itself off as a pro-worker film. In doing so, it does exactly what it accuses the unions of doing—it pretends to be a friend of the working class while exploiting that market for every dollar of box office it can squeeze out of it.

Blue Collar did achieve something that most other films of the era did not, however. It integrated its cast and it attempted—although I submit it failed—to show life from the Black and White perspectives. Blaxploitation and White Ethnic films showed life from only one perspective, Black or White, and their narratives often presented a simplistic “black and white” world to their audiences. White working-class films often pointed a blaming finger at the Black community, which it saw as the recipient of special treatment from the government. Black independent films often chose to blame the white working class,

represented regularly by corrupt street cops, for the oppression of Blacks. Although both groups of films offered token criticisms of the “system,” these systems were often represented metonymically by working class blacks and whites. In this way, the people Smoke is referring to in his speech are the filmmakers who, because of their desire to provide catharsis for an audience and a profit for themselves, often turned the working class against itself instead of offering a potential course for collective action.

In the remainder of this chapter we will look at several films that demonstrate the changing face of the white working class in Hollywood. Except for *Rocky*, which incorporates a black antagonist and other peripheral black characters, these films are virtually devoid of black characters or a Black perspective. They not only privilege the white working class, but they virtually ignore the black working class. We will begin with three films that serve both as a departure from the realistic working-class films of the early 1970s and a bridge to ethnic working-class films of the 1976-1978 period—*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *Hard Times*, and *Jaws*. Two of these films, *Hard Times* (1975) and *Jaws* (1975), represent a return to patriarchal themes as both offer a new look at an old character, the paradoxically uncommon common man.

In *Hard Times*, Chaney (Charles Bronson) is literally a throwback to an earlier time. He is a character who recalls John Wayne and Randolph Scott of the 1940s and 1950s, only without the six-shooter strapped to his leg. He reinforces the patriarchal myth of the lone “gunman” who comes into town, cleans it up, and walks (rides) off into the sunset. In *Jaws*, an even more common working-class man, Police Chief Brody (Roy Scheider), is asked to take on not only his town fathers, but a literal monster in the ocean. His victory, as we will

see, serves as a rebirth of the patriarch in film. Although this film is looked upon by some as the beginning of the end of the New Hollywood because of its epic nature and marketing success, it is also a film about a working-class man who triumphs without being a superman.

The other film to be discussed in this section, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, poses as an early progressive feminist film, but is reined in by conservative forces that seem not quite ready for the full emancipation of the title character. We follow Alice (Ellen Burstyn) and her teenage son as they lose the patriarch of the family to an auto accident and embark on a journey to find a new life in the West. To Alice, this life is represented by a return to her dream of becoming a singer, a dream she gave up when she married her son's father. Instead of finding the metaphoric frontier closed, as many characters of the 1960s did, she finds a path of less resistance and settles in the Phoenix area. As we will see, the American Dream is alive and well for white ethnic males in the 1970s, but is not yet available to the working-class woman.

All three of these films preceded the bicentennial fever that brought *Rocky* to the screen in 1976, and they all provide more optimistic outlooks for their working-class characters than did the films of the early part of the decade. Unlike their earlier counterparts of the New Hollywood, which were not afraid to show the sometimes bleak existence of the working class in tough times, these films, even when attempting to argue a feminist position, reconfirm traditional Hollywood, and American, values. These were the kinds of films Hollywood thought America was clamoring for in the post-Watergate period, and these were the kinds of films the audience would get.

After looking at these three films, we will take a detailed look at the treatment of the working class in *Rocky*, the film most identified with the bicentennial and America's attempt

to rise from the ashes of Watergate and Vietnam. At the time, *Rocky* gave audiences, particularly working-class audiences, a Horatio Alger character to embrace and root for. His triumph is their triumph as the underdog “goes the distance.” But the film also offers a bleak look at the working class as a whole even as it celebrates the success of one of its own. The cheers of the working-class audiences that flocked to the film, along with other audience members, seemed to drown out voices that pointed to the racism and misogyny practiced by the film’s white ethnic males.

Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, Hard Times, and Jaws

At first glance, these films seem to have little in common. One is about a woman seeking self-reliance for the first time in her life; one is about a Depression-era man who fights bare knuckles to earn a living; and one is about a 1970s Everyman who is called upon to save his community from a monstrous shark that is stalking its beaches. But the three films do have one important element in common—they all represent a turn away from the bleak and realistic narratives of the early 1970s New Hollywood films. In *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, the audience is given a 1970s version of the classic romance narrative—girl meets boy, girl has falling out with boy, girl and boy end up together. The 1970s twist is that there is some residue of doubt at the end regarding her decision to remain with him, a decision that means her life will again be defined in large part by her new relationship, as it was to a larger extent in her earlier relationship with her husband. The film does not offer a purely 1940s schlock ending, but it passes for one in 1974. In *Hard Times*, the audience is taken back in time—not just to the Great Depression, but to the films of the 1940s and 1950s. This film is so simple in its narrative—mysterious loner comes to town, beats down the bad guys, leaves

a woman behind, and rides off into the sunset on a train—that it could have been exported to a Hollywood backlot of the 1940s and, with a few wardrobe changes, been filmed as a western. But it is exactly that simplicity that sets it apart from the New Hollywood films and distinguishes it as a conservative, reactionary Hollywood move to counter the counter-hegemonic forces of social realism. In *Jaws*, the move towards a new version of the working-class man takes another step. Here the protagonist is not a superman like Chaney; he is far from it. He represents the Everyman who, when called upon to do heroic things, rises to the occasion. As the working-class men of the time fretted about their future, so does Brody. For that reason, he, unlike the boisterous self-assured Quint, the other working-class character in the film, most accurately represents the working-class man of the period. But it is his success that defines him and the times in Hollywood, because three years earlier not only would a film like *Jaws* have been unlikely to have been made, but Brody would surely have given his life in his valiant effort to rid Amity of the monstrous shark.

In looking at the year 1975 in Hollywood, Peter Lev also sees a move away from the counter-hegemonic films of the early 1970s to a safer place. He writes:

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*. . . . The New Hollywood of 1970 was already struggling, already being replaced by the “Movie Brats” of 1975 [of which Steven Spielberg, the director of *Jaws*, was a leader]. (*American* xix)

I would agree with Lev, but I would add that the same period is also marked by a transition in the depiction of the working-class character and his/her fate. Whereas Warren Beatty's hairdresser George Roundy in *Shampoo*, despite his sexual prowess, is ultimately found to be "impotent"—he is unable to get a loan to open his own hair salon from the rich and corrupt political operative Lester Carp (Jack Warden) and subsequently loses the woman he truly loves to him—Chief Brody in *Jaws*, despite his self-doubts, emerges as a working-class hero. This transition that Lev places in 1975, and which was hinted at in 1974 with *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and others, points not only toward the "optimistic genre" films like *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), but also to the working-class ethnic films like *Bloodbrothers* and *Saturday Night Fever*, which we will discuss in relationship with *Rocky*.

If one theme emerges in the three films to be discussed here, it is restoration, always a conservative move. In all three films something of American, and Hollywood, tradition is restored. In *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, it is the nuclear family. In *Hard Times*, it is the rugged individualist who perseveres and drifts off into the dark night. In *Jaws*, it is the common man as patriarch who triumphs against corrupt capitalism, self-serving politicians, and a literal monster of the sea. Tradition in its various forms survives and thrives in different ways in each of the films as the working class is again restored to the center of Hollywood film during an epoch when America and its common men and women had lost confidence in their ability to live out the American dream.

Christian Keathley refers to the early realistic narratives of the 1970s that followed the counterculture films of the late 1960s as the "post-traumatic cycle." We explored some of these, *Scarecrow* and *The Last Detail* in particular, in Chapter 2. To Keathley, these films

represent the “second movement of a key group of left-oriented films” (303). These films are followed by films like *Jaws*, *Rocky*, and *Star Wars*, films that “represented a denial of the trauma the nation had suffered” (304). In these films, the protagonists all begin as self-doubters, but as circumstances require, they rise to the occasion. To Keathley, *Jaws* in particular serves as a transition film. It “begins like a post-traumatic film” with a protagonist who, despite his moral strength, appears doomed to failure. But “the blockbuster mentality takes over,” and Brody triumphs (305). *Jaws*, in effect, is a “response” to the “national trauma” of the Vietnam War (Robert Torry, qtd. in Keathley 305). In the words of Andrew Britton, “*Jaws* might best be described, perhaps, as a rite—a communal exorcism, a ceremony for the restoration of ideological confidence” (qtd. in Keathley 305). I would add that it also serves to help restore the confidence of the working class, the group most traumatized by the war and the economic downturn. In doing so, it also brings a new kind of working-class protagonist to the 1970s screen, one who is not doomed to failure, but instead is resourceful and ultimately successful in his (mostly *his*) specific endeavor. The hand of God does not reach down to remove the shark that represents the pall hanging over America at the time—a local, self-doubting sheriff emerges as a hero and thus sends a message to all working-class white men that they, too, can emerge from the darkness of the Vietnam experience and reaffirm the quest for the American Dream.

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore

Of the three films, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* is closest to a New Hollywood film. In some corners, it has even been called an early feminist film. But closer inspection shows that the filmmaker, Martin Scorsese, under pressure from the studios and concern for

his own career, which at the time was without a commercial success (Biskind 252-254), ended the film on a compromise note—something the New Hollywood films of the early 1970s disdained. Instead of pursuing her dream to become a singer—an unlikely occurrence considering her pedestrian talents—Alice decides to remain in Tucson with her new lover David (Kris Kristofferson) despite his generally traditional views about the relationship. Robin Wood notes that the film, along with a somewhat later “feminist” film by Paul Mazursky, *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), share a “certain deviousness.” Neither film guarantees a happy ending—the final scene in *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* is a shot of her walking down the highway in Tucson with her 12-year-old son towards a business sign that reads “Monterey,” her planned original destination—but both offer that possibility within a world still dominated by men. Wood writes:

The final effect is of a huge communal sigh of relief: the women don’t have to be independent after all; there are strong, protective males to look after them. Their demand for independence is accordingly reduced to a token gesture, becoming little more than an irrational “feminine” whim. (183)

There is one key difference between the heroines in these two films, however, and that is class. The woman in Mazursky’s film is upper middle class and can survive economically without the support of a man. Scorsese’s heroine, Alice, however, must make an economic decision as well as a choice of the heart. She chooses the safe route, but only after the audience is teased by her flirtation with full emancipation.

There is no compromise in films of the “post-traumatic” era like *Scarecrow* or *The Last Detail*. The realities of the sometimes bleak lives of their working-class protagonists are clearly on display as those films end. But *Alice* offers only compromise. She is a working-

class woman trying to find her way as an individual in a world stacked against her both as a woman and as a member of her class. Her effort alone to emancipate herself and her son from that world is laudable. Even when she ultimately compromises at the end of the film, her choice can be explained as an effort to provide a more stable and conventional home for her 12-year-old son, Tommy (Alfred Lutter III). Her mere attempt to emancipate herself may have even offered hope to other working-class women who were seeking their own liberation from a suffocating patriarchal society. But her return to the patriarchal fold is a compromise nonetheless. She cannot break away from a man she has fallen in love with—and needs—even if he represents a likely barrier to her self-realization and emancipation.

Throughout the film, the audience is teased with the potential for Alice to break away and find her own life. Following a short sequence of Alice's childhood in what appears to be Dorothy's Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), a sequence that introduces a tough-minded Alice who has dreams of being a great singer/entertainer, the film flashes forward to a rather dour domestic scene, with Alice attending to the needs of her sullen and verbally abusive husband. It appears at this juncture that Alice is not fully aware of her unhappiness with her situation, although her husband's coldness towards her clearly registers. These two sequences provide a back story for Alice, who is soon to lose her husband to a traffic accident. For the next hour the audience is treated to Alice and Tommy's journey west to her hometown of Monterey, California, where she hopes to restart her singing career. After finding a singing "gig" in an Arizona bar, she must quickly leave town when she discovers that the "charming" man she has fallen for, Ben (Harvey Keitel), is actually an adulterous wife beater. Her escape from Ben gives the audience more hope that she will find her own way—sans a male shoulder to lean on.

The sequence when Alice learns about Ben is particularly harrowing because it is shot in a documentary style, using a hand-held camera whose bouncing reflects the violence of the moment. The scene begins with Ben's wife appearing at Alice's door to tell her that Ben is married, which is news to Alice. Their commiseration, during which Alice promises to break off the affair with Ben, ends abruptly when Ben arrives at the door, breaks the window, and then terrorizes both women. The hand-held camera captures not only Ben's violent penetration of Alice's home, but also—through medium shots of his destruction of her property and his physical abuse of his wife, along with close-ups of both women—the terror he has brought into both of their lives. We are heartened when Alice first tries to stand up to him—to no avail—and then when she gathers her belongings and her son and leaves town. Although she is terrified, she is also stating that she will not be oppressed by another man. What makes this sequence even more harrowing is that Scorsese had previously used a number of wide-angle shots to illustrate domestic tranquility between Alice and Tommy, implying a world of possibilities even as they travel west and live in small hotel rooms. As Ryan Gilbey writes:

When Alice first hits the road after being widowed . . . the wide-angle lens makes everything look grand and daunting, and not only on the highway that rolls off toward the horizon like the Yellow Brick Road. The interiors of the crummy motels are like treasure troves; you know they must be cramped, yet the camera bestows upon them impossible generous dimensions—those rooms promise the world. (212)

The shaky, hand-held camera not only captures the fear of Alice and Ben's wife, but it also forces the audience to acknowledge that Alice's journey is fraught with peril. Unfortunately,

the film later removes that peril with as close to a happy ending as a 1974 audience would accept.

It should be noted that the film does provide a positive perspective on female bonding, particularly the working-class variety. Like the earlier “buddy pictures” of the late 1960s and early 1970s that explored male bonding in films like *Scarecrow*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* provides Alice with a female friend, Flo (Diane Ladd), who offers her a much-needed support structure. Although the two women do not initially like each other—Flo is a bigger-than-life character who overwhelms the more subdued Alice—they form a bond that proves to be important for Alice, particularly when her relationship with David hits a rough patch. In one particular scene, the two women are shot in a close-up, reclining in beach chairs, taking in the sun on a typical Phoenix day. It is the kind of shot that generally captures the middle class sunbathing around a hotel pool. As the camera pulls back, however, the working-class milieu is exposed. They are reclining on asphalt pavement in an open space behind the restaurant. The shot clearly demonstrates a strong bond between the two women as they make do with their working-class surroundings. It also demonstrates working-class female solidarity, something that was particularly important to portray at a time when women were fighting for equal rights, equal pay, and equal treatment under the law.

But, although the film does offer some hope that working women will bond and choose to seek their own fulfillment outside their relationships with men, the resolution of the film is disappointing if judged on “post-traumatic” terms. Alice’s choice to stay with David instead of pursue her own dreams is particularly unsatisfying because it comes almost immediately after a scene in which David asserts his patriarchal authority over Tommy, only

to be rebuffed by a strong Alice. In this scene, Alice, Tommy, and David are spending a day at David's home, located on his vast ranch, to celebrate Tommy's 12th birthday. The *mise en scene*, with decorations hanging from the ceiling, and the tight shots of the inside of David's home evoke a sense of claustrophobia, which, as noted above, is contrary to the use of space in other parts of the film when Alice and Tommy are alone. Instead of the possibility of movement from room to room, the streamers fall from the ceiling in David's house and seem to close off escape routes.

In this scene, Tommy asserts himself as he does with his mother, a trait that has endeared him to the audience. But in this context he is disciplined by David, who interprets Tommy's independence as insolence. This leads to Tommy striking David with a paper plate and David turning him around and hitting him once on the backside, unintentionally sending Tommy into a card table that collapses under the boy's weight. Alice immediately gathers up her son and her things and leaves the house. Her forceful and immediate response is seen as her assertion of her independence. But she doesn't leave Phoenix. She stays around, continues her work as a waitress at Mel's Diner, and eventually has a very public reconciliation with David, although she sets certain parameters before they reconcile. In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Robert Kolker writes that the ending was clearly a product of its very specific time. Following a post-traumatic phase in Hollywood, the movie-going public was not prepared for a truly liberated woman. He writes:

Alice has disappointed many critics on this score, for it gives and takes away, depicts independence only to wind up back in dependence again. Though it ends with the termination of Alice's fantasies, there is no end in sight for

larger fantasies, those that insist that a tall and handsome stranger will protect the weak and dependent woman. (218)

Hollywood was not quite ready for a liberated woman, particularly a liberated working-class woman. While some, like Gilbey, believe the final scene that shows Alice walking down the highway with Tommy rekindles the feeling that the future is again alive and open for Alice, it cannot erase the reconciliation between Alice and David. It may make some audience members feel that Alice will now avoid making the same mistakes she has made in the past, but that is small consolation when true emancipation was at hand. But, although the ending is disappointing, overall the film provides a positive representation of a working-class woman doing her best to survive and take care of her child. Alice may not be ready for full emancipation, but she is a good mother and an evolving woman.

Hard Times

In *Hard Times*, Charles Bronson portrays Chaney, unemployed as were at least 25 percent of workers during the Depression, who travels from town to town scratching out a living by taking part in underground fights sponsored by gamblers and hustlers. Chaney is a throwback to earlier times in more than one way. He could best be described as the lone gunfighter who comes into town, cleans up the mess the locals can't clean up, and rides away into the sunset. Like those old western gunfighters, Chaney is an existential hero—he has virtually no back story and can only be judged by his actions. His words are few (a Bronson trademark), and his back story is thin—but his actions are those of an honorable man, even if he earns his money in illegal fights. Like Alice, he is an admirable representative of the working class despite his choice of “careers.” Chaney is also a character that working-class

men of the era could identify with, just as women could identify with the trials of Alice. He is a man who has lost his livelihood due to tough economic times, and he is a man most men would like to be—an individualist who is loyal to those who stand by him (even some who don't) and is just as smart as he is tough. He also gets the girl, Lucy Simpson (Jill Ireland), even if the relationship is doomed to failure. These two films also have one other thing in common that sets them apart from earlier films in the decade—they both end on relatively happy, and traditional, notes.

Hard Times begins and ends in a train yard, a symbol of the transient nature of the working man in Depression-era America. The audience first meets Chaney as a train pulls into an unnamed town and the camera captures him from a low angle standing in the “doorway” of the moving train car. In the next scene, shown in a long shot over Chaney’s shoulder as he drinks coffee at the counter of a restaurant, several men are shown disembarking from cars and walking into what appears to be a warehouse across the street. After a brief exchange with a waitress, Chaney gathers his stuff and heads towards the door. The tone of the film is set as the editor cuts to a tracking shot of Chaney walking into the warehouse and down a narrow and dark hallway, chasing sounds of voices and cheers in the distance. The walls are splashed with shadows as Chaney approaches the end of the hallway, which opens to an area ringed by several men who cheer on the two bare-knuckle combatants in the center. As he enters the “arena,” the audience is shown a close-up of a fighter, a rugged looking guy stripped to his waist. Behind him stands Chaney’s future manager, “Speed” (James Coburn). We immediately are introduced to Speed’s act as he hustles bets for his fighter as the crowd of about twenty gamblers clamor for action on the floor of the dark and dingy warehouse. Speed’s fighter loses, and in the next scene the hustler is shown eating

clams in a cafeteria-style restaurant. When he steps to the counter to claim some more clams, he returns to his table to see Chaney sitting across from him, and the relationship between the hustler and the transient fighter begins.

The look of the film is established early. Much of it is photographed in gray and brown warehouses, basements, docks, and poorly lit restaurants of modest décor, giving a sense of the bleak times in which Chaney operated. The milieu is working-class throughout as each alley and street appears to be pulled from a Warner Brothers feature of the 1930s. The only respite from the gloomy city life of the street fighter is a trip to the countryside where Speed hustles a fight for Chaney with a local farm boy who is hulking, but overmatched. Here the hard-scrabble, aging transient—the product of the working-class slum of some unnamed city—is simply too much for the country boy. He also proves to be more honorable, as the “country boys” refuse to pay when Chaney wins the fight, pulling a gun on Chaney and Speed, and chasing them down the road. Chaney later collects his winnings through force, but he is clearly the wronged one in this clash between the rural and city working classes. In what could be a scene plucked from an old western, the corrupt leader of the “country boys” takes advantage of the transient “townie,” only to get his comeuppance in the end.

The choice to pit working class against working class results in a conservative move. Set during a time in American history when the working class should have been pulling together—when Marxism and collective action was considered a viable alternative to many who sought relief from devastating economic conditions—the film instead shows the proletarian “country folk” and “city folk” fighting and cheating each other.

Throughout the film individual action is also privileged over collective action, even when Chaney takes on an affluent underground fight promoter in New Orleans. Chaney prevails over this slick “operator,” Chick Gandil (Michael McGuire), who, because of his wealth, can employ the toughest fighter in New Orleans to take on all comers. But the victory is again an individual victory, not a collective one. It is also transient, because as Chaney leaves town after the fight, it is clear that Chick Gandil will continue to run the underground fighting business in New Orleans and Speed will continue to hustle a dollar wherever he can find one.

Once Chaney unseats Chick’s champion, he must then show another side of his character—loyalty, another “traditional” American value. When Speed gambles away the winnings he secured as Chaney’s promoter and falls into disfavor with a local loan shark, Gandil steps in to pay the debt, with one caveat— Chaney must fight his new fighter, an out-of-towner. It is left to Chaney to make the moral and ethical choice to fight again—and risk his earnings—to save the life of a man who is already indebted to him. The final fight scene comes after Chaney has been thrown over by Lucy, who has made a more safe choice in companions despite her obvious preference for Chaney. Lucy is a woman of the Great Depression who needs a steady, reliable lover and provider. Chaney has made it clear in his silent, laconic manner that he is unable, or unwilling, to be what Lucy needs, and when he goes to visit her one evening she is not home alone. Chaney returns to his hotel room and agonizes over the decision to fight Gandil’s hired gun as Speed is held hostage in a vacant warehouse by Gandil and his thugs as they all await the arrival of Chaney.

As Chaney contemplates his decision to fight or not, he is shot from a high angle through the blades of a ceiling fan as he lies on the bed of his sparsely decorated room, a shot

pulled directly from any number of film noirs of the 1940s. Through parallel editing, the film cuts back and forth from Chaney's room to where Chaney's "cut man" Poe (Strother Martin) paces inside the empty warehouse while Speed is held captive in offices above the main floor. The easy decision for Chaney would be to leave town with his winnings, as he has planned to do all along. Speed, in his acerbic way, has already made that decision easier by telling Chaney that, "You owe me," when it is clearly the other way around. After one last shot of Chaney in his hotel room gathering his things, the film cuts back to the warehouse to an extreme long shot of Poe, who stands alone on the floor of the warehouse looking left to see if Chaney walks through the large door. An eyeline match, a long shot—and long take—of the garage door to the warehouse anticipates Chaney's arrival. Chaney appears in the doorway out of the dark, and the fight is on. Chaney, of course, has chosen loyalty over self-preservation.

It is here that the working class recovers some of the solidarity lost in the earlier fight scene with the country boy. When it becomes clear that Chaney will win the fight against the skilled fighter brought in from Chicago—the fight goes back and forth for several minutes, demonstrating the skills of both men before Chaney gets the upper hand—the camera shows a close up of Gandil reaching into his pocket and pulling out what appear to be two round metal cylinders. He rolls the cylinders, small enough to fit into a man's palm, towards the fallen Chicago fighter who is struggling to get to his knees. A high-angle close-up shows the fighter looking down at the cylinders and then up in the direction of Gandil before swiping the metal cylinders away with his hand. He then rises to his feet to defend himself and, after taking several more blows from Chaney, who is now reluctant to inflict more damage on his beaten foe, he falls backwards onto a pile of clam shells. Two things take place here—the

Chicago fighter is saying that you may “own” me as a fighter (as a worker), but you cannot buy my integrity; and both fighters, though a great deal of money is involved, show solidarity within the working class as each refuses to take unfair advantage of the other. But, while this expression of respect for each other’s skills and place in the economic hierarchy is a clear showing of solidarity within the class, it cannot supersede the conservative message of the film. Both men, despite refusing to compromise their integrity, are still workers, performers, in the service of the upper class. Neither can survive without money pumped into the system by the powers that be. Chaney’s decision to fight, along with his victory, also restores the seemingly contradictory traditional values of loyalty and individualism that he embodies.

Chaney fights out of loyalty, but he succeeds out of a rugged individualism that he then reinforces in the final scene of the film when he walks away from Speed and Poe down a dark train track after handing both men significant piles of cash from his winnings. As Speed and Poe discuss their next move—a trip to sunny Florida is their preferred option—they interrupt their conversation to marvel at the man who has made that possible. “He was something,” Speed says to Poe. That is the overriding message of the film: Chaney, as an individual, is something, and you, too, can be something if you choose to be a rugged individualist.

Jaws

In the next film, *Jaws*, we explore a somewhat different kind of “hero,” a man who must grow into his role. *Jaws*, like *Rocky* that followed, was a blockbuster that offered a working-class hero at a time when the working class, facing a crisis of confidence, needed heroes. In one way, the film represents a joining of forces of the working class and the

intellectual upper class. Police Chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider), fisherman Quint (Robert Shaw), and wealthy scientist Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss) work together to fight a shark—and city hall—after the politicians and business leaders of the community try to downplay the threat before a series of ghastly attacks force their hand. As the partnership is formed, it appears that this collective action by the classes will demonstrate the deficiencies of the capitalist hierarchy. But as it proceeds, the film turns away from that political message and Brody more and more comes to the fore. It is he who becomes the reluctant hero, the rugged individualist, and not the rugged, fire-breathing Quint or the cerebral Hooper. Although it is their collective action that begins the day, it is Brody’s action that carries the day as he emerges as the working-class hero of the operation. As in *Hard Times*, criticism of the capitalist system recedes into the background as the rugged individualist emerges to save the beach community.

Although *Jaws* has been criticized (or praised, depending upon the critic’s perspective) for leading Hollywood out of the New Hollywood era into the blockbuster era, here we will primarily explore its celebration of the uncommon common man, in this case Chief Brody, as a working-class hero. That is not to say the film speaks with only one voice. The film is clearly a dialogic work, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. It does not carry just the dominant culture’s message of rugged individualism, but it is polyphonic—it has many voices. Bakhtin, in the words of Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, argues that no work can be completely monologic, “for every work contains myriad voices that contend for recognition and disrupt the authorial voice and the dominant or official ideology” (Murfin 86). In *Jaws*, the dominant culture speaks loudly with its restoration of the patriarch and rugged individualist (Brody). But other voices are also heard, including those that critique

capitalism and a corrupt politics, as well as those who praise collective action, even if ultimately one hero must stand at the end. Because of its dialogic form, critics and theorists have looked at *Jaws* from multiple angles. As we will see, it carries a patriarchal message, which serves to restore confidence in the common “man” under attack in the 1970s. It is critical of unfettered capitalism, offering some small catharsis for those who have lost their jobs in a recession. It praises collective action—the intellectual upper class and the working class join forces to conquer the monster, although it is clear that the working class common man carries the day. It is anti-intellectual—Matt Hooper on one occasion fumbles important evidence to the ocean floor, and on another is startled into dropping what appears to be their only weapon to fight the beast to the same ocean floor, while Quint never wavers in times of crisis. It is pro-intellectual—Brody (and to a lesser degree Quint) succeeds only with Hooper’s knowledge base behind him. In this critique, we will primarily explore how the film’s working-class hero, Brody, not only saves the day, but how he reasserts patriarchal authority in a troubling time and helps to restore confidence in the working class by being an uncommon common man.

The path to the restoration of patriarchal authority begins in the first scene of the film as a young woman seduces an inebriated young man at a beach campfire and takes off running along the beach, disrobing as she does, until only her silhouette is visible in the tracking shot as she disappears into the dark and foreboding post-sunset ocean. The young boy gives up the chase when she enters the ocean and collapses to the beach, too tired and inebriated to pursue her. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner note, the young woman represents an “excessive independent female sexuality” that undermines “male public action and responsibility.” They write, “As she [the young woman] runs toward the ocean, shedding

clothes, she leaves behind the palings that connote the strictures and boundaries of civil society. Her transgressively independent sexuality is suitably rewarded” (60). Her reward is death in the jaws of the great white shark. Ryan and Kellner tie this “independent sexuality” to Brody’s demonstration of weakness early in the film. In a key scene, just after the city fathers have refused to close the beach after the first attack, Brody is distracted by his wife as he scours the beach swimming area with binoculars, on the lookout for a shark. As Brody poses as protector of the swimmers from his safe perch on the beach—he, as we learn, fears the water—his wife’s flirting takes his attention away from the shore line long enough for a young child to be taken from his raft. Although Brody would never have been able to prevent the attack—the shark came and went without even the swimmers noticing its presence until blood billowed to the surface—the appearance of Brody’s wife at this moment points to a need for the patriarch unencumbered by the feminine. Brody can escape the influence of the feminine only after he goes to sea, and then only when Quint literally cuts the phone line when Brody attempts to call his wife at a tense moment in the pursuit of the killer shark. Until the “umbilical cord” to home is cut by Quint, the quest to confirm manhood and reestablish the patriarch cannot truly take place. Otherwise, as Ryan and Kellner note, “Woman is always there, in other words, as threatening as the shark” (64). This threat was symbolic of the threat that women posed to men in their push for equal rights in the 1970s.

This first scene on the beach also establishes another more subtle theme in the film, one directly connected to class. The film opens with a slow tracking shot of a group of young people gathered around a campfire. Voices are engaged in conversations as the camera captures the passing of a marijuana “joint” from person to person in the background. Guitar and harmonica music play as the long-haired sons and daughters of the middle and upper

classes enjoy a summer evening on the beach. We later find that many of them are home on vacation from college prior to the annual Fourth of July celebration. The casualness of the relationships between the young people is captured in a brief exchange between the young woman who will be victimized by the shark and the young man she would seduce. After the camera pulls back to show a high-angle view of the entire group, it captures the two making eyes at each other in medium close-ups. The young man, clearly inebriated, begins the brief exchange:

Young man: What's your name again?

Young woman: Chrissy. (She stands.)

Young man: Where are you going?

Young woman: Swimming. (She smiles.)

At this point she takes off and, as noted earlier, is tracked with a long shot running through sand dunes as she makes her way towards the ocean. This is the only scene in the film that depicts elements of the counterculture, and it ends in tragedy. Not only is Chrissy punished for being a woman who smokes marijuana and seduces a man, she is also punished for her frivolity, a frivolity only the sons and daughters of the more privileged can engage in.

Although the young man does the right thing the next day when he reports her missing—he passed out on the beach as she entered the ocean—he must turn to the working class Brody for help. Although the clash of classes is not a common motif in the film, this opening scene clearly establishes class as a component.

Brody's immediate response is to close the beaches. As a police chief, his instinct is to protect the community from whatever forces might threaten it. But it quickly becomes clear that his instincts, honed on the streets of New York, are not immediately transferrable

to his new community, Amity, a fictional New England coast town. Mayor Larry Vaughn (Murray Hamilton) sidles up to Brody as Brody and others prepare signs to close the beach, and convinces him that he is acting rashly. The mayor even convinces the coroner, who is tagging along with him, to change his initial “cause of death” from shark attack to “boating accident,” convincing the coroner to tell Brody that the death could have been caused by an outboard motor. The mayor makes clear the economic implications of a reported shark attack: “You yell shark, we’ve got a panic on our hands on the Fourth of July.”

Shortly thereafter, the young boy is taken from his raft by the shark, and a town meeting is called in what appears to be a classroom to address the situation. At the meeting, conflicting accounts of the most recent incident are considered. Most importantly, the character of Quint is dramatically introduced. As townspeople and city officials argue about what course of action to take, the literal sound of nails against a blackboard is heard and a group of men part to show a medium shot of Quint sitting at a desk in the back of the classroom, his back to the proceedings, dragging his nails down the blackboard behind him. The sound halts all voices in the room, and a rugged looking man with a hat and several days of beard turns frontward. Quint speaks: “You all know me. How I make a living.” The introduction is masterful because not only does it tell us the kind of man Quint is—rugged, and individual—it also tells us that, while he is clearly working class, he is not the hero type. Heroes do not hunt sharks for money—they hunt sharks to save communities. Quint reinforces his position within the capitalist system when he announces he will kill the shark for \$10,000, not the \$3,000 being offered. He drills home that point when he says, “Or, you can be on welfare all winter,” a comment that would have elicited a visceral reaction in a working-class audience of the time.

After Quint's introduction, the only key character missing is the scientist, Matt Hooper. Hooper is introduced when he arrives in Amity to inspect the remains of the first victim to determine the cause of death. He confirms Brody's fears—a large shark killed the young woman. After a feeling-out process, Hooper and Brody form an alliance, which initially establishes collective action between the elite and the educated (Hooper comes from a rich family) and the common man who, to this point in his life, has survived through instinct and common sense.ⁱⁱⁱ This alliance is cemented when Hooper, who is supposed to be leaving for a long tour on an oceanographic study, shows up at the Brody house with wine and a plan to perform an autopsy on a shark that was caught by fishermen after the town put a bounty on the killer shark. The contents of the shark will tell if it is their shark, Hooper says. He and Brody are clearly skeptical that the right shark has been caught. The autopsy shows that, in fact, it is not the right shark.

The autopsy scene establishes an early hierarchy between Hooper and Brody in the film, a hierarchy that is overturned as the film proceeds. In this scene, Hooper is shot in the foreground cutting open the shark and pulling its stomach contents out, tossing them aside and behind as Brody sits on the concrete floor in the background, watching the operation. Once Hooper becomes involved in the operation, he and Brody are shown in a number of situations, almost always with Hooper in the foreground. This hierarchy of placement is consistent throughout much of the film, until Brody must assume a more pronounced leadership role. (Brody is also filmed in the foreground with his wife as Hooper and Quint prepare Quint's boat for the quest to find the shark, momentarily excluding him from the male bonding activity taking place in the background. But the bond between husband and wife is soon eliminated when Quint cuts the phone cord.) Once they begin their pursuit,

Brody is also occasionally shown in the foreground performing the task of the laborer, “chumming the water” with dead fish to attract the shark, while Quint and Hooper do the manly work of operating the vessel in the background. But this positioning just serves to isolate Brody from the other men, not establish a new hierarchy. Later scenes also show Hooper and Quint operating together, displaying their credentials as shark experts as Brody often performs his duties in isolation. But in the end it is Brody, not Quint or Hooper, who is forced to take center stage and emerges as the rugged individualist who improvises to kill the shark after Quint is devoured and Hooper is presumed lost.

The contrast between Quint and Hooper is also established early on. When Quint meets Hooper for the first time, he asks the scientist to give him his hands to inspect: “You have city hands, Mr. Hooper. You have been counting money all your life.” Hooper responds, looking at Quint and then Brody: “I don’t need this working-class hero crap.” This is the only time in the film that the term “working class” is used, but it is a significant moment. It is important for the classes here to work collectively to destroy the monster that is attacking society, and so it is important for the tension between the two to be made clear. It is interesting to note that this shot is taken over Quint’s shoulder with he and Brody in the foreground and Hooper in the background, establishing a class bond between the fisherman and the police chief that does not exist between them and the scientist. At another point, Quint once again evokes class when he and Hooper disagree about the whereabouts of the shark, and Quint proves to be right. Hooper refuses to admit he was wrong, however, and Quint says, “You wealthy college boys don’t have the education enough to admit when you’re wrong.” Not long after that exchange, the shark is finally spotted as it swims up to the

boat and rises out of the water as Brody chums, leading to his classic line of dialogue, “We’re going to need a bigger boat.”

Later that night the bonding between the three men becomes permanent, although disagreements about how to proceed continue. As in the earlier scene when Hooper and Brody bonded over wine before the autopsy of the shark, alcohol again plays a key role. It apparently takes this “manly” activity to enable the bonding to take place. But even here Brody is left out of the “club” of fishermen. Quint and Hooper exchange tales about shark encounters as they celebrate their run-ins with sharks by proudly displaying their scars to the other men. Despite the obvious differences between Quint and Hooper, which crosses into antagonism at times, this moment demonstrates a shared experience that is literally played out on their bodies. Hooper may have “soft hands,” but he has body scars to demonstrate his experience with the dangers of the ocean, creating a bond with Quint that Brody cannot have. Brody, who has also suffered from a fear of open water and ocean sickness during the early stages of the hunt, a sign of weakness to Quint, has no such scars and is reduced to looking down his pants—an obvious metonymic allusion to his penis and manhood.^{iv}

When it becomes clear that the shark is a greater threat to them than they anticipated, it is Brody who, despite his obvious fear, assumes a more assertive role. Quint by now is obsessed with the hunt. The shark has become his Moby Dick, and he ignores signs that his boat cannot match the shark. At one point, Brody and Hooper are in the foreground as Quint, back turned to the camera, navigates the boat from his higher perch. “Why don’t we start leading the shark into the shore instead of him leading us out to sea?” Brody asks. But Quint is oblivious to the question and continues his blind pursuit. By the time Quint takes Brody’s

advice to lead the shark into shore, it is too late. The boat's engine has burned out and they are now adrift.

It is here that Hooper tries one last, desperate attempt to kill the shark. Despite the obvious danger, he goes into the water in a shark cage with a jerry-rigged spear loaded with a large syringe of strychnine, hoping to stick the shark inside its mouth to kill it. But he is startled when the shark attacks from the rear. When it strikes the cage, Hooper drops the spear to the ocean floor. This fumbling of a key item out of fear replays a similar scene from early in the film when Hooper, exploring the torn hull of a fisherman's boat as it floats on the water, finds a large shark tooth, only to drop it to the ocean floor when the head and torso of the dead fisherman poke out of the hole in the hull. For the second time, Hooper has literally "dropped the ball." It is up to Brody to save the day because, shortly after this incident, Quint is literally swallowed by the shark as it attacks the sinking boat.

Here the working-class hero, and the rugged individualist, emerges. No longer is Brody the man who fears the ocean and is ill-at-ease on the water. Now he is the lone survivor (he assumes Hooper is dead, although Hooper eventually safely rises to the surface) who must conquer the monster. He doesn't have the fisherman's tools or the scientist's science to employ. He must employ the one thing that the American male is bred to have—good old-fashioned American ingenuity. As the shark attacks, he gathers a large air tank. (When the tank broke loose from its mooring earlier in the hunt, Hooper admonished him, saying that the tank had the potential to blow up the boat.) Brody raises the tank and, as the shark approaches, tosses it into its mouth. The shark descends, but when it rises, Brody is ready. As the shark approaches the boat for what will surely be Brody's last stand, Brody fires at it with his pistol, trying to get it to open its mouth and show the tank. When it does, a

close-up shows the tank lodged within the shark's mouth. Brody calmly shoots with his pistol until he hits the tank. A long shot shows the shark exploding into thousands of pieces.

In the end, it is the working-class hero whose ingenuity carries the day. Brody and Hooper share the final scene as they both paddle towards the shore together, kept afloat by remnants of the boat, and to a certain extent the scientist and the working man together share the glory. But the audience leaves the theater knowing that the scientist panicked when he had a chance to end the shark's carnage, and the working-class businessman Quint fell prey to his obsession with the shark. It took the uncommon common man, the man who conquered his fear of water and later called upon his American ingenuity, to kill the shark, protect his community, and restore the patriarch to the "throne."

Rocky

The last film to be discussed in detail in this chapter is *Rocky*, the film that details the rise of a working-class boxer from the row houses of Philadelphia to a place in American lore. The title character embodies many of the traits Americans wanted to see in themselves in the mid-1970s—a quiet integrity, a sense of right and wrong, a humble self-image, and a refusal to give up, no matter what the odds. *Rocky*, while celebrating its working-class hero, is not as flattering to the working class as a whole. Although its title character displays surprising complexity—he's a mob "collector" with a heart, a lover of animals, and a believer in community—he's also a misogynist and, while not as extreme as other working-class characters in the film, a subtle racist. More importantly, the film fails to rein in either his misogyny or racism or the more extreme versions displayed by other working-class characters in the film. Like the racist in real life who assumes others share his/her views, the

film assumes its audience shares its subtle racism and misogyny, which can be more disturbing than the overt expressions of these qualities.

In *Rocky*, an Italian-American boxer/thug (Sylvester Stallone) overcomes all odds to “go the distance” with the champion, serving as a metaphor for good old American ingenuity during a crisis. To serve as a metaphor for America at its best, though, Rocky Balboa must be presented with an opponent who metonymically represents the crisis that is afflicting the working class—Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers), a black man who embraces all that is wrong with capitalism and who mocks American tradition along the way. While the film served to uplift many because of its Horatio Alger story line, it also exposed an ugly underbelly in the working class as it created a mythic hero for white ethnics.

Rocky has been much written about since its release in America’s bicentennial year of 1976. The story of a Philadelphia club fighter who is chosen to fight for the world championship after the scheduled challenger is hurt, the film has been explored primarily as a modern-day Horatio Alger story with a 1970s twist. Like any film, *Rocky* is a product of its times, and its times were troubled for the white working class, which felt particularly put-upon at the time. Although the black working class faced similar economic issues, which are chronicled in some of the Black films of the era as well as *Blue Collar*, this moment in Hollywood history was reserved primarily for white working-class angst. The term “working class” had become so synonymous with whites that New York writer Pete Hamill, noted observer of the working class, wrote at the time that “nobody calls it the working class any more . . . ; the bureaucratic, sociological phrase is white lower-middle class, . . . sometimes referred to as ‘the ethnics’” (qtd. in Leab, 266). The story of *Rocky*’s writer and star, Sylvester Stallone, added a second layer to the Horatio Alger myth (as well as the white

ethnic myth), as Stallone, facing the poor house himself, not only penned the film in three days, but also refused to sell it unless he was given the opportunity to play the lead. He eventually got his way, but the budget of the film was cut almost in half to about \$1 million, “a pittance” at the time, because he was a virtually unknown commodity (Leab 261-263).

Stallone wrote the film after watching a real-life club fighter, Chuck Wepner, known in the business as the Bayonne Bleeder, almost go the distance with then champion Muhammad Ali in March, 1975. Wepner, an awkward, flailing fighter, proved to be too unorthodox for Ali to solve, and only a fifteenth round knockout avoided what could have been an embarrassing decision for the champion, who was clearly out of shape for the fight. Wepner was another in a series of “White Hopes” who was sent into the ring to shut up the “uppity” Ali, who had not only turned his back on the Vietnam War by refusing induction into the Army as a conscientious objector, but had also proved to be a loud and effective critic of the white establishment and its role in the Vietnam conflict. As a Black Muslim, he also represented the voice and face of Black militancy, even after he broke with the more radical wing of his faith. Many in both the White and Black communities rejected Ali when he adopted his Muslim name and dropped his Christian name, Cassius Clay. As Grant Farred notes in *What's My Name*, Ali had to literally beat his black opponent, Ernie Terrell, into submission before he could get him to use his new name in a 1966 fight. Terrell, as Farred notes, was an uneducated man who had little knowledge of the history of Black oppression or the Black Diaspora, and did not understand the import of Ali's name change. Terrell, after a savage beating, finally acknowledged in the ring “in a barely audible whisper” that his opponent's name was indeed Muhammad Ali. “It would take white Christian America somewhat longer than Terrell to acknowledge Ali's name and his religion and to engage the

ideological import of his identity,” Farred writes (63). Although the Wepner fight took place many years later, after Ali had been stripped of his title for refusing induction and then had won it back from George Foreman in another sociologically controversial fight with a black man, the residue of the Vietnam experience and fear of “uppity” blacks were still strong in the mid-1970s when white ethnics felt pressure from below as they feared that Blacks, who already dominated American sports, would take their jobs next through government programs like Affirmative Action.

It is against this backdrop that *Rocky* came to the screen in the bicentennial year of 1976. Most critical accounts of the film, when not referring to its Horatio Alger aspects, refer to its racist and misogynist tendencies. Almost universally, critics say that beneath its rags-to-riches story is another story of white ethnic America that is not so flattering. The portrayal of Apollo Creed is particularly problematic. As Peter Biskind writes in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*:

It [*Rocky*] was one of the coming crop of post-New Hollywood feel-good films, a throwback to the ‘50s, and a peek at the ‘80s, a racist, Great White Hope slap at Muhammad Ali—on whom the character of Rocky’s opponent was all too obviously based—and everything he stood for, the generation of uppity black folk and the antiwar, “nigger-loving” white kids who admired him. (385)

But while the critics, particularly in retrospect, recognized the blatant racism in the portrayal of Apollo Creed and other blacks in the film, the working class audience at the time did not. They saw a “White Hope” who was able to overcome the frustrations they felt as ethnic, working-class Americans. They experienced a catharsis through Rocky’s ability to go the

distance with the champ, a triumph made that much sweeter because the champ he went the distance with was a loud-mouthed, black man who symbolized to them all that was wrong with America.

The cries of misogyny are most obviously supported by the treatment of Adrian (Talia Shire), Rocky's "ugly duckling" love interest, by her crude brother Paulie (Burt Young), whose character will be explored later. But it is also apparent in Rocky's more subtle sexist treatment of his future wife, particularly in a scene when his physical intimidation of her is disguised as a coarse method of courtship.

While the cries of racism and misogyny can both be supported, and I will support them in this chapter, most critics ignore the critique of capitalism that is inherent in the film. Despite the clearly pro-America, pro-classic liberalism, pro-individualist conservative stance of the film, there is an anti-capitalist thread that also runs through the film. The film is "dialogic" in that respect, as Mikhail Bakhtin might say. This capitalist critique is exacerbated by Stallone, as writer, and John G. Avildsen, as director, by making Apollo Creed not only a walking, talking imitation of the brash Muhammad Ali, but also by making him the ultimate cynical capitalist. By tapping into white ethnic anger at African Americans, who they feared would take their jobs, and their distrust of capitalists, who they believed were trying to drive down wages, the filmmakers were able to manipulate the emotions of the white ethnic audience. But, as we will see, while the film is critical of Blacks and capitalists, it does not spare the ethnic working class, even though it offers a white ethnic hero.

Rocky, like *Jaws* that came before it, is also "dialogic" because while it often presents the world from the working-class point of view, it is also critical of many aspects of the working class. Also, while it generally privileges the concept of liberal capitalism as it

pertains to the pursuit of the American dream, it also criticizes the excesses of capitalism, as well as its dehumanizing effects on the working class. Ultimately, however, (and ironically) the film finally supports the dominant ideology that actually created the very working-class characters that the film often disparages.

Rocky Balboa, the working-class hero, is presented as an exception to the rule. Even as he survives on the edges of the boxing world and the edges of the law in the early part of the film, he is depicted as exceptional. He is a mob “collector” with a heart; he is a lover of animals; he is the protector of young women; and he is a believer in community. He is an uncommon ethnic working-class man who, the film seems to say, represents what every working class ethnic could be if he only stopped feeling sorry for himself, stopped drinking, stopped brutalizing women, stopped hating Blacks, and got up off his lazy ass and went to work every day without complaint. He is what everyone could be if he/she could only ignore his/her alienation and just produce what’s necessary for the greater good. In writing about another conservative working-class film of that era, *Dirty Harry*, Ryan and Kellner say something that is clearly applicable to *Rocky*:

Harry [Callahan] takes on meaning for audiences through his transcendence of his middle-class context, but he has no meaning except as part of that context. This is a common representational dilemma of conservative films during this period. The ideological strategy of conservatism is to isolate a hero from social contexts and to idealize him. (45)

The same can be said about Rocky Balboa. Although not completely isolated from social contexts that define him, he transcends his class and the other characters that are mired within it. Rocky, representing the ideal of the American Dream that the dominant culture

offers as a panacea to working people, is the hero of this film, not the working class or the crowds who saw themselves in Rocky Balboa. It's not the system that is at fault, the film says, even as it exploits your belief that it is the system. It's you. You must work harder to transcend the boundaries of class.

The film is not subtle, particularly in its visual use of symbolism. The juxtaposition of the first two shots in the film equates Rocky with Christ. The first shot of the film is a close-up of a mural of Christ on a wall. As the camera pulls back, a small crowd and a boxing ring come into view. The shot cuts to Rocky Balboa in the center of the ring, fighting another pug. With the Christ mural watching over the fight—it appears to be taking place in a Roman Catholic athletic center—Rocky is outboxed and outclassed until his opponent viciously head-butts him, causing him to explode in rage and savagely beat the man to the canvas, striking him several times as he's down. But despite the savagery of the beating, the brutality of the action seems almost cartoonish. It is presented in a long shot, and the blows are so exaggerated that it could just as easily be Popeye pummeling Brutus as Rocky pummeling an unnamed fighter. In the poorly lit, dingy gym the small crowd is loud and unappreciative—one woman calls Rocky a “bum” as he literally “bums” a cigarette from a member of the crowd as he heads for the locker room, another piece of cartoonish action that drains some of the brutality from the scene. Yet, the setting and the mural clearly establish a religious element in the film and connect Rocky directly to Jesus Christ.

As Sugrue and Skrentny note in “The White Ethnic Strategy,” this appeal to Catholic ethnics was common in the political and cultural arenas at the time:

These second-and third-generation descendants of European immigrants became the embodiment of Nixon's “Silent Majority,” a group alienated by

the civil rights movement, betrayed by liberals, and simmering with “middle-class rage.” . . . Ethnicity also pervaded popular culture, from the remarkable success of Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* to commercials that featured “Anthony,” an Italian boy rushing to his immigrant mother on Wednesday, “Prince Spaghetti Day.” (172)

By setting the fight in a Catholic athletic center and placing Christ and Rocky Balboa at the center of the scene, the filmmaker is clearly appealing to this ethnic demographic. Daniel Leab notes that *Rocky* stands out from earlier boxing films because it “speaks for the working class” instead of presenting the working class from a middle-class point of view:

Rocky obviously was palatable to the American middle class, but its success rests on the film’s appeal to the white ethnic American (once succinctly described by a magazine writer as “perhaps the most alienated person” in the United States). *Rocky* endorsed the ethnic’s prejudices, deferred to its fantasies, and highlighted his life style. (266)

As Bruce J. Schulman writes in *The Seventies*, the revival of ethnic America was a reaction to and an imitation of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. After decades of “assimilation,” Schulman notes that ethnic Americans wanted to rewrite their narratives to assert their place in a new multicultural society. No longer did they want to be considered just “Americans.” They wanted their cultural heritage to be honored and respected by the WASP establishment. “This upsurge of white ethnicity also manifested itself in some of the era’s most influential and enduring cultural products,” Schulman writes. “In art, in fiction, especially in film, a new model appeared—a revised narrative.” Whereas earlier films about ethnics had concentrated on the loss of a homeland and subsequent

assimilation to a new land, 1970s films like *The Godfather* emphasized “tales of failed assimilation, of deassimilation, of the lingering, inescapable imprint of the ethnic heritage” (80-82). *Rocky* tapped into this ethnic revival while unabashedly and simultaneously promoting the American Dream of rags-to riches.

Part of *Rocky*'s appeal was the film's realistic portrayal of the working-class milieu. This is accomplished through *mise en scene* and lighting, apparent in the opening sequence, and the use of location shots throughout the film. The milieu is clearly demonstrated in the use of the row houses and the tight, crowded, trash-strewn streets of the neighborhoods. Rocky's small, dark, and disheveled apartment represents the lower end of the working class, while Paulie and Adrian's modest row house with its small rooms and pressing walls represents the modest accommodations of a typical working-class family. Their small house is surrounded by others of identical outsides, replete with small front yards, establishing the sameness of the lives that are led by the inhabitants. As Leab notes, “The furniture is neat but worn, the rooms are small, the lamps are chintzy, the living room is dominated by an old television set” (268). The living room points to a narrow hallway that leads to a kitchen at the back of the house, and the lighting inside the home is always dim, with lamps providing the illumination. In short, it has the authentic feel of an urban working-class home, and any working-class ethnic American, particularly one from any urban environment, would feel right at home in front of Paulie's TV.

The scene following the fight establishes the working-class milieu of the streets. After collecting his \$40.55, minus taxes and other miscellaneous costs, for winning the fight, Rocky is tracked walking down the sidewalk in a working-class neighborhood. The street is narrow, dark, and damp, as it appears throughout the film, and the residences are brick row

houses. Rocky briefly stops in front of a pet shop to say hello to a “doggie in the window,” showing a gentle side to the savage, and then walks by a small crowd of locals singing “Doo Wop” as they lean in to warm their hands from a fire burning in a 50-gallon drum on the corner. The long shot captures the relationships between the characters gathered on the street corner. Everyone knows Rocky, and he knows everyone else. It is a neighborhood like those that were disappearing in the 1970s. It is a throwback. As Sugrue and Skrentny write, “Ethnicity in the 1970s was, to a great extent, performative. People asserted their ties to their Old World ancestors by eating pierogies, dancing ceili, or serving seven fishes on Christmas Eve” (174). The Doo Wop, a remnant of 1950s and 1960s Italian neighborhoods in Philadelphia, was yet another example of performative ethnicity, albeit a more modern one. But the brief scene gives Rocky an opportunity to show his neighborhood credentials and to praise the singers on their improvement, indicating that he has been listening to them for some time, thus demonstrating a deep neighborhood bond. His leather jacket and pork-pie hat set him apart from the others, almost all young men, but he is clearly one of them.

In the next scene, we see Rocky enter his apartment after being tracked about a half-block up the street from the singers. The apartment is dingy and dark, unkempt as one would expect, and is decorated with an old refrigerator and tattered furniture. It does not represent the “charm” of Paulie and Adrian’s home, but appears to be a step above a flop house. Rocky immediately grabs a bottle from the refrigerator as he enters the apartment, finishes what appear to be the remnants of a beer, and tosses it into the garbage. He is then tracked across the small room to a fish bowl. As he leans down to “talk” to his turtles, Cuff and Link, a poster of Rocky Marciano looks down at him from the wall, not unlike the Christ mural in scene one. The placement of the poster is particularly telling for several reasons. In 1976

Marciano was considered the last great white American fighter, the man who had retired undefeated at 49-0 and had knocked out every notable black fighter who had come before him, most notably the aging, legendary “Brown Bomber” Joe Louis. At a time when white ethnic America was looking for a hero, many still clinged to the feats of the former heavyweight champion.^v As an Italian-American—Rocky Balboa is known as the “Italian Stallion,” a name that Creed denigrates later when he intentionally pronounces the “I” as a long vowel—Rocky, like others, looks to Marciano as the patron saint of Italian manhood. This connection to Marciano is deepened later when Balboa’s manager, Mick (Burgess Meredith), tells Rocky he reminds him of Marciano. This is both a compliment and an insult—Marciano was known as an awkward fighter who made himself into a champion through pure will power, not exceptional skill. This scene ends with a poignant shot of Rocky looking into the mirror at both himself and what appears to be his elementary school picture. Shot from over Stallone’s shoulder, the shot connects Rocky to his youth as he looks not only at himself and his photo, but also at a photo of what is assumed to be his parents. Throughout the scene, deep family and ethnic connections are constructed, and nostalgia for this simpler past reigns.

In the following scene, another interesting connection is drawn, this time to another white ethnic athlete of the time. The scene opens with two blurred hands in the foreground. The sounds of birds chirping indicate that this is likely to be the pet store that Rocky visited the night before. Beyond the hands is a window, and from the right Rocky’s face moves into the picture. He is looking in the window at the owner of the two hands, who we soon learn is Adrian, the painfully shy clerk whom he is trying to romance. As he enters he almost immediately tells her a joke he had been practicing in the mirror the night before about his

two turtles, Cuff and Link. Adrian doesn't laugh, but he is nonplussed, telling her he will be back the next day with another joke. As the first scene with both characters on screen, this quickly establishes the potential for Rocky and Adrian, two lonely people, to get together. It is clear that he will not be easily dissuaded, and that he has been pursuing her for some time. But the scene also establishes yet another white-ethnic connection. At one point in the scene, Rocky calls across the room to a dog that is caged. "Butkus," he yells. It is not a coincidence that Butkus was the name of one of the most famous white football players in the NFL, Dick Butkus. Although his career had ended in the early 1970s, Butkus still remained the poster boy for toughness and savagery on the football field. Pictures of his own and others' blood adorning his uniform were legend, and no ethnic (in his case Lithuanian) football player was more revered in the white-working class world of Rocky Balboa. Within the first ten minutes of the film the filmmaker has connected Rocky to Jesus Christ, Rocky Marciano, and Dick Butkus, indelibly establishing both his potential as a blue-collar Messiah and his working-class credentials for the working-class ethnic audience.

Rocky is not a saint, although he is as close to being one as a collector for a loan shark can be. Early in the film Rocky is shown walking along the Philadelphia shipping docks with purpose as men in forklifts carry materials to his left and right. When he sees a man he recognizes operating one of the forklifts, he takes off after him on foot and catches him before he can escape. The audience quickly learns that Rocky is collecting for a loan shark named Gazzo, and that the man he has caught is in arrears on his payments. Told to break the delinquent's thumb if he does not pay in full, Rocky takes a partial payment instead and leaves the man unharmed. Sounds of the waterfront are heard around them as whistles blow and various pieces of heavy machinery groan.^{vi} After failing to break the delinquent's

thumb, Rocky is later castigated by Gazzo, but even the loan shark is shown to “have a heart.” Instead of dressing down Rocky in front of his driver, who has shown open disdain for the club fighter, Gazzo pulls Rocky aside and explains that his benevolence is bad for business. Later, he slips Rocky extra cash to make up for the verbal slights of his driver. Much later in the film Gazzo offers Rocky money for training purposes, but when Rocky turns him down he does not threaten him or try to buy a piece of him, as mob boss Johnny Friendly did with Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*. He simply wishes him the best and shows up at the fight to root for the hometown hero.

Throughout the film the working class is presented with ambivalence. For every Adrian, who is decent and selfless, there is a Paulie, who is “pathetically brutish” (Leab 268) and self-absorbed. For every local who has an encouraging word to say to Rocky, there is another who denigrates him, often out of intra-class jealousy of Rocky’s once-in-a-lifetime shot at success. For every Gazzo who loans locals money and threatens to break their thumbs for non-payment, there is a Gazzo who slips Rocky extra money so he can “take his girl out.”

Paulie’s characterization is one of the most problematic in the film. As Rocky’s future brother-in-law (Rocky is married to Adrian in the sequels), Paulie is always looking out for himself. He is a self-pitying laborer in a slaughter house who complains daily about the brutally cold conditions he must work in. He is not a particularly sympathetic character, though, and he would be even less sympathetic with a working-class audience that was threatened with plant closings and job loss every day. He at least has a job.

It is not surprising that our first introduction to Paulie is in the bathroom of a local bar. Although more spacious than most corner bar bathrooms, its fixtures are old and drab, and the room is generally unkempt. Rocky tracks him down at the bar to ask him for help in

getting the attention of Adrian. Throughout the conversation Paulie denigrates his sister, calling her a loser and an albatross around his neck. His characterization of the woman who cooks, washes, and cares for him is particularly disconcerting, and over the top. “She’s a freakin’ loser,” Paulie tells Rocky. “Sometimes she makes me so crazy I could split her head with a razor.” The line is delivered with such casualness that its impact is even more disturbing than the words themselves. If he had said he could “strangle her” or “toss her off a bridge,” the words would have seemed hyperbolic and unreal. But by describing the specific use of a straight razor in a violent action against his meek sister, Paulie comes to represent the worst of the working class, a brutal and violent man who would consider engaging in sororicide. As the scene in the bathroom proceeds, Paulie spends most of his time lobbying Rocky to get him work with Gazzo so he can leave the meat plant. Rocky is pouring his heart out to Paulie, and all Paulie can do is denigrate his sister and ask for a personal favor. Paulie leaves the bar shortly after Rocky arrives, saying that if he gets home ten minutes late Adrian calls the hospitals looking for him.

Paulie’s character remains unchanged during the film. His first impulse is to do what’s best for Paulie, and his second impulse is to do it again. Even as Rocky moves inexorably towards his title fight with Creed, a fight that no one gives him a chance to survive, let alone win, Paulie schemes to exploit his friend. First, he calls in the media to watch Rocky as he trains by hitting a side of beef, embarrassing his friend but bringing publicity to the slaughter house. Later, as the fight nears, he again approaches Rocky with a proposition to make money off the fight. Rocky accedes to his request, and we see later that Rocky’s fight robe is now adorned with the name of the meat house. The only kind thing

Paulie does in the film is to hold the ring ropes for Adrian so she can climb into the ring to reach Rocky after the fight, and even that seems to be an afterthought.

Throughout the film Paulie also shows ambivalence towards his sister that hints at incestual feelings. He can't wait to bring her and Rocky together so he can be "free" of her overbearing ways, but when Adrian and Rocky do get together he sees her new relationship as a threat to his relationship with her. This is most apparent in one of the film's most disturbing scenes, when a drunken Paulie verbally abuses Adrian and then picks up a baseball bat and breaks a lamp, smashes Christmas ornaments, blasts a hole in a wall, and threatens Rocky and Adrian. During his tirade he turns to Adrian and says, "You're busted," referring crudely to the loss of her virginity. Although she is quickly approaching her thirtieth birthday, Paulie is still applying "Old Country" rules of morality to her, acting more like a protective father or scorned lover than her brother. Adrian, who earlier had cowered in the face of Paulie's Thanksgiving Day verbal attack—he tossed their dinner turkey into the alley to force Adrian to go out with Rocky that night—stands up to his attack this time. Although her relationship with Rocky has helped her to emerge from her incredible shyness, and her reaction to Paulie is presented as a byproduct of that emergence, she is clearly buttressed by Rocky's presence in the room. In the end, she leaves her brother's house for her boyfriend's house, hardly a victory for feminism even though the relationship is not one-sided. Rocky clearly needs what Adrian can give him, which is someone who believes in him.

A scene just prior to the previous one demonstrates in equally stark terms Paulie's ambivalence towards his sister's awakening. As Rocky visits Paulie at the meat house where he works, the two men engage in conversation surrounded by sides of beef hanging from

hooks. Paulie turns to Rocky and asks, “Are you ballin’ my sister? You screwin’ my sister?” As he does so, he turns and punches a side of beef. Rocky, trying to contain his rage over the insult of the woman he loves, begins to punch a side of beef, too. But he does it with rage and purpose. Wearing the same worn knit cap and dirty sweat clothes that he runs in—he had just finished his morning conditioning run—he beats the slab of meat until his hands are covered with blood. The connection between violence, sex, and blood is captured in this brief scene, and is later accentuated when Paulie tells Adrian, “You’re busted.” Throughout the scene, as Rocky pounds the carcass in front of him, grunting and groaning, Paulie’s demeanor slowly changes until he calmly tells Rocky to stop pounding the carcass because “you’re breaking the ribs.” The beast of Paulie is temporarily tamed through fear. Two messages seem to be clear here. The film offers only one response to Paulie’s unhealthy attachment to his sister, and that is violence. The only way one working-class “brute” can take something away from another “brute” is to subdue him with violence. Here, not only is Paulie’s incestuous attachment to his sister exposed, showing a horrific side of the classic brute, but his cowardice in the face of a superior brute is also demonstrated. In the person of Paulie, the working class is shown to be capable of only one resolution to crisis, and that is violence

Leab, citing social commentator Michael Novak, refers to Paulie’s outbursts as demonstrations of the “suppressed anger” felt by the ethnic working class (268). He then quotes Stallone who refers to Paulie as “a symbol of the blue collar, disenfranchised, left-out mentality, a man who feels life has given him an unfair amount of cheap shots” (268). While this may be Stallone’s take, and clearly it is the character Paulie’s take, the reality is that Paulie lashes out at the two people who care the most for him, Adrian and Rocky. He doesn’t recognize what they do for him, only what they don’t do for him. He is angry and bitter, and

his bitterness is fueled by drink and an unhealthy attachment to his sister. He shows no real loyalty to anyone, and he exploits the two people who show the most loyalty to him. In short, he represents a return to the working-class brute that was so common in films of the 1930s and 1940s. More disturbing than Paulie's actions is the film's refusal to pass judgment on him, except for the decision to have Adrian leave him. His attempts to exploit Rocky and Adrian are excusable, the film seems to be saying, because his life, and by proxy the life of the working class, is difficult. That seems to be a flimsy excuse for brutish and exploitive behavior, but it's one the film seems to accept.

The bartender in the local bar represents another example of the brutish, intolerant working class. In the same bar sequence recounted above, Rocky takes a seat at the bar and orders a drink after Paulie leaves for home. As in all neighborhood bars, a television blasts in the background. This time the television is carrying an impromptu interview with Apollo Creed, who is preparing for his title defense on January 1, 1976, the first day of the bicentennial year. Creed is dressed ostentatiously in a fur coat and is accompanied by a beautiful woman. He eloquently promotes the upcoming fight as the reporter and champion walk towards the camera and then stop for the brief interview. As the television plays, the bartender, a tall, casually dressed, middle-aged, balding white man with a paunch, sidles up to Rocky's spot at the bar and leans into the shot, his elbows on the bar. As both men listen to Creed recite a pithy poem about staying in school, the bartender turns to Rocky:

Bartender: Would you look at that guy? I mean, where are the real fighters gonna come from? The pros? All you got today is jig clowns.

Rocky: Clowns . . . You're callin' Apollo Creed a clown? Are you crazy? This

man is champion of the world. He took his best shot and became champion.

Huh. What shot did you ever take?

As he says this, Rocky tosses a bill onto the bar and walks out. The camera settles on the bartender as Rocky exits. The bartender retorts, “What are you so insulted about? You want me to take a shot? All right, I’ll take a shot.” The bartender then grabs a bottle of whiskey, pours a shot and drinks it, lending a light moment to the otherwise disturbing scene. Frank Tomasulo rightfully points out that Rocky objects to the use of the word “clown,” but not to the use of the pejorative “jig” (162). Rocky’s protest is a working-class protest—taking a shot and working hard to achieve a goal is part of the American Dream—but it is not a protest against racism. Whether intended or not, the film assumes that the word “jig” is not offensive to Rocky or the audience. The bartender, although admonished by Rocky in this scene, is shown once again later in the film as the fight between Rocky and Apollo Creed is broadcast on local television in his bar. In this scene he is shown cheering on his white, ethnic, local patron as Rocky stands toe-to-toe with the “jig.” The use of this shot, with the bartender at its center, seems to sanction the use of the pejorative term earlier. This choice stains the working class once more, although audiences, caught up in the fight did not seem to notice.

Although much of the criticism regarding the depiction of race is directed at the characterization of Apollo Creed, and rightfully so, there are other subtle and not-so-subtle moments in the film that attempt to paint the white ethnic as the victim of a society that privileges everyone, particularly blacks, over white ethnic men. One of these scenes takes place early in the film when Rocky, after winning his club fight the night before, shows up at his gym and discovers that his locker has been given to a younger black fighter. The gym

looks as if it hasn't changed since the 1940s. The lighting throughout the gym is generally low key and the walls and floor are drab and dark. The lockers are old and metal, and that area is also dimly lit. The equipment, from the ring to the speed bags, appears old and worn. It is clearly a working-class boxing gym torn from the pages of *Ring Magazine*. A handful of boxers shadow box and hit bags as Rocky makes his way to the locker room.

When Rocky discovers that a new lock has been placed on his locker, he grabs a fire extinguisher and breaks the lock. As he opens it, pictures of scantily clad black women adorn the inside of the locker, a not-so-subtle indication that a black man now owns his locker. Rocky turns to the locker-room attendant for an explanation and is told that Mick (Burgess Meredith) has ordered him to give the locker to Dipper, a young black fighter. Rocky's equipment has been placed in another area of the locker room reserved for lesser fighters. "You put my stuff on skid row," Rocky tells the attendant, voicing a fear that many white ethnics had at the time about their own futures. When Rocky confronts Mick about the loss of the locker, Mick, who is standing on the ring apron directing a sparring session, tells him to "shut up." When Rocky protests that he has had the locker for six years, Mick tells him he has wasted six years. "You fight like an ape," Mick says, suggesting that Rocky retire. The white ethnic fighter is thus reduced to a sub-human by the trainer, himself a former pug. The final dig, supplied by Dipper, is a reminder to all in the audience that a black man has been given something that once belonged to a white man. As Rocky turns to walk towards the front door, a well-conditioned black athlete calls down to him in a taunting manner from the boxing ring: "I dig your locker, man." The man who has replaced Rocky in the locker room is the same man whom Mick has now placed under his wing. Tomasulo, in his essay,

“Movies and Cultural Contradictions,” connects this taunt to white ethnic fears that their jobs were threatened by black workers:

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. (162)

The only thing I would add to Tomasulo’s comments is the word “perceived” before Black economic gains. The black working class was suffering just as much as the white working class—more in places where seniority rules determined who kept jobs in certain industries, although Rocky’s seniority is shown to be irrelevant—but the perception was not the same as reality in the white ethnic community. Their anger was directed at those who they felt were taking their jobs. By choosing a black fighter to take Rocky’s locker instead of an up-and-coming white or even Hispanic fighter, the filmmaker exploits this unsupported and unfounded perception.

This irrational resentment of blacks by whites is made even easier to justify by the characterization of Apollo Creed. Although Creed appears in only a handful of scenes before the climactic fight, in each scene the filmmaker offers white ethnics something new to dislike about the handsome, articulate champion. In the first scene in which Creed appears, he spouts poetry and mugs for the TV camera, a clear allusion to Muhammad Ali, who was still despised by some in the working class, as exemplified by the bartender in the film. In the second scene, Creed is brash and denigrating to his potential opponents. The scene opens

with a close-up of a poster with a red-white-and blue clad Apollo Creed and ad copy referencing the bicentennial. In an anticipatory shot, Creed, dressed in an expensive business suit, steps into the frame from the right, followed by a middle-aged white man in equally dapper attire. The setting is a well-furnished office that overlooks the city, a stark contrast to the gym and apartment where Rocky lives his life. The fighter whom Creed was scheduled to fight on January 1, 1976, has been injured, the white promoter says, and other contenders refuse to take a championship bout with just five weeks to train. Creed's response is clearly designed to elicit a response from a white ethnic audience accustomed to Ali's braggadocio: "They're making excuses so they don't have to be the chump that gets whipped in front of the whole civilized world." In addition to further establishing his persona, the term "whipped" clearly contains racial connotations.

With the fight day quickly approaching, Creed and the promoter, with the help of some of Creed's black assistants, brainstorm ideas. It is in this brief exchange that Creed's character is clearly drawn and his ascendance to the role of black villain is solidified:

Creed: This is the land of opportunity, right? So, Apollo Creed on January first gives a local underdog fighter an opportunity. A snow-white opportunity, and I'm going to put his face on this poster with me. (He points to the aforementioned poster.)

Promoter: Apollo, I like it. It's very American.

Creed: No, Jerry, it's very smart.

This exchange paints Creed not only as someone who is very much aware of race, but also as someone who is willing to exploit the bicentennial by overtly injecting race into the fight for purely economic (capitalist) reasons. He is not only a braggart, but a cynic and very possibly

a racist. For the white ethnic in the crowd already predisposed to fear Black economic gains and the new boastful Black athlete, what is there not to dislike?

The training scenes also provide a more subtle message about race. While Rocky is shown punching sides of beef, scaling the steps of the Philadelphia Natural Museum, and running through blue-collar neighborhoods, along railroad tracks, and through run-down business areas of town, Apollo Creed is never once shown training for the fight. While Rocky does one-hand pushups in a boxing ring, Creed takes business meetings as his black trainer, shirt unbuttoned to display his own muscular torso, watches Rocky train on television. The white ethnic is shown training to exhaustion every day, changing his body and improving his skills, as the black champion clowns before television cameras and makes business calls. The subtle message is that the white ethnic must work for everything he gets, while the black man does not. This choice in the narrative exploited the myth that blacks drove around in “welfare Cadillacs” (Schulman 117), bought without the requisite sweat associated with work, while hard-working whites struggled to pay their mortgages every month.

The choice to not have Rocky admonish the bartender for the use of the pejorative “jig” also coincides with the blind eye the film trains on Rocky’s misogyny. While the film’s misogyny is most obvious in Paulie’s treatment of Adrian, it is also apparent in Rocky’s relationship with Adrian, despite his awkward and generally gentle treatment of her. His misogynistic attitude is most clear in the seduction scene that takes place in Rocky’s apartment as their first date winds to a close. Adrian reluctantly enters the apartment only after several attempts by Rocky to coax her into his domain, a place where he knows he will have the upper hand. As she stands at the bottom of his row-house “stoop” and he stands in

his doorway, she firmly states on several occasions that she cannot accept his invitation to enter his apartment. Her level of discomfort is obvious as she looks at the ground and shuffles her feet, trying to conquer the instinct to run. A high-angle shot accentuates her feeling of apprehension bordering on panic. But Rocky's persistence finally wins out after he insists that he only wants to show her his pets—pets that he acknowledges purchasing from her. Rocky finally disappears into the entrance and gently pushes the door open from the inside in a low-angle shot shown from Adrian's point of view. He motions to her several times with only his hand, still coaxing her to come in. Finally, after minutes of cajoling and reassuring, she accedes to his request and slowly climbs the half-dozen steps to his doorway.^{vii}

Once inside the apartment, Rocky is clearly the dominant figure. He moves confidently about the room, walking towards the camera early in the scene and removing his shirt, exposing his powerful arms and shoulders in a muscle T-shirt. He takes a seat on his couch, brushing aside old newspapers to create a space for Adrian. She remains near the door, refusing to take off her hat or coat, clearly uneasy about being in a man's apartment. Rocky acknowledges the messiness of his apartment, but continues to try to convince her to stay. It is here that a subtle but important moment takes place. Rocky moves across the room, from right to left, to the spot where Adrian stands, coaxing her to stay all the while. As he reaches her, he reaches up and, with both arms, leans against an overhang in the apartment, towering over her and blocking her exit from the apartment at the same time. His towering presence and Adrian's meek response are captured in a tight, low-angle shot. She has nowhere to move, either left or right, and his physical power over her is accentuated. He reaches out and, asking her permission, takes off her glasses, a symbolic gesture that not only

exposes her natural beauty, but also represents her undressing. After a little more coaxing, made more powerful by his physical dominance in the shot, he kisses her powerfully and both slide to the floor. We don't see the culmination of the "seduction," but it is clear from later scenes that she gave herself to him that night.

This scene is troubling on at least two levels. At a time when women were rebelling against the patriarchal world of the past—when women were little more than the property of their men, whether they were fathers, brothers, or husbands—Adrian is coerced, if not physically forced, to have sex with Rocky on their first real date. What makes the scene even more problematic is that it is presented as seduction, not coercion. The audience is manipulated to believe that Rocky's actions are necessary in order for him to free Adrian from her frigid, meek, and virginal past. She needs to blossom as a woman, and the filmmaker seems to be saying that a little coercion, combined with a little physical intimidation, is just what the doctor ordered. Force is okay, the film seems to be saying, as long as the woman eventually stops saying "no." The scene is also troubling because it implies that the working-class hero, and thus the working class, can only engage in sexual relations through physical intimidation, not subtle seduction. The "brute" takes what he wants without regard to the desires or needs of the other. He is an instinctual animal, not an analytical, designing one.

The kiss that ends the scene is almost identical to a shot from *On the Waterfront*, another film about a brutish working-class character. In that film, longshoreman Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) kisses Edie (Eva Marie Saint) after trapping her against a wall in her apartment. Although more justifiable than the kiss in *Rocky*, the result is the same. Both participants slide to the floor in animalistic ecstasy.^{viii} Again, while the film is directed at the

working class and is told from a working-class perspective, it also reinforces stereotypes about the working class that not only shaped the view of the working class for the outside world, but also served to define the working class for itself. The lesson seems to be, “If it’s okay for Rocky to do it—and he’s a good guy—it must be okay for us to do it, too.” This scene, like the scenes regarding race, represents another backlash by the ethnic white community against social changes—in this case the women’s movement—that the white working class believed were taking place at their expense.

The final fight scene is predictable but successful in eliciting an emotional response from the predominantly white audience. Through a montage that condenses the 15-round fight into less than ten minutes on the screen, Rocky “goes the distance” with the superior fighter through sheer will and conditioning. After Rocky knocks down the champion early in the fight—recalling Chuck Wepner’s flash knock-down of Ali—the fight becomes a battle of attrition, with the champion generally controlling the action against the game challenger. Rocky at one point refuses to stay down after being knocked to the canvass despite Mick’s emotional appeal for him to do so, and he risks his eyesight before the final round of the fight by having his “cut man” slice open his eyelid so the blood can flow and reduce swelling. Throughout the montage, the emotional *Rocky* theme “Gonna Fly Now,” played during the most intense training sessions, rises to a crescendo as the fight nears an end.

The fight scene does offer one opportunity for the filmmaker to rehabilitate the champion, despite the clearly racist portrayal of Apollo Creed throughout. As the fourteenth round ends, Rocky, having just gotten up from a vicious knockdown, lands several body blows to the champion, breaking his ribs and apparently puncturing a lung (the ringside announcer makes this declaration, requiring the viewing audience to suspend disbelief and

accept the announcer's medical credentials). Creed is advised by his corner to throw in the towel because of the "internal bleeding" (another snap diagnosis), but he refuses to give up his title. For the first time in the film, Creed is shown in a positive light. Like the white challenger, he, too, refuses to throw in the towel despite the chance of permanent damage—or even death. Does this one moment counterbalance the numerous scenes when the race issue is exploited? No. But it does bear mentioning if only because it so clearly contradicts much of what the audience has been led to believe about Creed all along.^{ix} The sequence also further enhances the working-class hero Rocky by giving him a worthy opponent against whom he can test his mettle. Narratively, it also makes for a more interesting and dramatic ending to the film. But, to look at it more cynically, it could just as easily be an attempt by the filmmaker to anticipate cries of racism for the portrayal of Blacks throughout the film.

F.I.S.T., Bloodbrothers, and Saturday Night Fever

Rocky's success led to other films about the white male ethnic. Just as *Easy Rider* was followed to the screen in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a spate of youth/cult films in an effort to capture the youth audience—unsuccessfully as we have previously noted—*Rocky* was followed to the screen in the late 1970s by several films that placed the white working class at the center of narratives. These films, much like the youth/cult films, met with little success at the box office, with the exception of *Saturday Night Fever*, which took advantage of the television success of its star John Travolta.^x Travolta came to fame in the mid-1970s as Vinnie Barbarino, the leader of a benign group of New York City working-class, high school delinquents on the popular television show *Welcome Back Kotter*. His appeal to a youth audience certainly helped with initial box office for *Saturday Night Fever*, but the film also

earned strong reviews and became one of the year's top grossing films, taking in more than \$94 million domestically (Bordwell 212). We will return to this film shortly.

Other films like *Bloodbrothers*, the story of a young construction worker who chooses to leave construction and work with local youths in a hospital, and *F.I.S.T.* and *Paradise Alley*, two Sylvester Stallone vehicles that came to the screen within a month of each other in mid-1978, were modestly successful at best. All three films rely on stereotype in their efforts to bring working-class characters to the screen, and all three fail to capture the magic of *Rocky*. *F.I.S.T.*, like *Blue Collar*, returns to the corrupt-union theme of the 1940s and 1950s, embodied in films like *On the Waterfront*; *Paradise Alley* is a semi-comic portrayal of three Depression-age brothers who turn to professional wrestling to make a living; and *Bloodbrothers* resorts to virtually every stereotype associated with the working class to tell a story of one young man's attempt to transcend his roots, or at least sidestep them. We will take a brief look at *F.I.S.T.* and *Bloodbrothers* here.

F.I.S.T., like *Blue Collar* released in 1978, is the story of a Teamster who rises to president of the union in the 1930s and is corrupted along the way. Although the Stallone character, Johnny Kovac, is portrayed as a man caught in a no-win situation—he is given the choice to either work with the mob or lose a key strike to a recalcitrant employer—the film is anti-union, as are most Hollywood films about unions, as we discussed in the Introduction. Although the employer is not shown in a particularly good light, the union is portrayed as mob-controlled and corrupt, a trope also exploited by *Blue Collar*. Like *Blue Collar*, *F.I.S.T.* presents working-class characters as victims of corrupt unions, rather than victims of class oppression. William Puette compares both films and their treatment of unions to *On the Waterfront*:

One could view the movie [*F.I.S.T.*] as a lesson in the importance of ensuring labor's protection from harassment by employers so its leaders would not need to turn to the mob, but most viewers would get the same impression that was conveyed in *Blue Collar* and *On the Waterfront*—that there is no real difference between organized labor and organized crime. (25)

Instead of exploring the class struggle and corrupt capitalists in America, Hollywood again chose to blame unions for the oppression of the working class. The employers do not survive unscathed by the film, but the overriding message is that labor organizing leads to corruption and mob influence.

Bloodbrothers is problematic on many levels. Although adapted by Walter Newman from a well-received novel by Richard Price, who later achieved success as a screenwriter, the film appears to be written by someone who learned about the working class by watching Hollywood movies. Virtually every character in the film is overdrawn, from the second generation construction worker “Stony” (Richard Gere), to the overbearing father Tommy (Tony Lo Bianco), to the larger-than-life Uncle Louis (Paul Sorvino), to the overwrought mother (Lelia Goldoni). Lo Bianco and Sorvino both play characters who would not need a sound system to play the Coliseum in Los Angeles. They yell, drink, rant, sing, fight, and generally mug their way through the whole film. Lo Bianco is the classic working-class brute. He plays construction worker Casanova at the bar on a nightly basis, but when he suspects his wife of doing the same (erroneously), he beats her to protect his own reputation among his peers. Throughout the film he also verbally abuses his wife and two sons. He is so defined by his construction work that he virtually disowns his son when Stony decides to work with children rather than follow in his father's footsteps. He objects not only because

the work will pay less than construction work, but because it simply is not “manly” work. He implies that anyone who would do such work is a “pansy,” again a stereotypical representation of what a working-class man would say in such a situation. Testosterone oozes from his pores in every scene, but after a while it seems counterfeit. He prowls around their small Brooklyn apartment like a brutish force of nature, forever claiming his role as alpha dog.

Stony is more quiet and reserved than his father and uncle, although he has not yet evolved beyond choosing violence to solve a problem, particularly when he is still within his father’s sphere. This is particularly apparent when he is goaded day after day by a bully on the construction job—a job he agreed to take on a trial basis to satisfy his father—and finally fights him. His decision to fight on the job—generally a fireable offense—is applauded by his father and uncle and leads to a night of drinking.

The mother’s chronic anxiety and depression are not explained, but Tommy’s treatment of her seems to be a contributing factor. Her anxiety is also blamed for the “feminizing” of her younger son Albert (Michael Hershewe), who suffers from anorexia, an illness most often associated with young women. She is portrayed not only as a woman who is unable to fulfill her duties as a mother, but also as a woman who has submitted herself to years of verbal and likely physical abuse. At a time when women of the middle class were claiming their rightful place in the workplace and at home, the film presents its key working-class, female character as weak and dependent. She is clearly several steps behind even Alice in *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*.

Visually, the film does provide a realistic look into working-class life. The film opens with an establishing shot of a bird’s-eye view of a working class neighborhood in Brooklyn,

replete with railroad tracks and small, tight neighborhood streets. This is a clear contrast to the usual establishing shot of the New York skyline in films about the middle and upper classes. Throughout the film, the living spaces of the working-class are tight and crowded—from the small apartments and walk-ups to the bars tightly packed with working men after a shift. The only shots of working-class men that give them any room to move are the construction sites where they work. But this ability to move is just a mirage—the sites are always bordered with cyclone fences, symbolizing the ability of the working class to move freely only within a confined space established by those who employ them. That is the space that Tommy wants his son to be content with, but Stony chooses to venture beyond the cyclone fences to a clean, spacious, children’s ward at a local hospital to work with children for half the pay. His move represents an escape of sorts from a life that is restricted by real and imagined fences. Unfortunately, the visual elements of the film are overwhelmed by an overdramatic, soaring score and stereotypical representations of the working class that can only be described as melodramatic and false.

The theme of transcendence of class, or at least escape from it, is also central to *Saturday Night Fever*, a film that has been much written about and dissected. The film is about a Brooklyn youth, Tony Manero (John Travolta), who works in a hardware store and breaks out every Saturday night with a group of friends to “go clubbing” and disco dancing. Based on a mid-1970s *New York* magazine article, “Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night” by Nik Cohn (Sternbergh), it is a story about escape from the drudgery of life in the working class. The film portrays the young men as misogynistic, racist, and intolerant, and the women as either “good girls” or “tramps,” as Tony explains to one of his dance partners Annette (Donna Pescow), early in the film. Although the film portrays the young men as budding

brutes, their rendering is made less offensive, and they become almost “likable” because 1) the film is presenting a subculture of the working class, not necessarily the working class as a whole; 2) the characters are all young, so there is still hope that they will mature into more rounded adults.

Ultimately, however, the film is about one young man, Tony Manero, and his attempt to transcend his working class roots. Winning local dance contests with his new partner Stephanie (Karen Gorney) is not enough for him—nor is it enough for her. He has to cross the Verrazano Bridge into Manhattan if he is to transcend his roots, and as the film proceeds, and as Stephanie teaches him not only how to dance but how to dream, he moves in that direction. As Ryan and Kellner write, Tony Manero’s use of dance to transcend class is not unlike Rocky Balboa’s use of boxing. Their actions on film mimic the real-world efforts of working-class people to transcend class through the only avenues some believe are available to them—specifically sports and entertainment. Ryan and Kellner write:

The desire for class transcendence frequently takes the form of physical activity like sports or dance. Working-class people in general are tracked away from intellectual power by the American educational system; consequently, physical activities like sports or dance are often their only way of breaking out of the cultural circle of class oppression. (112)

But, as in *Rocky*, the protagonist can live the American Dream only by leaving his working-class roots behind. He must prove himself to be an uncommon common man, and in Tony Manero’s case he must reject his roots. His friends and family are doomed to lives in the constricting and restrictive streets of Brooklyn while he gets to cross the bridge to Manhattan and become exceptional—or at least attempt to do so. Others will have to live vicariously

through him. The success of *Saturday Night Fever*, in fact, can be partially traced to its Rocky-esque theme of the underdog and the young Italian protagonist's overt connection with Rocky Balboa, whose poster adorns Tony's bedroom wall.

Conclusion

In its courting of a working-class audience and its portrayal of working-class characters, *Rocky* appealed to the lesser angels of the working class. By exploiting working-class fear of blacks and feminism, along with its paranoia about its future, the filmmakers pieced together a modern-day Horatio Alger story that served to legitimize the pursuit of the American Dream for working-class white men, but no one else. Although many of the working-class characters are depicted as flawed, racist, misogynist, or all three, the film seems to justify those traits by blaming "uppity" blacks, smothering women, and exploitive capitalism.^{xi} But the issue of race hovers over the entire film. The working-class characters in the film are almost universally portrayed as victims of a system that had turned its back on the white working class in order to cater to Blacks and the underclass. The working-class crowds who were drawn to the film were easy to manipulate because they brought their economic fears and suspicions of the "other" with them to the theater. The fairy tale ending, designed to show that the American Dream was still alive, served to underline the fact that only the uncommon common man could achieve it, and he had better be white. Rocky's journey is one of transcendence. As Ryan and Kellner write:

The individualist ethic also accounts for the transmutation of resentment against class oppression into a desire for class mobility that ignores the structural causes of that oppression. The most common motif of conservative

working-class films during this period consequently is the desire for class transcendence. (110)

This transcendence, however, is reserved for the few, not the masses.

The films explored in this chapter trace the evolution of working-class film characters during the epoch that followed New Hollywood's "post-traumatic" period in the early 1970s. While the films of the post-traumatic period generally offered bleak, yet realistic, resolutions to their narratives of working-class life, the films of the mid-1970s returned to a time when the American Dream was celebrated on screen. The films were in large part designed to offer an alternative to the bleak films—and times—of the early 1970s. In doing so, however, the films were often reactionary responses to changing times that privileged the white male ethnic over all others. This choice of the filmmakers not only presented a false view of the working class to the film-going audience, but it also helped shape how members of the working class viewed themselves. At a time when fear and anxiety ruled their lives, it was easy for working-class audiences to buy into the message that they were the victims not only of those above them, but of those below them on the economic ladder, too. In the one film explored here that placed a working-class woman at its center, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, the message is equally clear: although women may want independence, they are most comfortable in the arms, or within the circle of influence, of a man. The American Dream in these films is reserved for the white ethnic working-class man, as long as he is exceptional.

In the final chapter, we will look at films that take a more nostalgic look at the working class as the 1970s end and the 1980s begin. With much of the American manufacturing base already gone, or going, it was a time for some to look back wistfully at a

working-class existence that had all but disappeared in some regions. First, we will look at *The Deer Hunter* (1978), generally regarded as the first major film about the Vietnam War, but one that we will explore from a working-class perspective. We will then explore three other films—*Breaking Away* (1978), *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), and *Four Friends* (1981). Each of these films offers a unique look at the working class, with working-class characters who ring true compared to their counterparts in the mid-1970s. Three of the films—*The Deer Hunter*, *Breaking Away*, and *Four Friends*—also offer a look back at the turbulent 1960s and will provide an appropriate bookend to the films of the counterculture that we discussed in Chapter 1.

ⁱ Although several sources list these five films in this order, the sales numbers vary dramatically for numbers 2 through 4, and are thus not used here.

ⁱⁱ *On the Waterfront* comes to mind, particularly scenes immediately following Terry Malloy's testimony to the crime commission when he is ostracized by his fellow union workers.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that Brody tries to educate himself about sharks after it becomes clear to him that he will have to confront one.

^{iv} In the novel, Brody's wife is having an affair with a local businessman, which might provide another explanation for his looking down his pants. But that story line is never broached in the film, so it will not be offered as an explanation here.

^v This white obsession with Marciano was later parodied in the 1988 Eddie Murphy film *Coming to America*.

^{vi} This is not the first time the waterfront has been associated with the mob and a brutish working class, as the scene recalls earlier films like *On the Waterfront* (1954) and countless film noirs. In *On the Waterfront*, the protagonist, ex-boxer Terry Malloy, who like Rocky runs errands for the mob, loses a shot at the title when he "takes a dive" to put money in the pockets of a corrupt union boss. By comparison, Rocky is a later, more fortunate version of Terry Malloy who gets his shot at the title.

^{vii} The relationship between Edie and Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* is a more equal relationship in some ways. Although Adrian is older by almost a decade, she has been sheltered. Edie has been away to school and appears to be wiser to the world. In *Rocky*, Rocky Balboa is by far the more worldly member of the couple.

^{viii} It should be noted that the scene in *On the Waterfront* comes late in the film when both partners have already expressed love for each other. When Terry arrives at her apartment seeking counsel, Edie refuses to let him in because she is angry that he has not only withheld information from her about her brother's death, but has also expressed an unwillingness to testify to the crime commission regarding his knowledge. Terry literally breaks down the door because she is the only one he can turn to. Their relationship is more mature at this point than Rocky and Adrian's, although the force applied by both men to subdue the women is presented as acceptable in both cases.

^{ix} In a generous interpretation, this choice of the filmmaker to show Creed's courage could also be construed as a criticism of the "system" that Creed is operating in, possibly positing that it is the system (capitalism) rather than the individual (Creed) who is to blame for his public persona.

^x I'm not counting the *Rocky* sequels, which generally did well at the box office as they continued to exploit white male anxiety during the Reagan years. The racism in these films, particularly *Rocky III*, was even more overt, particularly in the characterization of Clubber Lang (Mr. T.) in *Rocky III*. Whereas Apollo Creed was given redeeming qualities in *Rocky I* and *Rocky II* and was seen, at worst, as a cynical businessman and a Muhammad Ali knock-off, Clubber Lang is depicted as one-dimensional, animalistic, racist, and flamboyant, with his omnipresent gold "chains" always alluding to the worst hours in American history, the long night of slavery.

^{xi} While the critique of capitalism is generally a Left move, in *Rocky* the most visible capitalist is a black man, Apollo Creed. The capitalists who exploit workers like Paulie, with the single exception of the white promoter who follows Creed's lead, are faceless in the film.

CHAPTER 4

HOLLYWOOD VIEWS THE 1960S AND 1970S FROM THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

The move to the right in the United States began in the 1960s—some point to Barry Goldwater’s failed bid in 1964 as a starting point—and continued throughout the 1970s. As we have shown throughout this work, this slow but inexorable move towards a more conservative America was reflected in the films of the times. Just as the youth/cult films of the late 1960s were replaced by the New Hollywood films of the American auteurs in the 1970s, counterculture-themed films were replaced by working-class themed films as the 1970s progressed. While the mid-1970s in Hollywood were punctuated by the revival of the working class in films like *Jaws* and *Rocky*, a trend that continued for about two more years with *Saturday Night Fever*, *F.I.S.T.*, and others, by 1978 Hollywood was already looking back at the tumultuous 1960s. Films addressing the Vietnam War came to the screen as Hollywood decided that Americans were ready to take a critical look at the war that tore the country apart. At the same time, films about the upheaval in working-class communities were also finding audiences. As America approached 1980, the counterculture receded into the background, both in the streets of America and on Hollywood screens. In effect, the move to the right and the mood of the people had made it passé.

With the revival of the white ethnic in the mid-1970s in America and in American film, America was no longer interested in Timothy O’Leary’s message of “turn on, tune in, drop out.” As noted in Chapter 3, the nation was tired of the war, tired of civil unrest, and tired of wallowing in the aftermath of Watergate. As the 1980s approached, Americans embraced populist themes in their politics and in their entertainment. Several films came to

the screen that privileged the working class or were directed at working-class concerns, some that we have discussed in previous chapters and others that we will discuss in this one. The working-class rural south and “good ole boys” became big box office, as demonstrated by the success of several Burt Reynolds vehicles of the era, like *White Lightning* (1973), *Gator* (1976), *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), and *Hooper*, (1978). In music, country cross-over became mainstream, breaking into pop charts. On college campuses, the young, who led the counterculture revolt in the late 1970s, were no longer engaged in philosophical discussions about Guy Debord’s “Spectacle,” or Herbert Marcuse’s “repressive desublimation,” although surely some pockets of youth remained sympathetic to countercultural ideals. The mass of youth had turned away from protest and towards the establishment in search of job training and inclusion in the American Dream, and their tastes in film and music reflected a move away from the protest music and films of the 1960s. Punk, and its music, emerged as a subculture in America, but it was more ironic than rebellious according to Bruce J. Schulman. Schulman notes in *The Seventies*, “Despite common roots [with British punk] American punk lacked that political edge, that overt class consciousness” (157).

Considering the Seventies as a whole and as a reaction to the Sixties, Schulman describes what he calls the “Seventies sensibility” like this:

The most obvious marker of the Seventies sensibility—its signature in literature, film, music, politics, advertising—was a kind of double identity. Seventies performers produced works that were a parody of something—a biting knowing satire—and simultaneously the very thing itself. (157)

Schulman adds:

Seventies sensibility, then, offered a kind of antidote to the melodrama of the Sixties sensibility, an antidote devised by a generation of youth just plain sick and tired of being told how they missed out on the glory days. . . . But this omnipresent skepticism—this sense that nothing is serious, nothing can be trusted—undermined a campaign for national renewal, one that would have to be based on ardent conviction. (158)

In other words, the call for collective action from the counterculture in the 1960s, the passionate belief in “something,” was missing in large part by the end of the 1970s, and the counterculture as a vocal and visible force had receded into the background.

Some of this movement away from counterculture values was also obvious in popular music of the time. Disco music was the rage in the late 1970s, with reborn groups like the Bee Gees and new stars like Donna Summers and K.C. and the Sunshine Band ruling the charts. This dance music was roundly criticized by many who felt it was nothing more than updated “bubble-gum” music, but it captured the fancy of youths who simply wanted to dress up and go dancing, as the characters in *Saturday Night Fever* did in 1977. The introspective singer-songwriters of the earlier part of the decade also turned outward in many cases, often exploring working class angst for their material, or they gave way to new artists who produced more populist fare (Sagert 166-169).ⁱ

This “populist fare” often meant country music, which became mainstream in the mid-70s. As Schulman writes, the music flourished “not so much in the real South, but in a symbolic South” because its populist theme had become popular with the working class and the middle class. Country music continued to champion poor whites, Schulman notes,

“frequently plotting the working stiff’s revenge against welfare chiselers, taxes, and the boss man.” (116). He adds:

They [country music artists] continued telling tales of the poor man, even if the music and the populist conservatism it espoused were embraced by more prosperous people—by millions of migrants to the South’s cities and suburbs, refugees from the rural South and the urban North. . . . Instead of “the Greening of America,” the new consciousness predicted by the Sixties counterculture, the Seventies Sunbelt began a redneck revival. One wry observer termed it the “Reddening of America.” (117)

Outlaw Country also became popular in the latter part of the 1970s as “long-haired country boys” like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Hank Williams Jr., and Charlie Daniels crossed over onto the pop charts (Sagert 171). Ironically, the core of their message was not antithetical to that of the counterculture. They, like some members of the counterculture, espoused “doing your own thing.” The major difference was the approach—the counterculture believed in doing that “thing” in a peaceful, communal manner while the “outlaws” preached doing it in a loud, hard-drinking, and stay-out-of-my way manner. Both groups sought freedom from the hum-drum life of 9 to 5, but it seems that while many on the Right were able to embrace the “outlaws,” they could not embrace the pacifist counterculture. To be fair, some on the Right, particularly the religious right, rejected both groups. But it should also be noted that many working class youths embraced the outlaws but denigrated the counterculture.

The working class was also the subject of works by two enduring musicians who are not associated with Outlaw Country or the Right. Bruce Springsteen and Bob Seger, who

came to fame about the same time in the mid-1970s, sang about working-class people and working-class issues on their albums, as they continue to do today. Their hard-rocking sounds had wide appeal, but their music often dealt with the trials of growing up in a world without wealth. Seger may have had a more working-class following, and he may have written more about those on the margins, but both wrote of and spoke to the working class (Sagert 177).

Television also evolved during the 1970s, first moving to the left and then back to the right. In the early part of the decade, shows like *All in the Family* and the *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* addressed social issues in a new and controversial ways. With bigot Archie Bunker spewing ignorance every week, only to be ridiculed, and single woman Mary Richards portraying one of the first successful single women on TV, television moved beyond its safe sitcom formulas of the 1950s and 1960s. These shows were followed by shows about African-American families (*Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*) and liberated women (*One Day at a Time*, *Maude*), all of which debuted in 1975 or earlier. Another major television high point in the 1970s was the sitcom *M*A*S*H*, a show set in the Korean War that offered an anti-war message as America continued its involvement in Vietnam (Sagert 195-198). But as the decade wore on, these shows of social consciousness began to fade and television turned back towards more safe fare. As Kelly Boyer Sagert writes:

From the mid-point of the decade on . . . viewers seemed to tire of the socially responsible sitcoms and a degree of fantasy returned to television shows such as *Mork and Mindy*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *The Love Boat*. Nostalgia also reigned, as evidenced by *Little House on the Prairie*; *The Waltons*; *Happy Days* [a TV version of *American Graffiti*]; and *Brady Bunch*. (198)

Hollywood did not ignore social issues in the late 1970s—unlike television, films did not have to appeal to a mass audience to be successful—but it clearly privileged the working class and traditional American values over counterculture values. After passing through its counterculture stage in the late 1960s, its New Hollywood stage in the early 1970s, and its blockbuster and working-class stages in the mid-1970s, Hollywood determined by the late 1970s that enough time had passed to look backwards at the 1960s. But as we will see in this chapter, the counterculture was seldom the subject of these films. When it was the subject, the films were generally successful only when the counterculture was viewed from a late-1970s perspective. Films set in the 1960s that promoted counterculture ideals generally did poorly at the box office during the latter part of the seventies, and we will discuss some of them, particularly *Hair* (1979), later in this chapter.

With the times also came a change in the depiction of the working class. Instead of being represented by superheroes like Rocky Balboa and Amity Police Chief Brody, the working class was now represented in films by working class men who either went off to war or found themselves caught in an economic transition that limited their opportunities and threatened their working class communities. In this chapter we will concentrate on four films that offer specific looks at the working class during this period, two of which also touch on the counterculture from a late 1970s perspective: *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Breaking Away* (1978), *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979) and *Four Friends* (1981). Although Arthur Penn's *Four Friends* was released almost a year after Ronald Reagan took office, it was in the works much earlier. In looking at these films, and some others, I plan to show that although Hollywood was ready to look at American involvement in the Vietnam War and

how that involvement affected working-class communities, neither Hollywood nor the American public seemed anxious to re-engage in the dialogue of the 1960s.

Before we discuss the cultural mood of the country in the late 1970s, however, it is essential to briefly provide some context for the epoch. When Jimmy Carter took the oath of office in January of 1977, the economic crisis in the United States that began in the early years of the decade was deepening. The dual enemies of the economy, inflation and stagnation, whose combination was dubbed “stagflation,” continued. Although the jobless rate in the United States initially fell during Carter’s time in the Oval Office from 7.5 percent in January of 1977 to a low of 5.6 percent in May of 1979, it rose again to 7.8 percent in July of 1980, finishing Carter’s fourth and final year at 7.2 percent in January of 1980. More men and women found themselves without jobs as the nation, fresh from celebrating its bicentennial, fought high oil prices, an aging and crumbling manufacturing base, and competition from Europe and Asia.ⁱⁱ But even more damaging were the inflation figures. When Carter entered office, inflation was at 6.5 percent, a significant drop from the 11.03 percent in 1974, but still historically high. By the end of 1980, however, inflation was at a staggering 13.58 percent as it ate away at any wage gains won by workers during the period.ⁱⁱⁱ This drop in “real” wages added to working-class angst.

At the same time, America was still recovering from its defeat in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. Although the nation was continuing to move to the right, the Watergate scandal and some gaffes during the 1976 presidential campaign by President Gerald Ford brought Jimmy Carter to the White House by a narrow margin as Carter received 50.1 percent of the popular vote to Gerald Ford’s 48 percent, and 297 electoral votes to Ford’s 240 (Zelizer 268). But it became clear during the 1976 Republican primary that a new

conservative force was forming in the nation and that it would be led by Ronald Reagan, who, despite running against an incumbent, almost wrested the nomination from Ford (Zelizer 266). As Julian E. Zelizer writes:

Although Carter won the general election, one of the most important developments in the campaign with far-reaching national consequences was the shift within the GOP in 1976. When Ford ended his presidency, so too ended the centrist foreign policy agenda that Republican presidents had pursued since 1968. (268)

Events also conspired to weaken Carter. The OPEC oil cartel continued to manipulate world oil prices, adding to the skyrocketing inflation, which passed 11 percent in 1979. In that same year, the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, suffered a severe malfunction and almost melted down, forcing the evacuation of more than 100,000 people before it was controlled. The real-life “meltdown” paralleled a film version of a similar incident, which will be discussed later in this chapter. America also failed to anticipate the fall of the Shah of Iran at the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and by the year’s end Iranian militants were holding 52 Americans hostage in the American Embassy in Tehran. (Lev, *Movies* 228-230). The hostage crisis became a national embarrassment, spawning the late-night news show *Nightline* with Ted Koppel, which kept a running count of the days of hostage captivity. The nightly embarrassment of America at the hands of armed Iranians holding Americans hostage aided the Right’s cause, pushing the nation even farther right.

One of Carter’s more disastrous moments came on July 15, 1979, when he delivered the infamous address to the nation that would later become known as the “malaise” speech,

although he never used that word (Lev, *Movies* 228). In the speech, Carter spoke of a “crisis of confidence” in the United States, and although he frankly addressed the state of America at the time and offered solutions to many of its problems, the speech was most remembered for what was perceived as its pessimistic tone. As Peter Lev writes, “The entire speech seemed to be suffused with a sense of limits in what America could do both at home and abroad, calling for small, incremental action in a resistant world. It came to be seen as a metaphor for the Carter administration as a whole” (229).

Lev posits that the “cautious, step-by-step” approach embraced by Carter was reflected in many of the Hollywood films of 1979, although, as Lev readily acknowledges, “One cannot expect one theme to dominate any year’s output” (230). Among these films of “incremental change” that Lev points to is *Breaking Away*, which we will explore in detail later in this chapter. Others include family melodramas and romantic comedies like *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Starting Over* (1979), and *Manhattan* (1979). Like any era, the films of the late 1970s reflected society and also helped to shape it. Film critic and historian James Monaco takes a particularly negative view of the latter part of the 1970s and the decade in general. In *American Film Now* he is critical of the return to classic Hollywood genre formulas and the reliance on a blockbuster mentality that began with the disaster films in mid-decade. He writes:

On analysis, the seventies have been a decade in which we’ve stayed comfortably put, or regressed—in film as well as in other areas of culture . . . Anthropologists unearthing *Jaws*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *Grease*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and other popular films of the seventies a

thousand years from now will be hard-pressed to divine from this evidence
just what the 1970s in America were all about. (Preface)

Monaco, writing in 1978, is clearly disillusioned by the turn “backwards” in Hollywood after the promise of the New Hollywood films of the early 1970s. But, while I agree with his critique in one way—the move to the right was a move backwards to an imagined past—I disagree with his conclusion. The blockbuster films he notes say much about who America was in the late 1970s. They say that American audiences were not interested in introspection during this epoch unless that introspection entailed trying to make sense of the Vietnam War. (To be fair, Monaco was writing before several Vietnam-themed films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) were released.) The success of the blockbuster films in the mid- and late 1970s says that America primarily wanted to be entertained at the cinema. They also say that America was moving hard to the right and felt safe immersing itself in “traditional values,” not counterculture values, as we explored in Chapter 3. Monaco, in manner of explanation, continues:

If this seems a harsh judgment, remember that film (together with allied forms of popular culture) still has a profound effect on our lives. Movies may reflect our society, but they also mold our view of it. What we see on film takes on special significance, like it or not. Film validates reality. (Preface)

If, as Monaco states, films validate reality, that is exactly what the films of the late 1970s did. They validated the reality of the time, not just by what they presented on screen but also by what they didn’t represent on screen. The films of the late 1970s reflected where America was at the time politically and culturally. It should also be noted that some films did represent the liberal or Left point of view. Films like *Norma Rae* (1979), the story of a

southern textile worker's awakening and move towards activism, is such an example. At a time when the Right to Work movement was gaining momentum in American industry and unions were on the defensive, *Norma Rae* bucked the trend. The film took a clearly liberal view of labor relations, with its iconic shot of Norma Rae (Sally Field) standing on industrial machinery, holding aloft a hand-drawn sign that simply read "Union," sending a pro-labor message to the masses at a time when union membership was falling precipitously and union "greed" and "corruption" were being blamed in right-wing circles (and in films like *F.I.S.T.* and *Blue Collar*) for failures in American industry. Union membership, which peaked in the private sector at close to 40 percent in 1965, slipped to about 20 percent in 1980 and would fall during Reagan's first term to about 15.6 percent in 1984 (Davis 146-147). In the same year as *Norma Rae*, another film from the Left, *The China Syndrome*, warned of the dangers of nuclear power. But, while *Norma Rae* and *The China Syndrome* did well at the box office, they were the exceptions. Films from the Left were not common in mainstream Hollywood at the time. It could even be argued that *Norma Rae* was successful despite its pro-labor message. The working-class film could be viewed as a feminist version of the *Rocky* story, with Norma Rae as a working-class woman who overcomes great odds and her own doubts to fight for what she believes in. While some members of the audience may not have identified with her pro-union message, they may well have identified with the form of the tale, the "rugged individualist" who struggles against great odds to achieve a goal.

As for *The China Syndrome*, it was greatly aided by the Three Mile Island incident, which occurred less than two weeks after the film's release on March 16, 1979. No one knows the exact effect the incident had on the box office of the film, but everyone agrees that the real-life incident certainly brought tremendous publicity to the film. As Dan Epstein says

in *The 70s*, the Three Mile Island accident “silenced the energy companies who had derided *The China Syndrome*’s premise as far-fetched, and lent an extra measure of terror to the Jane Fonda-Michael Douglas vehicle” (45). The Left message of the film may well have been incidental to the fear caused by the real-life incident and the attention it brought to the potential dangers of nuclear power. Whatever the reason for their successes, however, *The China Syndrome* and *Norma Rae* nonetheless bucked the conservative trend in Hollywood and America at the time. They also succeeded in attracting large crowds because they were human stories that touched audiences, as *Norma Rae* did, or frightened audiences, as *The China Syndrome* did.

For our purposes it is important to note that while these two films came from the Left, they did not come from a counterculture perspective. Films that did embody counterculture values seemed doomed to failure. One prime example of the failure of Hollywood to produce a successful film imbued with counterculture values in the late 1970s was *Hair*, which came to the screen only a couple months after *The China Syndrome*. The story of an Oklahoma farm boy who enlists to fight in the Vietnam War and later meets and cavorts with hippies in New York before he is inducted into the Army, *Hair* was well-received critically but did poorly at the box office. A wildly popular Broadway production in the late 1960s, the film version simply did not resonate with a 1979 audience. As David Cook notes in *Lost Illusions*, the box office failure of *Hair*, as well as the greater box office failure of *The Wiz* (1978), an “updated, all-black version” of *The Wizard of Oz* that had triumphed on Broadway, “suggested that musicals adapted from the stage had lost their audience appeal simultaneously with countercultural values” (219). Cook adds, “Like *The Wiz*, Milos Forman’s version of the 1967 Broadway musical *Hair* was out of sync with an audience that

was about to elect Ronald Reagan to the presidency, and United Artists lost \$4.2 million on the venture” (221 caption). True, it was out of sync in large part, particularly because it generally endorsed the Left’s view of the war. But it also incorporated elements that could be considered contemporary in 1979, even conservative. One, the “hippies” in the film are not always portrayed in a positive light. They are shown as beggars and, in one case, as a man who has abandoned a woman who has borne his child. (The young man is also black, which in itself opens the film to a criticism of racial stereotyping, particularly considering the cultural and political environment at the time of the film’s release.) Only group intervention persuades Hud/Lafayette (Dorsey Wright) to let the mother of his child become part of the “family” of hippies.

Another facet of the film that varied from the 1960s versions of anti-establishment films was the role of the working class. Berger (Treat Williams), the leader of the hippie group, has emerged from a working-class background, unlike hippies of the bygone era of films who tended to come from privileged or upper-middle class backgrounds. The audience learns of his background when Berger returns home briefly to borrow money from his parents to bail out his friends, who have been arrested for crashing the party of a wealthy family. His father is portrayed as a stereotypical working-class father who does not understand his long-haired son, while his mother quietly gives him the money he needs. Here the audience gets two views of the working class based on generational differences. The Oklahoma farm boy who enlists in the Army, Claude Bukowski (John Savage), is also a working-class character. Although initially reluctant to embrace the “hippies,” he is won over by Berger and the others despite his misgivings about their approach to the war. In this film the clash is not between privileged youth and the working class, as it often is in films like

Alice's Restaurant, but it is between the working class and the elite, represented by the family and friends of Sheila Franklin (Beverly D'Angelo), Bukowski's wealthy love interest in the film. This is a move that would seem to have some appeal to the late 1970s audience that privileged the working class. But the film's anti-war theme and generally Leftist point of view provided the more powerful message. Although the film ends on a hopeful note with the song "Let the Sunshine In" sung by hundreds of youths gathered near the reflecting pools in Washington, D.C. after the audience learns that Berger has died in battle impersonating Bukowski, a broad audience did not find the film. Even the final shot of a large American flag displayed in the center of the large group of singing youths, clearly a conservative move, could not alter the general view of the film as Leftist.

One might argue that the nation simply wasn't in the mood for musicals of any kind, but the success of several nostalgic musicals in the late 1970s counters that argument. For example, *Grease* (1978), which was a success on Broadway in 1972, was also a box office success as a film, earning a re-release on its 20th anniversary in 1998. Unlike *Hair*, however, *Grease* looked back to a supposedly more simple time, the 1950s, and was not imbued with counterculture values. Instead, the film looked more at teen angst and how working-class teenagers deal with life's tough lessons. Musical that succeeded either avoided the cultural argument between the Right and the Left or they served to critique the counterculture. Cook writes:

What succeeded in 1979 was either clearly self-reflexive and revisionist—such as ITC's *The Muppet Movie* (James Frawley), New World's *Rock 'N' Roll High School* (Allan Arkush), and Columbia-Fox's coproduction *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse)—or countercultural critiques like Fox's *The Rose* (Mark

Rydell) which depicted the meteoric implosion of a doomed, Janis Joplin-like rock star. (220)

As noted in Chapter 3, *Saturday Night Fever*, not a traditional musical but a film that relies heavily on the contemporary sound of disco, was a box office hit in 1977. But *Saturday Night Fever* was firmly fixed in the late 1970s. It was a contemporary film about the working class and the influence of discotheques and disco music on a subculture of white ethnic youths in Brooklyn, and was neither a nostalgia film about the 1950s nor a film that presented or argued counterculture values.

Nostalgia for the 1950s also proved to be popular in non-musical films, but it was clear that audiences were not yet ready to look at the late 1960s from a nostalgic perspective. The best examples of this embrace of the “conservative” 1950s and rejection of the “liberal” 1960s by the paying audience of the late 1970s may be the *American Graffiti* films of George Lucas. *American Graffiti* (1973), the story of several high school students graduating in 1962, was a box office hit, collecting more than \$55 million in domestic box office after being shot for less than \$1 million. *American Graffiti II* (1979), a film about the effects of the Vietnam War on those same characters, earned only \$8 million in box office despite returning all but one of the original stars, according to *Box Office Report*. *American Graffiti*, although set in 1962 and released in 1973, offers a nostalgic look at the “simpler” 1950s that pre-dated the tumult of the 1960s. Even the film’s ads promoted the idea that 1962 was the unofficial end of the 1950s. Its sequel, however, dealt directly with the Vietnam War, with one character enlisting to fight it, others protesting it, and yet others supporting it from home. But in 1979 the audience clearly was not in the mood for another battle over Vietnam. Some of this failure at the box office—or luke-warm success—might be attributable to the passage

of six years between *American Graffiti I* and *American Graffiti II*. But it appears clear that the sequel's exploration of the more troubled mid- and late 1960s played a key role in keeping audiences away. While offering some of the same humor and tone of the original, the film tells a rather direct tale of the debate that surrounded the war in the mid-1960s and how that debate divided families and led to the dissolution, or at least the damaging, of communities. Had the film been self-reflexive or revisionist, it would have had a better chance to succeed at the box office in 1979.

It is also not insignificant that actor Burt Reynolds, noted for his roles in “good ole boy” films, was the top box office star of the 1970s, particularly dominating the latter half of the decade. Reynolds's persona, honed through appearances on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, was ironic and tongue-in-cheek, much like the era, according to Robert B. Ray. In *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Ray writes, “Where television now [1980s] perpetuates the ‘sincere’ versions of the traditional mythology . . . the movies have increasingly reproduced that mythology in forms either explicitly or implicitly ironic” (367). Ray adds that whereas television once “wanted to be movies,” now movies “wanted to be television, trading on personalities or subjects spawned by the networks' shows.” He continues:

No figure understood this new relationship more than Burt Reynolds, the leading box office draw of the 1970s, and the first major Hollywood star to use television talk shows to “correct” an existing screen persona. Like the “corrected” genre picture, Reynold's [sic] resulting image (simultaneously straight machismo and parody of machismo) proved the perfect means for

satisfying the popular audience's combination of nostalgia and cynicism.

(367)

This cultural sense of nostalgia and cynicism shaped even films that dealt with the political and cultural wars. Peter Lev, citing Social historian Peter N. Carroll, writes in *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions* that the nation may have encountered a “period of exhaustion” in regards to the dialogue about the 1960s that took place “via the medium of film” for much of the 1970s (183). The dialogue did not stop, but it took on a different shape and tone, one more compatible with the prevalent mind-set of the late seventies. For example, the dialogue did not overtly privilege the counterculture, as it had done in films like *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*. This change is apparent in films like *Four Friends* and *Return of the Secaucus Seven*. *Four Friends*, while privileging community, virtually ignores the counterculture, and when it does engage with the counterculture it sends a mixed message about it. *Secaucus Seven* looks back at the sixties with a sense of nostalgia for a lost community, all the while demonstrating a touch of the irony that was popular in the culture of the late seventies. The 1979 versions of the *Secaucus Seven* are not “yuppies” like *The Big Chill* (1983) characters and they have not abandoned their idealistic views of the world. But they are firmly established within the mainstream of society and can look back at their activist days with a touch of irony.

On the surface, some of the films we will explore in Chapter 4 may seem to have little in common. *The Deer Hunter* is about the effects of war on a white ethnic community in the 1970s. It tells its tale by chronicling the experiences of three young men who volunteer to fight in Vietnam. *Breaking Away* is both a coming of age picture and a film about the changing economy of Bloomington, Indiana, the home of Indiana University and limestone

“cutters” who made their living by cutting the stone used to build the great buildings of the university. It, too, explores how crisis, in this case an economic one, impacts a working-class community. *Return of the Secaucus Seven* tells the tale of several college friends who get together for a reunion weekend about 10 years after they were all arrested en route to an anti-Vietnam War rally in Washington, D.C. Unlike the more commercial *The Big Chill*, which seems to view 1960s activism almost as a youthful indiscretion, the characters in *Return of the Secaucus Seven* retain their activist ideals even as they settle into more conventional lives. *Four Friends* chronicles the tale of three working-class young men and the young woman they all love as they grow to adulthood during the tumultuous 1960s in the Indiana steel town of East Chicago. The four working-class friends share virtually all of life’s experiences together as they try to find their way in life. Despite the obvious differences in these films, they have one important quality in common: through each of them runs a thread of nostalgia for a somewhat romanticized past and a longing for something that approximates or reproduces the sense of community that has been lost.

Because we are most concerned with the working class in this study, it may be puzzling to see a film about former 1960s radicals (two such films, if we include a few characters from *Four Friends*) discussed at this juncture, particularly since these characters would have been members of the counterculture ten years earlier. The characters in *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, in particular, are difficult to label. Although they were counterculture activists as college students, they have become school teachers, a drug counselor, a medical student, an assistant to a progressive politician, and a struggling folk singer as they approach 30. Because they display an ironic sense of humor about their “radical” past, one gets the impression that they likely existed on the periphery of radical activism, but were committed

to the cause nonetheless. That ideological commitment continues ten years later, even if the characters no longer march on Washington. The inclusion of *Return of the Secaucus Seven* in this chapter helps to bring the cycle of the counterculture in film full circle. Just as importantly, because the film shows both former activists and working-class characters interacting in a communal setting, it demonstrates the possibility for a larger community that crosses class lines.

Return of the Secaucus Seven is included here primarily because central characters emerged from the working class (some remain in that class based on their personal economics), and they all retain connections to their working class friends, some of whom play an important role in the film. They, along with the characters in *Four Friends*, provide a bookend to the counterculture characters we explored in Chapter 1. Characters in both films, particularly *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, could just as easily represent Arlo's friends from *Alice's Restaurant*, only now they are approaching 30 and have had a decade to reflect on the ways of the world. It is probably not a coincidence that *Alice's Restaurant* and *Four Friends* were both directed by Arthur Penn, *Four Friends* being his last major film in Hollywood.

It is also interesting to note that although *Four Friends* is set in the 1960s and *Return of the Secaucus Seven* is about former 1960s activists, both films spend very little time exploring the counterculture. Released only about a decade after *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*, the films essentially explore community and the lives of its major characters. Although *Secaucus Seven* clearly privileges the Left and is progressive in its ideology, it is primarily a film about community, a community that emerges from the experiences of central characters as working-class high school students and college-aged activists. Even as *Return of the Secaucus Seven* pivots on the brief period of activism that helped to shape the lives of

its central characters, it is primarily a film about the formation of and potential for community. In *Four Friends*, the overriding message is again community. This time the community is one that develops in a working-class neighborhood and remains intact 20 years later, even as its members go their separate ways. The counterculture is actually shown in a negative light on three specific occasions, signaling that by the early 1980s the counterculture was no longer “quaint,” and certainly not privileged, even in some liberal circles.

The concept of community is also prevalent in *The Deer Hunter* and *Breaking Away*, films set in working class communities during the mid- and late 1970s. In each of the four films to be discussed, it is community that holds people together, and it is community that is threatened by economics or, in the case of *The Deer Hunter*, war. This concept of community resonated with audiences of the late 1970s, particularly audiences in working-class towns and neighborhoods. As steel mills and factories were closing and small town businesses were being boarded up, the young in America’s “Rust Belt” were fleeing to the Sun Belt and other places in search of employment. Communities across the Midwest and Northeast began to flounder. The very concept of community became endangered for many people across America. So, while these films represent some of the ideals of the 1960s, and even privilege them at times, they do so in a way that is more in line with the ideals and realities of the late 1970s.

The Deer Hunter

The Deer Hunter is generally recognized as the first commercially successful Vietnam film, although other films like *Tracks* (1975), starring Dennis Hopper, and *The Boys in Company C* (1978) preceded it to the screen. As Charles J. Maland writes in “Movies and

Changing Times,” Hollywood was not ready for Vietnam films in the early 1970s when Vietnam War scripts, including Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), were in the works (208). By the late 1970s, however, the war was just far enough in the rear view mirror for Americans to accept it as a subject for a film, and films like Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* (1978) and Ted Post’s *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) actually came to the screen before the December release of *The Deer Hunter*. But *The Deer Hunter* was more than a film about Vietnam. In fact, director Michael Cimino defended it against claims that it failed to “offer a political critique” of the war by telling writer Mark Carducci in an interview that Vietnam was not material to the story. “It could be any war,” Cimino said. “The film is really about the nature of courage and friendship” (Maland 213). I agree, with the stipulation that it is also about community. That is the primary reason the film is included in this study. *The Deer Hunter* is not a “Vietnam War” film as much as it is a film about the white ethnic community of Clairton, Pennsylvania, a town near Pittsburgh and the setting for much of the film. The war simply provides a backdrop for the telling of the tale of how three friends who leave their community to go fight are forever changed. Although generally looked at as a Vietnam War film, it is actually one of the last films in the white ethnic working-class cycle that began with *Rocky* about two years earlier. Robert Sklar, responding to criticism of the film, writes, “The passions aroused by the war made it difficult to recognize that *The Deer Hunter* was concerned with Vietnam as no more than a metaphor, a disruption and fateful symptom of disorder in the lives and friendships of ethnic working-class American men” (337). Metaphors abound in the film, as we will see.

Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, writing in “Vietnam and the New Militarism,” say that criticism of *The Deer Hunter* from the Right and the Left demonstrate that the film is “multivalent politically” (244). They write:

It appealed to working-class viewers who saw in it an accurate representation of the dilemmas of their lives. Radicals praised its implicit critique of certain male myths. And its bleak, ambiguous ending inspired many to read it as an anti-Vietnam-War statement. We respect all of these positions, but we read the film from the perspective of the critique of ideology, and in that light, it seems less progressive. (244)

Ryan and Kellner’s ideological view was common in progressive circles. The film is viewed by many as racist in its depiction of Asians, and that view has merit. The Vietnamese, particularly the Viet Cong, are depicted as men who have such little value for life that they force prisoners to play Russian roulette as a form of entertainment. (No one has been able to confirm any such events took place in Vietnam.) They are portrayed as less than human as they torture and humiliate their American captives. By contrast, the American men are portrayed as either victims of war—one loses his legs and the other his mind—or superheroes like Michael (Robert De Niro), a throwback to the mythological American hero of yesteryear, the loner who survives through cunning, single-mindedness, an indomitable spirit, and a code.

But, while the film is multivalent politically and ideologically, it also provides the kind of intimate view of working-class life that is rare in film. From the opening scene of the men working their final shift in the Clairton steel mill, to the morning visit to the bar on the way home from the night shift, to the sprawling and brawling Russian Orthodox wedding,

Cimino captures the flavor and reality of working-class life. While some insist that his view of that life is too romantic, no one questions the *mise en scene*, the locations, the dialogue, or the use of subtle detail that make the film look and feel like the real thing.

Setting ideology aside for the moment—and clearly that is never quite possible—*The Deer Hunter* is not only a film about any war, as Cimino says above, but it is a film about the people who fight wars, particularly in our modern times. It is about the working class and how war affects the lives of the men who fight and the communities from which they emerge. It is surely not a coincidence that *The Deer Hunter* is set in Clairton, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh and the home of the still-operating U.S. Steel Clairton Works. Statistics show that only three states can claim more casualties than Pennsylvania during the war—California, New York, and Texas—and California and New York had significantly larger populations at the time (American Vietnam War Casualty Statistics). A disproportionate number of these men came from Western Pennsylvania, particularly Allegheny County, home county of Pittsburgh. The sons of steelworkers and miners were called to the battlefield during the Vietnam War, either through the draft that they could not avoid because they were not college students or through their own patriotic sensibilities, cultivated by living in households and in communities that still remembered the “good war” that many of their fathers and uncles had fought. While *The Deer Hunter* may not be “about” the Vietnam War, it is surely about the people who fought the Vietnam War. As such, it can be read as a film about the sacrifice the working class must make in order for the middle and upper classes to flourish in a world in which the nation’s future is often put into the hands of young men, and now women, from the working class.

The film opens with a high-angle shot through a bridge underpass of a steel mill alongside a river, in this case the Monongahela as it winds its way towards Pittsburgh to join the Allegheny and form the great Ohio River. The sounds of heavy equipment are heard in the background and then are drowned out by the sound and sight of a truck rolling past the mill. The film cuts to a shot inside the mill with orange-hot flames rising from molten steel as men in fire-retardant outfits that resemble space suits work around the flames, testing the temperature of the steel as it rolls down a concrete trench towards its destination. The men work in silence as the din of the mill precludes conversation. Cut to several men entering a large service elevator as it appears their shift is over. To add to the reality of the scene, cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond notes in commentary on the DVD that the actual actors were trained to perform the basic duties of the men on the furnace.

The next scene shows the men entering the locker room area, with its wooden benches and worn green metal lockers, clearly stating that this is a place where men shower after work, not before. It is during this scene that the audience learns that some of the younger men on the crew have enlisted in the Army with their sights on fighting in Vietnam. The young men are congratulated for their patriotic decision and sent off with comments like, “Don’t get your ass shot off,” and “Kill a few of them for me.” The scene establishes the working-class “bona fides” of the men at work as well as the working-class community’s position on the war. In the mid- and late 1960s, working-class families from steel towns like Clairton still believed their government had good reason to send their sons to war, and those who chose to fight, or were drafted into service, were looked upon as heroes.

It soon becomes clear that this is not a film about war as much as it is a film about a white ethnic community. Shooting on location in Cleveland and in Clairton and other steel

mill towns in Ohio and Western Pennsylvania, the film captures the working-class milieu. Uneven asphalt streets; discolored red-brick homes; baroque church steeples; small, tight spaces in bars and cramped row houses; and the ever-churning steel mill down below, always the steel mill down below, dominate the visual character of the film. With the exception of the middle third of the film, which is shot on location in Thailand, the film's look is dominated by the ever-present steel mill, the river, and the tight, hilly, and often wet, streets.

As the main characters are introduced in the early scenes, we quickly learn that not only are three of the men going off to war—Michael (Robert De Niro), Stevie (John Savage), and Nick (Christopher Walken)—but we also learn that Stevie is getting married that night and the others are going on their last hunting trip before entering the Army. In a shot that demonstrates the bond between the men, and serves as a metaphor for the community, the men are shown in a long, wide-angle shot walking shoulder to shoulder across the sun-bleached asphalt parking lot of the steel mill. A cyclone fence is to their right and the steel mill is behind them, demonstrating in visual terms the set parameters in which the lives of the steelworkers are lived. But the long shot meliorates that sense of claustrophobia, as does the comradeship shown by the men, Michael, Stevie, Nick, Stanley (John Cazale), and Axel (Chuck Aspegren), as they jostle with each other and “ride” each other verbally across the parking lot. The character of Michael is established here, as it becomes clear that he is a leader who paradoxically stands apart from his friends. As the men exit the mill and look to the sky, Stevie sees an unusual formation of clouds with the sun peaking through and asks aloud what it is. Michael has a ready answer, saying they are “sun dogs,” a good omen for hunters. Stanley is incredulous, but Michael goes on, citing an old “Indian” tale. At that point, Stanley turns to him and says, “You know, Mike, there’s times that no one but a doctor

can understand you.” This simple line does several things. It demonstrates that Michael is not your typical steelworker, and it establishes the relationship between Stanley and Michael. Also, by acknowledging that any “doctor” is on another social level, it subtly establishes the men as working class. In “The Deer Hunter: The Superman in Vietnam,” Leonard Quart describes the De Niro character as a symbolic figure who fits into the “American romantic tradition” originated by James Fenimore Cooper. “Like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo in *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, Michael is an outsider—chaste, honorable, forbearing, revering the mountains and nature, and given to a purity of purpose embodied in his deer-hunting gospel of the one-shot kill” (160).

Another exchange, this time between Stanley and Stevie, whom we have just learned is getting married, also demonstrates the kind of hard-edged humor that working-class men use with each other. This kind of exchange adds to the realism of the milieu as well as the relationships between the men. After Stevie tells his buddies that they are “crazy” for thinking about going hunting after his wedding, Stanley responds, “You’re getting married, and we’re crazy?”

As we get to know the men in these early scenes, we are also introduced to the women who will play key roles in the film. First, we meet Angela (Rutanya Alda), Stevie’s future wife, as she stands before a mirror in her wedding gown, rehearsing her lines and touching her slightly bulging mid-section. We also meet Stevie’s mother (Shirley Stoler), who is shown discussing the upcoming nuptials with a priest in a large, ornate Russian Orthodox Church. In an exaggerated Russian accent, she makes reference to her prospective daughter-in-law’s pregnancy.^{iv} We then meet Linda (Meryl Streep) in the most disturbing domestic scene in the film. Dressed in her bride’s maid dress, she is shown in a

claustrophobic, modestly decorated kitchen frantically fixing food as a growling man is heard upstairs. She quickly fixes a plate and literally runs it up the stairs to find a fat, swarthy middle-aged man dressed in an open flannel shirt and t-shirt sitting on the floor next to a window at the other end of the room grumbling incoherently about parking meters and women. As she approaches him with the food, he mumbles that “they are all bitches,” and he backhands her, knocking her to the floor. When she stands to try to calm him, he strikes her again and then collapses on his back onto the bed, a straight-on shot showing the rising and falling of his bloated stomach against his t-shirt. This scene returns us to the “working-class brute” of Hollywood films, represented by people like Paulie in *Rocky* and Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The only purpose the scene plays in the narrative is to give Linda the motivation to move out of her father’s home and into the home shared by Michael and Nick when they go to Vietnam. Otherwise, it simply serves to reinforce the stereotype of the working-class brute. This stereotype is reinforced once more when Stanley punches his girlfriend because she permits her dancing partner, the bandleader at the wedding, to squeeze her buttocks. Although this scene is played primarily for its humor—she is not hurt, and the drunken friends stumble all over each other trying to drag Stanley from the scene—it still virtually endorses Stanley’s physical abuse of his girlfriend.

Scenes like the ones above are counterbalanced in great part by scenes of male bonding and gentle moments between Michael and his best friends, Nick and Stevie. Michael’s ambiguous and complex relationship with Linda also serves to counterbalance some of the “brute” scenes above, as does the response of the group to Nick’s death late in the film. The hunting scenes, for example, serve a vital role in the establishment of the relationships between the men, although they have been roundly criticized by some. Danusha

V. Goska, in “The Bohunk in American Cinema,” is highly critical of the use of hunting in the film. Goska believes the hunting scenes serve to stereotype the “bohunks,” as she calls them, as men of little thought who can transfer the love of hunting to the battlefield without questioning the reasons for the battle itself (417). Others have criticized the ritual of the hunt as practiced by Michael because it offers him up as a “superman” figure and detracts from the realism of the film (Quart 163). This sense of mythology is exacerbated by the recording of a Slavic men’s chorus, which sounds much like Gregorian chanting, that is played during Michael’s solitary forays into the mountains (Goska 417). But I also see the hunting scenes as opportunities to demonstrate the obvious, that Michael is not like the rest of his friends. I also see them and Michael’s code about “one shot” as a metaphor for the life of a working-class man.

Michael’s insistence that you must take a deer with “one shot,” or “it’s pussy,” is more than his philosophy about hunting. I believe it refers to the “one shot” that most people, particularly working-class people, get in life. Whether it’s the one shot to take down a deer, or the one shot to save yourself from an almost certain death, or the one shot to rise above your class, it represents the one opportunity that you must grasp when it appears before you. Michael’s role throughout is to tell his friends to be prepared for whatever comes their way. That is why he refuses to lend Stan his extra hunting boots when they go hunting after Stevie’s wedding. It’s not the boots, but it’s Stan’s refusal to plan ahead, to look beyond the next skirt he chases, that angers Michael. In order to establish Michael as the consummate “deer hunter,” however, the filmmaker denigrates the other “hunters,” particularly Stan and Axel, in a way that does not ring true. While Michael hunts stealthily and professionally, they run through the mountains shooting wildly at anything that moves. Real hunters don’t do

that, and no hunter, “bohunk” or other, would tolerate that in a companion. Lives are at risk when guns are being fired, and real hunters take the shooting of a rifle very seriously.

The bar scenes in the film also counterbalance some of the stereotyping, although some might think just the opposite because of the large amounts of alcohol that are consumed on the morning of Stevie’s wedding day. The bar is small, dimly lit, and, as photographed, restrictive to movement. But the relationships between the men make a location that could be claustrophobic simply intimate. In the first bar scene, which takes place the morning of Stevie’s wedding after the men finish a midnight shift, the men play pool, drink beer, comment on the football game on the television, and play American rock and pop on the juke box as they carry on monologues and dialogues that can only take place over a beer in a bar. The men constantly jab at each other, either by gloating after a win at pool or “riding” Stevie about his impending nuptials. But the mood remains light. At one point the whole bar breaks into song when Frankie Valli’s “You’re Just too Good to be True” comes on the juke box. It is important to note that they sing an American pop song, not a British pop or American protest song. Later in the film, after the men have completed their tour in Vietnam, the music in the Clairton bars has switched to country and honky-tonk. This demonstrates an even stronger move to the right in the working class during the 1970s as country music, earlier thought to be for southerners and “hicks,” crosses over to the mainstream and becomes a favorite of white ethnics. As noted above, this change in musical tastes is also reflected in the rise of Outlaw Country. Although the bar is small and cramped, and the lighting is low-key without being dreary, the sense of community pervades the environment. The festive occasion is interrupted by Stevie’s old-country mother, however, as she bursts through the

doorway and literally drags her son into the street and admonishes him for drinking the morning of his wedding.

If there is one major problem with the realism of the characters in the film—aside from the stereotypical characters who demonstrate brutish characteristics—it is in the depiction of Stevie’s mother and the older women of the community. While heavy-accented Lemko^v immigrants might have been common in ethnic communities in the 1940s and 1950s, they were anachronistic in the 1970s. While a few might still have been around, most of the Eastern European immigrants had long been assimilated by this time, although they continued to practice their religions (in this case Russian Orthodox) and follow ethnic and religious traditions. As we learned in Chapter 3, however, by the 1970s “ethnicity” was primarily “performative” (Sugrue 174). The depiction of the ethnic women, almost always dressed in black with babushkas covering their heads, was over-the-top, a stereotype that had outlasted its time. That is not to say that ethnic enclaves did not exist in the 1970s. But it is safe to say that entire communities peopled by heavy-accented Eastern Europeans were no longer in existence. The men and women with heavy accents were the grandfathers and grandmothers to the Stevie’s of Clairton, not the parents.

Several other Clairton scenes demonstrate the homogeneity of the community and the deep sense of community felt by those who lived there. While aspects of the film’s depictions of community and ethnic rituals have been criticized in some quarters as exaggerated, even Goska, a critic of the film, recognizes that Cimino captured these rituals accurately. To her, however, that is one of the film’s failings. As she writes, “*The Deer Hunter*’s unique use of Bohunk cultural markers is combined with grotesque exaggeration that well represents stereotypes, but does not represent real people . . . these culturally distinctive markers are not

there as part of a real portrait of real people, but to buttress a stereotype.” She goes on to say that the inability of these “Bohunks” to “see and to speak” and thus objectively critique the elite who led the nation into the Vietnam War leaves ethnics vulnerable to the criticism that they, and not the elites, were responsible for fighting a racist war in Vietnam and at home (416).

While I admire her defense of the working-class ethnic, I believe the film accurately portrays the inability of the “Bohunks” to “see and speak.” That is not meant as a criticism of the white ethnics, but a recognition that they were in a unique position as sons and grandsons of immigrant Americans during this period. I believe the verisimilitude of the scenes is powerful and necessary because it shows how these enclaves of ethnicity, despite their apparent uniqueness and individuality, had assimilated to the broader American culture and were vulnerable to the flag-waving jingoism preached by those in power. Despite retaining their ethnic markers and traditions, these were uniquely American people who believed in their country and their government, maybe even more than those who had been Americans for multiple generations. Because of their positions as second and third-generation Americans, they were less likely to question the leaders of their new country, owing a great debt to the nation that took them in when they escaped from oppressive and dangerous regimes earlier in the century. The power of the scenes of tradition is in the knowledge that these people, despite retaining strong ties to their homeland, were now on the front line of America’s war in Vietnam.

The wedding scene is a good example of the power of verisimilitude. The ceremony itself is shot inside a Russian Orthodox Church, complete with altar and deep rows of pews, murals, and stain-glassed windows. Throughout the ceremony the camera pans the

bridesmaids and groomsmen, often capturing several of them in one wide-angle shot to record reactions without the use of close-ups or eyeline matches. As Vilmos Zsigmond says on the DVD, the anamorphic format he used provided a wider palette for him to work with and gave the film a more documentary look. This allowed the filmmakers to eschew some classical film editing techniques like shot-reverse-shot and create a more realistic look for the film.

The long wedding reception sequence is shot in a real small-town hall (the Lemko Hall in the film) and captures the feel of an ethnic wedding reception with its simple furniture, wooden tables and folding chairs, and low ceiling. As Zsigmond notes on the DVD, streamers celebrating the wedding and the enlistment of the three young men into the Army were hung from the low-hanging ceiling partially to camouflage the lights needed to illuminate the facility. Shot primarily from low angles, as was much of the film, the sequence is pregnant with ethnic dancing, polka music, and hundreds of extras pulled from ethnic neighborhoods. The long sequence includes pans of celebrants seated at tables, eating, drinking, and sometimes applauding the activities on the dance floor located in the center of the hall. Throughout much of the sequence the audience is treated to “moments” of an ethnic wedding reception: the longing glance of a homely girl towards Michael as he stands in the doorway to the bar, trying to get Linda’s attention on the dance floor; a young boy dancing with an older woman; drunken young men toasting with shots of whiskey and stumbling across the dance floor; men collecting dollars from anyone who wants to dance with the bride; a man “slurping” down spaghetti at a corner table; old men and old women watching young men and women carve out space on the dance floor; and the near fight that always threatens to erupt when young men drink too much whiskey and beer. The wedding scene is

captured in pans of the room and in long takes, often from an objective camera. At times, wide angle master shots are used to capture as much of the celebration on screen as possible, providing the audience with a sense of being there. In total, the working-class milieu is captured in muted colors, giving an authentic and realistic feel to the scene.

Technically, the use of low-angle shots in the wedding sequence is consistent with camera work throughout the film. Although Zsigmond gave no artistic reason for their use, other than the fact that he likes shooting film from that angle because it allows for more to be captured, the low angles had the effect of accentuating the claustrophobic lives led by the working-class inhabitants of Clairton. Ceilings were often captured in shots, and the characters often seemed to be trapped in tight spaces in their homes and in the local steelworkers' bar. This was particularly true in Michael and Nick's single-wide mobile home that overlooked the steel mill. The rooms were tight and generally dimly lit, and the characters were almost always shot from a low angle, accentuating that claustrophobic feeling. Michael, as the mythical leader of the group, is almost always shot from a low angle throughout the film. He is only obviously shot from a high angle once in the film, and in that shot he proves to be impotent in the face of his friend Nick's dilemma.

After having discovered that Nick is still alive and playing Russian roulette in Saigon for money^{vi}, Michael returns to Saigon to try to bring his friend back before the city falls. Nick does not initially recognize him because of his state of mind and drug use. Michael is forced to sit across from Nick and challenge him in Russian roulette in order to try to convince him to return home with him. He is unsuccessful, however, as Nick pulls the trigger on the pistol just as he recalls and voices Michael's mantra, "one shot," and dies in Michael's arms after blowing a hole in his head. Here, Michael is shot from a high angle for one of the

very few times in the film. By contrast, in an earlier Russian roulette scene with the Viet Cong, Michael is shot from a low angle despite being a captive. In that scene, it is his strength and cunning that save his life and the lives of Nick and Stevie. Although low-angle shots were often used to demonstrate Michael's control over situations, their use throughout the film also served the purpose of characterizing the restricted lives of the working class characters.

Another important sequence takes place at the end of the wedding sequence, as Stevie and Angela pull away from the reception. Michael, who throughout the film demonstrates almost inhuman control over every situation, begins to run down a steep city street, disrobing as he goes. By the time he reaches a basketball court at the bottom of the hill overlooking the steel mill, he is naked. Nick, who has followed him down the hill after others have given up the chase, walks up to his friend, who is lying on the asphalt court, and places his coat over Michael's exposed genitals. Lying naked and on his back on the basketball court, Michael "exposes" his fears and doubts for the first time in the film. "I must be outta my fuckin' mind . . . Nick, you think we'll ever come back," he asks, alluding to Vietnam. Nick's response, criticized in some quarters because it shows no desire to rise above his working-class roots, is revelatory and prescient: "You know something, the whole thing. It's right here. I love this fuckin' place. I know that fuckin' sounds crazy. If anything happens, Mike, don't leave me over there. Just don't leave me. You gotta promise." Michael, of course, promises.

The brief sequence demonstrates the difference between the two men, and I believe it answers some of the criticism that these men, and the members of their community, saw no life beyond Clairton worth exploring. Michael, by stripping to his naked self, seems to be searching for that new life, or maybe a rebirth of sorts. He seems to be trying to rid himself

of the past as he runs down that damp asphalt hill tossing his clothes aside. When he reaches the bottom of the hill and the basketball court, however, he seems to realize that any chance for rebirth is contingent upon returning home from the war in one piece, and based on his experience, the odds of that happening are not what he would like them to be.

Nick also seems to regret his decision to enlist. This may be exacerbated by his decision that evening to propose to Linda, who has accepted. He is already wistful about leaving not only the place called Clairton, but the idea of Clairton, a place of hard-working, simple people that looks after its own. In the end, it is the man who attempts to strip Clairton from himself who is able to return to his hometown, damaged but still intact, while the man who loves his town too much is unable to return once he witnesses the worst life has to offer. Clairton, a metaphor for working class communities, is only restrictive for those who let it be restrictive. You can leave it, but it will not leave you if you need to return to it.

Clairton does not represent the same thing to everyone who inhabits it, though, particularly if that inhabitant happens to be a woman. In *The Deer Hunter*, women are clearly second-class citizens. Although the worst working-class “brute” is denounced in stark terms in the film through the isolation of Linda’s physically abusive father, the message throughout is that the working-class male is generally misogynistic and that the women are “enablers,” in the vernacular. This is starkly demonstrated in the scene when Stan punches his girlfriend. After he knocks her down in the middle of the dance floor, she rises and accepts his apology, sealed by a kiss to the jaw he just punched. Later in the wedding sequence, Axel literally tosses his girlfriend over his shoulder and carries her out of the wedding. Her cries to “put me down” are met with Axel’s response, “You wanna fuck or fight?” as he removes her from the hall on his shoulder, exposing her undergarments to anyone standing in his path. Although

the misogynistic brutishness of these scenes is softened because no one gets hurt and the perpetrators are falling-down drunk, the message is still clear. The brute is alive and well in the working class.

On two other occasions, crude remarks about women are spouted by Nick and Stan. In the opening locker room sequence at the steel mill, Nick, tying his shoes, nonchalantly says to anyone listening, “Did you hear about the happy Roman? He was glad he ate her.” Later in the film Stan turns to Axel and Michael as they walk through the mill parking lot and says, “I’m getting more ass than a toilet seat.” Throughout the film women serve as appendages to the men. They are dates, potential sex partners, or wives. The only women who show any independence are the widowed, babushka-wearing older ladies, who control their sons and pass judgment on the young women, and Linda, who leaves her father’s house and insists on paying rent to Nick while he and Michael are in Vietnam. But, while some of the references to women are crude, they are in large part realistic. Some men in locker rooms, whether in steel mills or gyms, do make crude comments and tell crude jokes about women, whether the men are working class or not. It should also be noted that the two most obvious offenders, Stan and Axel, are also marginalized in the film. Neither goes to Vietnam with their friends, so in the eyes of the community they don’t represent the best the working class has to offer. Both are also frequent targets of their friends’ verbal jabs. Stan is regularly ridiculed for his constant references to his sex life, and Axel is the target of several jabs for his monosyllabic vocabulary, particularly his repetitive use of the term “fuckin’ A” in virtually any situation.

Race also plays a role in the film, as many have noted. The representation of the Viet Cong as subhuman men who entertain themselves by forcing prisoners, and later civilians, to

engage in Russian roulette is particularly disturbing. But is it possible that class also plays an even larger role in the film than many acknowledge? An argument can be made that wars dehumanize everyone who must fight them, whether they are poor peasants fighting for North Vietnam or working-class ethnics fighting for America. Although the Asian characters are primarily blamed for the Russian roulette games, it should be noted that many of the early prisoner of war victims of the game are Asian. Also, it should be noted that Americans like Michael and Nick engage in the activity in Saigon after they have escaped captivity.

Although it is assumed that Michael shows up at one clandestine civilian Russian roulette game in search of Nick, whom he sees across a room but can't physically reach, that is never made clear in the film. (He does return later to find his friend when he learns that he is still alive.) Was he there simply to watch or to bet on the "game?" If so, he too has been dehumanized to an extent. While some critics point to the Russian roulette games and say that the white ethnics are privileged in these scenes, I think an argument can be made that the roulette games are a metaphor for the dehumanizing of a peasant or working class that is forced to fight the wars of the elite.

The final scene in the bar after Nick's burial has been much written about. John (George Dzundza), long-time friend to all of the men and owner of the bar, takes the funeral party back to the bar for breakfast. Everyone is there, including Stevie, who arrives in his wheelchair. Michael's visit to him in the veteran's hospital earlier and his insistence that he leave the hospital have helped to assimilate Stevie back into the community. As John fries eggs, the group has a toast for Nick, shots and beers. The camera pans faces sitting around a table in the bar and captures pensive looks in close-up. In the kitchen, an emotionally distraught John begins to hum "God Bless America." In the other room, Linda begins to

quietly sing the song and is joined by the others. The film ends with the entire group singing a melancholy version of the song. The singing of the song is not celebratory, but introspective. Although this scene has been criticized by writers from the Left for being too conservative, I see it as a return to the New Hollywood endings of the early 1970s when ambivalence was king. Are they singing “God Bless America” because they believe it, or are they singing it because it is all they have left to believe in? I subscribe to the latter, and I think that response is consistent with the portrayal of the working class throughout the film. These working class men and women and the community from which they have emerged have been jolted by the reality that America is not infallible, that American leaders can make bad choices, and that when they do, the working class pays a disproportionate price for those bad choices. But they also know that as working class people their choices are limited, so they solemnly fall back on the one thing that they know, patriotism, even though their patriotic fervor will never be the same.

Throughout the film the working class survives through its rituals, ethnic, religious, and recreational (hunting and bowling are highlighted in the film). While the filmmaker certainly calls upon some stereotypes to tell his story, he also offers a view of the working-class ethnic that was rare on American screens. Overall, the filmmaker captures much of the ambience and milieu of the steel-town communities that attracted ethnics during the early part of the last century. But there are critics who take umbrage at the depiction of some of the working-class characters in the film. In her defense of the “Bohunk,” Danusha V. Goska writes:

The viewer can pity *The Deer Hunter*'s Bohunks, be disgusted or horrified by them, and can easily feel superior to them and blame them for disasters like

Vietnam. Were they representational Bohunks, were they allowed subjectivity, it would soon be revealed that they, no less than their ethnic and economic betters, are capable of producing individuals who can critique the elite machinations that led to Vietnam in the first place. (418)

While I admire her defense of the working-class ethnics in the film, I do not agree with her conclusion here. Throughout the film it is implied that the working-class characters are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Whether the film is showing us the tough lives that they live and the difficult work that they do, or whether the film is showing us their sacrifice in the Vietnam War, it is clear that the characters in this film live lives that are less free and more restricted than the lives of the elite who plan wars for them to fight. It is not a matter of whether some individuals in the “Bohunk” community can rise above those restricted lives or whether some members of the community understand how they are being exploited by the people in power. The film is about the collective mind of the community and its relationship with the U.S. government. Just because the “monster,” in this case the government, never appears on screen doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist, even if the “Bohunks” don’t recognize its impact on them. I think it is clear to virtually anyone who watches the film that these people have been victimized by the same power that they ask God to bless in the final scene. Although the film is not perfect, overall I think it offers a more realistic view of the white ethnic working-class community of the 1970s than any other film of the era.

Breaking Away

Although they are wildly different types of films, *Breaking Away* and *The Deer Hunter* establish their working-class “bona fides” and the working-class milieu in much the

same manner. Both films begin with a shot of a worksite, and both films set the tone for the relationships between the principals with humor. In *The Deer Hunter* the first shot of the film is a long shot of a steel mill through the frame of a small bridge overpass. Subsequent shots take us inside the mill where the working men, hidden behind masks and flame retardant outfits, do their jobs as flames rise around them and molten steel flows in troughs past their feet. This series of shots demonstrates the dirty, dangerous, and unforgiving work done by the men of steel towns. In *Breaking Away*, the first shot is not of men at work, but is rather a shot of what working men have left behind. A medium-long shot of stones of many shapes and sizes stacked in piles, with an aging water tower in the background rising up from the undergrowth, shows the audience what is left after men excavate stone before transporting it to the mill to be cut and shaped. The opening shot and the sequence it begins tell us immediately that we are watching a film about the working class as it concurrently hints at what these workers once did for a living. We quickly discover that this is a pile of discarded stones decorating the site of an old stone quarry that is now used as a swimming hole by the children of the old quarry workers. But, while the steel mill in *The Deer Hunter* represents the present, even if that present did change drastically shortly after the film is set, the old stone quarry represents the past, a time when local working men literally carved lives out of the surrounding landscape. It also represents a nostalgic look at a past that the young have yet to come to grips with, although that message is hinted at from the beginning.

The humor of both opening scenes also draws a connection and a distinction between the two films. In *The Deer Hunter*, one of the principals, Nick, tells a crude joke about a Roman gladiator, establishing a tone that will run throughout the film. Through this simple joke, delivered in almost throw-away fashion, we are told these men are tough, crude, and

misogynistic, and that they live in a world where men are often defined by the work they do and the play they engage in. In *Breaking Away*, it becomes clear almost immediately that this will be a film about young working-class men coming of age in a town that is going through its own drastic changes. Like the town that is seeking a new identity, so are these four young men whom we meet in the opening sequence. Cyril's (Daniel Stern) animated and humorous re-telling of the moment when he "lost the will to live" immediately informs us that this film will not likely end in disillusionment and the loss of life, but will instead offer us a sometimes humorous, sometimes melancholy window into the lives of young working-class men in search of identities. The hard and sometimes somber characters of *The Deer Hunter* are not much older than the four friends in *Breaking Away*, but their approach to life is significantly different because it is shaped not only by their immersion in the working-class lifestyle they expect to last forever, but also by the political realities of the Vietnam years. Although the lighter tone of *Breaking Away* is initially set by the acappella rendition of a parodic country-western song sung by Mike (Dennis Quaid) as the credits roll and the four young men find their way through the brush to the top of the quarry, it is solidified by Cyril's humorous take on a tragic moment from his past, the day he discovered his girlfriend with another man.

Breaking Away has been assigned to various genres. Some critics connect it to the family melodrama or the romantic comedy genres of the late 1970s (Lev, *Movies* 231), while others lump it together with 1970s sports films like *Rocky* (1976), *North Dallas Forty* (1979) and *Running* (1979) (Cook 292). While it certainly shares some commonalities with films from each of these genres, I believe it stands alone as a film about the changing times in a small working-class community. The film is built around the floundering lives of four high-

school friends who have chosen to spend their first year after graduation doing “nothing” together, with one youth’s fantasy quest to become a great bicycle racer and to explore the world taking center stage. But beneath their coming of age is an even more important theme. The film is really about how the working class in a university town feels alienated from the very institution that their hands helped to build. Beneath its laughs, its family drama, and its youthful pathos, the film is a nostalgic look at a time that has passed, a time when working men cut stones from a quarry and watched those stones rise from the earth on the campus of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, to become great halls of study. The theme is more universal, however. Although *Breaking Away* is a film about a disappearing working class of men who once served as “cutters” in the region’s limestone quarries, the film could just as easily be set in a textile manufacturing town in New England or a steel town in Pennsylvania during the same period. The title *Breaking Away* has at least two meanings. On one hand it represents the sudden move a bicyclist must make to separate himself from the crowd in a race, and on the other hand it represents the only option the young of Bloomington, Indiana, have available to them, the option of breaking away from a life that no longer exists.

Throughout the film the working-class milieu is apparent. Although the streets of Bloomington differ from the dark, overcast, sooty streets and red-brick homes and businesses of Clairton, Pennsylvania, or the damp, concrete streets of South Philadelphia, they nonetheless provide a look at working-class life. As Dave Stoller (Dennis Christopher) peddles his bicycle down the streets of his neighborhood, tracking shots offer glimpses of small, neat homes and the well-kept tiny lawns and flower beds. A mail man walks the streets with a bag over his shoulder, an older couple sits on a small porch commenting about the

“Stoller boy” as he rides by, and young children play in the street. The asphalt streets are tree-lined and the sidewalks are narrow. Affluence does not reside in this neighborhood, but good, hard-working people who care about their little neighborhood do. On one occasion we see Dave’s parents, Ray Stoller (Paul Dooley) and his wife Evelyn (Barbara Barrie), walking through the town shopping district, and it is obvious the district is dominated by small, neat shops, restaurants, and bars. The working-class neighborhood and its asphalt, concrete, and small lawns is often contrasted with the greenways and the impressive stone structures on the university campus. A shot of one opulent university structure is used as an establishing and re-establishing shot throughout the film, usually juxtaposed with a shot of the modest Stoller home, a shot of a working-class Bloomington neighborhood, or a shot of the quarry where the four young men gather to reminisce about old times and look towards the future.

The Stoller residence is a perfect example of a well-kept working-class home. From the outside it looks small and neat—at one point Dave’s mother is shown working in her flower garden as he receives the mail on the front porch—and on the inside it is warm and modestly furnished. The small rooms of the house provide little privacy, even though only three people live in the home, Dave and his parents. The incessant Italian opera music that Dave plays during his Italian stage reverberates throughout the house. But the house is also dressed in warm yellows and browns, with soft lights showing off the yellow drapes and the hardwood floors. Most of the shots taken inside the house are deep-focus shots that provide a sense of intimacy while clearly demonstrating the tight quarters in which the family operates. Unlike the cramped quarters in Paulie’s house in *Rocky*, however, here the smallness feels more intimate than claustrophobic. That feeling is helped along by the often humorous

exchanges between Dave's mother and father as they question their son's obsession with everything Italian.

The tough economic time for the working class is established early in the film. As the four friends, Dave, Mike, Cyril, and Moocher (Jackie Earle Haley) sunbathe and consider a dip in the quarry "pool," which is a large retention pond created by the excavation of limestone, it becomes clear that Moocher's family has been forced to leave Bloomington to find work when Dave asks him if he has heard from his folks. Moocher responds, "Yeah, my dad called. He said there's lots more jobs in Chicago. He hasn't gotten anything yet, though. Wanted to know if the house is sold. He could use the money something fierce." By his response it also becomes clear that Moocher has stayed behind in Bloomington while the family has moved on to Chicago. His vernacular also clearly places him in the working class.

These kinds of conversations were not uncommon in the late 1970s when unemployment was high, American manufacturers were losing ground to foreign competitors, and families were being uprooted as the young men and women of steel towns and manufacturing towns of the East and Midwest were being forced to leave their homes to find meaningful work in the Sun Belt and the West Coast. In this specific context, the brief exchange between Dave and Moocher, lying on large stones as they peer into the water far below them, not only establishes that the stone-cutting business of Bloomington is dying, but also explains why these four young men are floundering. The one thing in their lives that had been a constant, the stone quarries that would provide employment for those who did not go on to college, has been removed from the table. The safety net that their fathers and probably their father's fathers had always relied upon was no longer there to catch them. Although they remain the closest of friends, it is apparent throughout the film that in order to move

forward, some of them, if not all, will have to move on. That process begins with Moocher's engagement to his high school sweetheart and is followed by Cyril and Dave's taking of the college entrance exam. Only Mike still refuses to "break away."

The loss of the "cutter" way of life is made poignantly clear in another early scene. As the four friends drink in the sunshine and take a dip in the quarry, their revelry is interrupted by the appearance of several university students. The contrast between the two groups is dramatic, and it is demonstrated primarily through wardrobe. While Dave and his friends swim in cut-off jeans and white t-shirts, the university students arrive in fashionable swim suits. The young, handsome men are accompanied by young, pretty women as giggles fill the air. Mike, the angriest of the four, who we soon learn was a star quarterback on the high school football team, yells some unwelcoming words to the students. The other "cutters," calm him, but they decide to invade the students' "turf" on campus to respond to their quarry being invaded. As they watch the football team practice in a beautiful modern stadium, Mike laments the end of his playing career and expresses fear about the years ahead when he won't be the new star quarterback who arrives on campus every fall, but will just be "Twenty-year-old Mike, thirty-year-old Mike, mean old man Mike." Most poignantly, he says, "They're going to keep calling us 'cutters.' To them it's just a dirty word. To me it's just something else I never got a chance to be." The irony, of course, is that while the college students use the term "cutters" as a pejorative, Mike and others are already nostalgically embracing their heritage.

The folly of this nostalgic embrace is most poignantly demonstrated in a later scene in the film. Dave has just lost a bike race and much of his innocence after competing with his idols, the Italian bicycling team Cinzano. Instead of accepting his challenge, the Italians

instead forced him off the road when he threatened their dominance. His father Ray, who has been humorously at odds with his son the entire film, complaining regularly to his wife that his son has no direction in his life and that he is becoming an “Ity” (Italian), recognizes his son’s disillusionment and takes him on a walk through the Indiana University campus. This scene takes place after Dave has returned from the race, bloody from his fall and broken in spirit, and has called his father “Dad” for the first time in the film. As the two stroll through the campus, Ray tells Dave what it was like to be a “cutter” in his time:

Ray: Thing of it was, I loved it. I was young, trim, strong. I was damn proud of my work. And the buildings went up. When they were finished, the damndest thing happened. It was like the buildings were too good for us. Nobody told us that. It just felt uncomfortable. Even now I’d like to be able to stroll through the campus and look at the limestone. I just feel out of place.

Ray then asks Dave if they still swim in the quarries and Dave says yes.

Ray: So, the only thing you got to show for my 20 years of work are the holes we left behind.

Dave: I don’t mind.

Ray: I do.

Here, Ray changes the subject, getting to the point he was working towards all along. Sitting on a stone in front of a warmly lit stone building on campus, Ray says that he has heard that Cyril has taken the college entrance exam. Dave acknowledges that he has, too, and that he did well. It is clear, however, that Dave is not yet ready to take that large step.

Dave: Hell, I don’t wanna go to college, Dad. To hell with them. I’m proud of being a cutter.

It is here that Ray makes the most profound and important pronouncement of the film.

Ray: You're not a cutter. I'm a cutter.

That is clearly the point of the film. Living in the past is not an option. The father is telling the son that he must move on, whether that moving on is physical, psychological, or emotional—or all three. But despite that message the film still encourages a romantic view of times past and embraces nostalgia for working-class solidarity. This is demonstrated in the film through the genuine affection displayed by the working-class characters towards each other, particularly the four friends. Although they are clearly going in different directions—Moocher is getting married, Dave is headed to college, Cyril is taking steps towards changing his life, although he has failed the college entrance exam, and Mike remains bitter and grounded in the past—they “have each other’s backs” throughout the film, even when Dave has to expose his real identity to the young Indiana University coed he is courting in order to help Mike.^{vii} The most obvious show of solidarity takes place in the “Little 500,” a fictional bicycle race held each year on the campus of I.U. For the first time in history the locals, read “cutters,” are permitted to enter. We will discuss the race later.

In another telling scene, which comes before the walk through the I.U. campus, Ray pays a visit to his old workplace. His visit plays no role in the film except to show that Ray misses his old job and the camaraderie that he felt while cutting stone.^{viii} As he meets and greets the men, walking through a factory area with finished stones to an area where men cut stones with the aid of huge saws, he clearly feels at home as he jokes with some old friends and smiles and nods to others. Before he leaves, he asks for permission to drive wedges into some stones to mark them for cutting. After finishing the job, he drops into a seat and one of the men approaches him to ask him how his son is. He says “fine” and returns the question.

The scene, while seemingly superfluous at first, is important because it shows us what Ray later tells us. When Ray tells his son that he loved his job, we believe him because we have seen that love in action. Although we never learn for sure why Ray is no longer cutting stone at the age of 50, it is implied that health reasons, a heart attack to be specific, played a role in his taking on a new profession, car salesman. But it is clear throughout the film that he is a “cutter” at heart. His work at the car dealership is portrayed as daily drudgery, but his one short afternoon at the stone factory appears to be bliss.

Breaking Away also breaks away from the other working class films of the mid-1970s in another significant way. Whereas those films primarily chronicled the lives of ethnic working-class Americans, Italians and Eastern Europeans in particular, the characters of *Breaking Away* are virtually devoid of ethnicity. The only mentions of ethnicity or religion could be construed as negative, although in the humorous context in which they are offered it is difficult to take offense. Dave’s obsession with all that is Italian is mocked by his father Ray throughout much of the film, with Ray referring several times to Italians (and their food) as “Ity,” short for Italian. Also, like Apollo Creed, although without the same venom, he uses the long “I” when he says Italian. The negative connotation that could be inferred here is meliorated, however, when Dave’s mother develops a fondness for the operas Dave has been playing and actually plans and executes a candle-light dinner for Ray with Italian opera music playing in the background. In one other scene, Dave makes a sign of the cross as he jubilantly tells his mother that the Italian cycling team Cinzano is coming to Indianapolis to ride in a race, fulfilling his dream of competing with them. Upon seeing his sign of the cross she says, “Oh, Dave, try not to become Catholic on us.” Out of context, this line of dialogue might have been offensive. But within the context of the film, coming from a woman who

has shown great tolerance and patience throughout, it is mildly humorous. The depiction of the Italian race team could be problematic, however, because they are portrayed as cheaters and bad sports. But it's important to note that they are Italian, not Italian-American. The negative depiction of the Italians is also meliorated by the fact that Ray cheats too. He regularly misrepresents the quality of the used cars he is selling, particularly when rich college students are the customers.

The relationship between the working class and the students is not only central to the film, but it also says much about the epoch and how times had changed. In the films from the late 1960s we have explored, *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*, for example, the youthful counterculture—which emerged from the middle and upper classes—is privileged by the filmmakers. The working class characters in those films are often looked upon as tools of the establishment. They fight the establishment's war without questioning it, and they turn their anger towards a counterculture that they believe is tearing their country apart. The middle- and upper-class college students in those films are the people who rail against the establishment and protest the war.^{ix}

Three years after the fall of Saigon, when *Breaking Away* is set, times have changed. Onscreen the sons and daughters of prosperous families are no longer protesting wars and bringing down a corrupt president. These sons and daughters, as characterized in *Breaking Away* and youth films like *Animal House* (1978), are now driving fancy cars, playing tennis, tying expensive sweaters around their necks, and denigrating “cutters” at every opportunity. The “cutters” are now the sympathetic characters, not the disillusioned counterculture. The cutters are the victims of a system that is taking away working-class jobs and destroying the fabric of working-class communities while the rich are flourishing as college students at the

best universities in the land. Director Peter Yates makes this statement about the rich primarily through the characterization of Rod (Hart Bochner), the obnoxious and condescending rich kid who drives a convertible and is clearly the leader of the university pack. Throughout the film he symbolizes the disdain some university students felt towards the “cutters.” In the end, however, he is somewhat rehabilitated, and the cliché of the spoiled rich kid somewhat meliorated, when he smiles and applauds team Cutters after the Little Indy 500 despite losing to what was virtually the one-man team of Dave Stoller.

The Little Indy 500 unquestionably, but only temporarily, brings the working class of Bloomington together with the university community. The Cutter win is celebrated by both groups as the working class and members of the more privileged classes both recognize the unlikely accomplishment of the t-shirt-clad sons of cutters. The camera, however, concentrates primarily on the friends and families of the Cutter team and members of the greater Bloomington community who have made their way to the I.U. track to watch the historic race after hearing it broadcast locally on the radio. It is their joy that is celebrated by the filmmaker. Although the celebration of the underdog is a common theme in Hollywood, this celebration is more wholesome and more fleeting than the celebration in *Rocky*. While Rocky’s “triumph” comes at the expense of an African-American champion as it celebrates ethnic pride and the return of the working-class brute, the triumph of the Cutters brings an entire community together in celebration. But it is a rather hollow victory. Rod can applaud the Cutters at the end of the film because he knows that the Cutter’s victory is a transitory event. In the morning, he will still be Rod, the “big man on campus,” and Mike will still be on his way to becoming “Mean old Mike.”

But Rod is not the only one who recognizes that the Cutters' victory is fleeting and that the strong-bodied and "weak-minded" will not inherit the earth. Dave Stoller does, too. In the final sequence, Ray Stoller is shown hopping atop a bicycle at his car dealership and taking to the road on a sunny day, presumably headed home. A man who has eschewed exercise throughout the film and has criticized his son for his obsession with bicycle racing has been transformed. He is now smiling and peddling along, no longer a man with a bad heart and a past that he cannot leave behind, but a man living in the present. But the more important transformation has taken place in Dave. As Ray peddles along the Bloomington street towards home, the camera catches him and Dave passing on the road. Dave, peddling alongside a young woman who was previously introduced as a French exchange student, turns and calls to his father in French, "Bonjour, papa." At this point the camera freezes on Ray Stoller's face as he looks back at his son, open-mouthed and quizzical, clearly wondering if his son is now going to embark on a "French phase." But the audience laughs at the look of consternation because it knows that Dave is now a college student and is destined to move beyond nostalgia for a working-class way of life that no longer exists in Bloomington, even if that means removing himself from the community that has nurtured him.^x That move beyond nostalgia is the final image, and triumph, of the film.

In *Camera Politica*, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe this shot in this way. "But the camera lingers at the end for a moment on one of those who won't be lucky enough to 'break-in'" (111). While that is true on one level, I think it misses an important point. The comical look on Ray's face notwithstanding—the film, after all, is a comedy and must end with a comedic moment—Ray is not being "left behind" any more than any working-class father is "left-behind" when his son or daughter takes a step beyond the working class. To the

contrary, the father lives on in the son, and Ray's quizzical look only briefly expresses a concern that his son may be engaging in another fantasy instead of taking that step that he could never take. In the end, both father and son have moved beyond nostalgia for a community that is changing. Neither remains anchored in the past. The message of the film may simply be that while we may feel comfortable and comforted in community, we can form new communities, and sometimes join existing communities, if we are open to change and are willing to look beyond our nostalgia for a past that cannot be sustained.

Four Friends

Four Friends returns attention to the working-class ethnic community that played a central role in *The Deer Hunter*, complete with its own steel mill and its Eastern European workers. Instead of being set in Western Pennsylvania, *Four Friends* is set in East Chicago, Indiana, an industrial town located between Chicago to its west and Gary, Indiana, to its east. These two industrial cities, like Pittsburgh (Clairton), were also major producers of steel during the Vietnam era and were inhabited in large part by working-class ethnics. Unlike *The Deer Hunter*, the film does not immerse itself in traditions of the "Old Country," but it does provide a steel-town milieu in its use of *mise en scene* and its choice of characters. Whereas a homogenous ethnic community dominates *The Deer Hunter*, *Four Friends* offers a melting pot America. The lead character, Danilo Prozor (Craig Wasson), along with his family and neighbor Mrs. Zoldos (Beatrice Fredman), represents ethnic America in the film. Danilo is a Yugoslavian immigrant who, as a young boy, accompanied his mother to America to reunite with his father years after his father had come to the United States to build a new life. The father's thick Yugoslavian accent identifies him as ethnic, much like the older women in *The*

Deer Hunter. Mr. Prozor's (Miklos Simon) disdain for the America he found, however, sets him apart from the ethnics in *The Deer Hunter*. Mrs. Zoldos, who serves as one of the many narrators of the film, also adds an ethnic quality to the film through her pronounced accent. But the other characters in the film are not identified by their ethnic backgrounds, with the exception of Danilo's friend David (Michael Huddleston), who is an ethnic Jew who takes over his father's funeral home despite his vow never to go into the family business. But, while ethnicity does not dominate the film, it does play a central role in Danilo's life and his doomed marriage to a rich young woman from the blue blood class, as we will explore later in the chapter.

Four Friends is the story of four young people who meet as pre-teens and form bonds that neither war, death, nor other forms of tragedy can break. In that sense, it is a conservative film because it privileges tradition. At its worst, the film could be viewed as an attempt to discourage attempts to transcend class. At its best, it could be seen as homage to working-class values that alone seem to be able to withstand the tumult that was the 1960s. But at its heart *Four Friends* is about four people who form an unusual and lasting bond that somehow binds them even as the world around them is falling apart.

While *Breaking Away* depicts four friends who must break away from each other and their old lives to find their places in the world, and *The Deer Hunter* depicts several friends whose bond is forged by their working-class ethnic background and their code of "one shot," *Four Friends* explores the relationship between three men and one young woman who have formed a love bond that takes a full decade to sort through. During that time, Georgia (Jodi Thelen), the love interest of all three men, offers herself to Danilo, who awkwardly refuses because it would cheapen his love for her; gives herself to Tom (Jim Metzler), with whom

she has a child; marries David; and eventually returns full-circle to Danilo, her one true love. Throughout the film, which coincides with the tumultuous 1960s and ends as America puts a man on the moon in 1969, the audience sees the four characters experience virtually all that the 1960s offered: Tom goes to war; Danilo goes to college; David stays home and runs the family business; and Georgia runs off to New York to become the next Isadora Duncan, whose spirit she believes lives within her. Along the way, Tom returns from war with a Vietnamese wife and two young children, Danilo survives an attack from his new father-in-law that leaves him a widower on his wedding day, and Georgia joins the psychedelic scene in New York only to witness the tragic death of a friend at a party and the loss of her own dream of becoming a famous dancer. The decade ends with the four friends back together, huddled around the warm glow of a campfire on a beach they once frequented as high school students. The warmth of the campfire and the sound of the lake seem to wash away the disasters of a decade as the four friends share a night together before Danilo and Georgia set off to claim Danilo's new position as an English professor at a small college.

Four Friends begins with a shot of a train station. Shot in a warm sepia tone, the scene shows young Danilo and his mother (Elizabeth Lawrence) disembarking a train and walking onto a platform to meet a man, whose face is initially hidden from the audience by an over-the-shoulder shot. The man turns out to be Danilo's father, a man who left for America shortly after his son's birth. The decision to hide the face of his father in this initial shot makes dramatic sense because, as we learn, his father is a difficult man for his son to warm up to or to understand, despite Danilo's attempt to show respect for his father by kissing his hand at his first meeting. His father, we later learn, is a hard man whose stone face cannot hide his disdain for his adopted country or his disappointment in the son who has

become more American than Yugoslavian. Judging from the clothing the young boy and mother wear as they step to the platform, they are immigrants arriving in the United States in the late 1940s or early 1950s. In the next scene we see the young boy playing a flute in the back seat of a car driven by his father as his father and mother quietly drive towards their home in East Chicago.

The working-class milieu is instantly established as the car rides past a steel mill and pulls into a street within clear site of the mill and in clear auditory distance of the clanging machinery inside the mill. The tree-lined, asphalt street is populated with small, wood-frame houses separated only by alleys and walkways. Just as in *The Deer Hunter*, the lives of the working class families are immediately connected to the sound and the sight of the steel mill and a train that dissects the neighborhood. The film immediately cuts to four young boys running through an industrial site near the steel mill. As they pass large concrete and steel edifices, they come to a chain link fence and through it they watch as Danilo's father and another man pour hot steel. Although this brief scene demonstrates to the son the hard and dirty work the father must do to support his family, it is not realistic. Steel mills are like prisons—they are almost impossible to get into because of barbed-wire fencing, and they are closely watched by guards at all entrances.

Through elliptical editing, the audience is transported several years into the future as a teen-aged boy emerges from the shadows of an alley playing a clarinet. Although he is clearly almost a decade older, we recognize young Danilo through his musical prop. The audience also understands that about a decade has passed because the theme song of the television show *Bonanza* is clearly heard from Danilo's neighbor's house on the spring night. *Bonanza* came on the air in the fall of 1959. Danilo's love of music also tells us that he has

aspirations beyond working in the steel mill, whose sound is omnipresent whenever his neighborhood serves as the film's location. As he passes his own home, his father looks through a window and frowns with disdain at his musician son, who is dressed in a white shirt and tie. Shortly thereafter Danilo meets up with Tom and Dave, who are also carrying instruments, and they all play and dance down the street, eventually arriving at the home of Georgia, the fourth member of the inseparable group.

At this point the narrator changes. Instead of an omniscient narrator, Mrs. Zoldos, Georgia's next-door-neighbor, assumes the role of narrator, describing the four friends and their relationship, and introducing the flamboyant Georgia to the audience. Mrs. Zoldos serves as an anchor of sorts for the four characters and an intermediary for them and the audience. She describes their relationship with each other and tells the audience that they are all "good" children. She later becomes David's first customer when he takes over his father's funeral parlor. As the three friends play a tune outside Georgia's home, Georgia arrives at the door wearing a flowered dress that matches her exuberant personality. The first words she speaks are, "Good evening, kiddos," making it clear from the start that she is the leader of this band of friends, the one the others long for. In the next scene, her irrepressible personality is established. As the school band plays its spring concert—she, Danilo, Tom, and David are band members—Georgia takes it upon herself to stand, dance, and sway to the music, to the chagrin of the band director, who admonishes her later in an Eastern European accent. As Georgia recounts the exchange with the band director to her three friends, she offers her own admonition. "These middle class minds," she says. "They don't know what passion is. What ecstasy is. What it's like to be possessed. I'm going to be a famous dancer.

I'm going to be a famous dancer. I am. I just know it." With that she pulls David and Danilo to her breast to listen to her heart.

With her reference to the middle class, Georgia acknowledges her and her friends' station in the working class. But in embracing dance, she is also saying that she does not have to live the restricted life of a working-class woman. Throughout the film, she announces in a variety of ways that she will not be forced to live a predetermined life. It is her irrepressibility that attracts the three young men, and it is that same trait that does not allow her to settle for what they appear to be willing to settle for. Only after Danilo emerges from the other side of his tragedy does she feel able to embrace her one true love and acknowledge that compromise is necessary in a relationship.

But the central character in the drama is Danilo. It is his life that we follow assiduously, and it is the intersection of his and Georgia's lives that carries the plot. Throughout the film Danilo is portrayed as a complex young man who struggles to meet his father's expectations and who waivers between jingoistic support for his adopted country and his intellectual questioning of the path his adopted country has chosen in the difficult 1960s. Unlike his father, who expels the word "America" from his mouth like the bile of acid reflux because of his disappointment in his adopted country, Danilo retains the immigrant's love for his new home. For much of the film he sees America as the land of opportunity, a place where a working-class youth can rise in a meritocracy that does not discriminate. But he also sees faults in the American system that need redress. This is best exemplified in his brief moment of protest at "Career Day 1961" at his high school when he questions the local steel company recruiter about the effects of capitalism on the working class. He protests that high school is not just a job-training site. "We are seekers of destiny," he tells the industrialist.

Admittedly, he takes this stand to impress Georgia, whose advances he has recently regrettably rejected, but it also shows his divergence from his father's right-wing views. His father later attacks him at the kitchen table, verbally and physically, after he has heard of his son's demonstration at the school. "You make me humiliated," Mr. Prozor says. "'Your son is a Communist,' they tell me at the factory." But, despite his progressive views, Danilo remains a true believer in the American Dream until his working-class roots come face to face with an even more powerful face of the capitalist system, his father-in-law. That brings us to Danilo's tragic wedding day and the courtship that led to that fateful moment.

As high school comes to an end, Danilo wins a scholarship to Northwestern University near Chicago, and immediately makes a name for himself as an intellectual. His roommate is a young man named Louie Carnahan (Reed Birney), who is suffering from a degenerative muscular disorder that will later claim his life. Louie, the audience soon learns, is the scion of a rich man who has made his money in steel, Mr. Carnahan (James Leo Herlihy). Louie also has an attractive sister named Adrienne (Julia Murray), who soon gets involved with Danilo, whom she sees as an exciting antithesis of her controlling father. The tragic wedding scene, when the father of the bride chooses to shoot his daughter and her new husband rather than lose her to a working-class man, is foreshadowed by a scene earlier in the film. As Danilo visits the Carnahan estate, he and Louie converse on the beach as the father and daughter jog by. Louie explains that his father is doing everything he can to stop the erosion of the beach, which has been shrinking at an alarming rate. Louie says to Danilo, "What's his is his, come hell or high water." When Danilo later says, "She thinks we should get married," Louie immediately responds, "If you do, I suggest you elope and don't tell

anyone.” Because the warning has the feel of hyperbole, Danilo does not take it seriously. That decision proves to be fatal.

In an even more ominous scene later, this exchange takes place between Danilo and Mr. Carnahan after the older man has questioned Danilo’s aspirations and dreams at the dinner table:

Danilo: I plan to marry your daughter.

Carnahan: So, you want to take my daughter away from me.

Danilo: I believe the tradition is you give her away.

Carnahan: Mr. Prozor, you are looking at a man who gives nothing away that he wants to keep.

In later scenes, an incestuous relationship is also hinted at between the father and daughter, although it appears that the daughter wants nothing to do with it. In one particular scene, a pan briefly shows Carnahan following his fleeing daughter as she runs across the second floor of the home. He is wearing only what appears to be pajama bottoms and an open coat of some sort. She, dressed in night clothes, is clearly in distress. The “chase” ends when Danilo begins to ascend the stairway to the second floor and Mr. Carnahan stops as the young man approaches. The scene demonstrates the depth of the father’s obsession with his daughter and makes the murder scene more plausible.

Class is also dramatically on display in the *mise en scene* of the Carnahan estate. Unlike the East Chicago neighborhood near the steel mill, where sounds of industry are omnipresent, the Carnahan estate is quiet. Not even the sounds of nature appear to pierce the silence. Whereas the shots of Danilo’s neighborhood are often tightly framed and even claustrophobic, particularly when the inside of his home is shown, the shots of the Carnahan

estate are almost exclusively long, full-framed shots. An establishing shot of the Prozor home is often a close-up of the father's stern face at a kitchen table, while an establishing shot of the Carnahan estate often shows a large fence surrounding a massive home and well-groomed compound, or a long shot of a lengthy, wooden table where the Carnahans and Danilo are sharing a multi-course dinner. In the East Chicago scenes, people fill the frame and dominate the space. In the Carnahan compound shots, people get lost in the vastness of the space, just as they may get lost in the vastness of the Carnahan wealth.

This space is much on display during the wedding reception scene. Opulent outdoor stairwells made of stone, imposing and meticulously groomed hedges that seem pulled directly from *The Shining* (1980), and large patches of deep green lawn dominate the *mise en scene*. As music fills the air and celebrants from both families drink, eat, and share the day with loved ones, the camera repeatedly returns to a low-angle shot of Mr. Carnahan standing in the window of his study, looking down on the proceedings. In several eyeline matches, a young boy looks to the window to see the dour looking man look down upon the wedding celebration. It is through the young man's reaction to what he sees that the audience becomes anxious about what may lie ahead. After a few minutes of various shots of the wedding and the young boy spying Mr. Carnahan in the window, Mr. Carnahan appears in the crowd and quiets the band in order to make the customary father of the bride's speech. But it is anything but customary. After quieting the crowd, he raises a glass in his left hand and says, "I'm not losing a daughter. No, I'm not losing a daughter. In fact, what I'm saying is I refuse to lose a daughter." He then pulls a handgun from his coat and shoots his daughter in the chest as she stands on a stone staircase with Danilo. He then shoots Danilo in the face and then turns the

gun on himself. Once the shots begin to ring out, the scene plays in slow motion and captures a close-up of Georgia screaming in terror as others run for cover.

While shocking because of the extreme nature of the action, this filicide is not entirely surprising because of the foreshadowing, particularly the hints of an incestuous relationship between the father and daughter. Without hints at incest the shootings would have seemed unbelievable. But the shootings also have a clear class component. The rich capitalist who has earned his riches on the backs of working-class men and women who have been exploited by the steel industry is not willing to let the “Yugoslav,” as he called Danilo, into the club. This is clearly an anti-capitalist statement by the filmmaker, a Left move designed to show the extremes to which the rich will go to keep the class system in place. But the initial reaction of the lead character to the shooting could just as readily be considered a Right move. Danilo, who has lost his newlywed and spent months in the hospital after the shooting, chooses not to fight the system, but to retreat into the safety of the working class. He retreats from sight, even refusing to see Georgia when she seeks to visit him in the hospital, and surfaces later as a cab driver in New York City. During his stay there he comes upon Georgia dancing in the street with children who have opened a fire hydrant on a hot summer day. Although it is not made clear in the film, it is assumed that he looked for her and found her because he knew she had gone to New York to dance. He professes his lifelong love to her, but she is not ready to sacrifice her dreams to “settle down” with him or anyone else. It is then that Danilo takes the full plunge into working-class life as he takes a job at a steel forging company in Pennsylvania. Here he meets a beautiful young woman, the child of Eastern European immigrants, and begins to build a new life as a member of the working class ethnic community.

Before Danilo leaves New York, however, two brief scenes are telling for their one-sided portrayal of the counterculture. These scenes are problematical because they come in a film that is generally regarded as “liberal” or “progressive.” Despite being set in the 1960s, *Four Friends* is not populated with many counterculture characters, but when counterculture characters do appear they are almost always portrayed in a negative light. One brief scene occurs when Danilo is leaving New York and he rides past a group of counterculture protesters burning an American flag. In 1981, the age of Reagan, this scene would have elicited a groan from an audience, while it may have elicited a cheer from a youth audience of 1969. Danilo’s own reaction is mixed. He seems simultaneously confused and repulsed, as if he doesn’t know how to react. Even more disturbing is the unnecessary depiction of a car thief as a “long-hair” and a “hippie.” Having packed his car for his journey out of New York, Danilo steps out of his apartment and sees someone hopping into his car and driving it down a busy New York street. He chases it on foot and catches it, jumping onto the hood of the car as the driver tries to “throw” him like a “bucking bronco” would throw an unwanted rider, swerving from side to side. Unable to toss Danilo from the hood of the car, the thief stops the car, hops out onto the street and says in the counterculture vernacular of the times, “Man, you’re really into possessions, you know that? You’re weird, man.” He then walks away.

This scene not only offers a hippie as a car thief, but it also ridicules the counterculture value that posits that possessions are the root of societal evil. Although the scene is played for a brief laugh as it demonstrates Danilo’s desire to fight back and return to the world of the living, it is also guilty of the same kind of stereotyping that the youth/cult films were guilty of, except this time the counterculture and not the working class is demonized. It is also dishonest. Hippies were many things—lost youth, commune

inhabitants, peaceniks, vagrants—but they were not common car thieves. Considering that so few counterculture characters appear in the film, to portray the car thief as a counterculture character in 1981 is no less egregious than portraying a working class character in 1969 as an oppressor of the counterculture.

As Danilo settles into his new life in Pennsylvania, it appears that he has chosen the bosom of the working class over the life of the university graduate. That impression is reinforced when his joyful participation in an ethnic festival is cross-cut with scenes of Georgia at a New York City party in a loft reminiscent of Andy Warhol's *The Factory*. Shots of Danilo dancing and playing music with happy immigrants are cross-cut with various unconventional characters experimenting with drugs and alternative lifestyles during the New York party. This is another negative portrayal of the counterculture, although it should be noted that these characters are more subculture than counterculture. Georgia is among the revelers, as is a woman we assume is her friend. But as Danilo revels in a world more like his father's than his own, Georgia witnesses a tragic event as her friend, high and virtually incoherent, climbs into a car in the loft (how it got there is unclear) and inadvertently backs it through a wall and falls several stories to a fiery death. In the next scene Georgia is standing at the foot of Danilo's bed, obviously distraught. She simply says, "I'm so tired of being young. Everybody wants to be young." Her confession seems to summarize the 1960s. It was a time when everyone over 30 was considered old and youth was celebrated. Some made it through the decade, and some did not.

The cross-cutting in this sequence is important because it juxtaposes the old and the new and finds both wanting. The old, as in old country, is quaint and beautiful, but it is presented as a warm hearth that at some point everyone has to leave behind. Throughout his

Pennsylvania period, Danilo appears to be healing psychically and physically from his wounds. That healing process is aided by his return to a simpler life of work and his ethnic heritage. But while he appears happy and content living the life of a steel worker, the audience assumes this is just a stop along the way for Danilo, a dip into a soothing spring before he returns to his real life. As soon as Georgia shows up, it becomes clear that Danilo cannot “hide” in his new life for long. Although she leaves suddenly when she learns of his new “love”—this appears to be an honorable act by her because she appears unready to settle down with him—he is awakened. Now stronger, physically and emotionally, he knows he must move forward, and for him that journey must begin with a return to home. For that reason, Danilo soon departs the ethnic community he had found temporary relief in.

In contrast to the almost pastoral depiction of the ethnic community, the psychedelic New York scene is portrayed as something ephemeral and unreal. It is something to escape from, not run to. It is a dream from which Georgia has rudely awakened. Danilo had earlier left New York because of his own disillusionment with the big city, and his encounter with Georgia has only reinforced his desire to return to something more real to his own experience. So, when Danilo leaves Pennsylvania, he does so not to return to the Old Country, as his parents eventually do, but to his own real working-class roots. This is most clearly demonstrated in a dissolve that begins with him riding past the Pennsylvania Iron Foundries mill that he worked in and ends with him riding past the old steel mill in East Chicago as he returns home. Home for the working class, the film seems to be saying, is where the family and familiar work are. The message seems to be that the only thing real, tangible, and American is the promise of America and the warm bosom of the familiar.

But, just as the film makes the statement that familiarity and the comfort of the working class are the answers, that one should be satisfied with one's station in life, it throws the audience a changeup. After returning home to work in the steel mill, Danilo sees Georgia on the street one morning talking to Tom, who is now married to a Vietnamese woman and has two children. She is holding their son in her arms as they speak. As Danilo approaches her and Tom drifts away, she initially turns her back to him. But it becomes clear that she is just "dancing" around the potential confrontation. She doesn't go anywhere. As he approaches he notices, and she acknowledges, that she now has a streak of gray in her hair.

Danilo: You come back to stay?

Georgia: No. Not a chance. You?

Danilo: No. I may have a job teaching.

Georgia: So, where is this college?

Danilo: Far away. That way I won't wait for you to show up again. That way I won't be tempted to show up again myself.

But it is clear throughout this hyperbolic exchange that this is a reconciliation, not a breakup. Their words are harsh, but their body language betrays their anger. They move closer to each other rather than farther away. The scene ends with an embrace as Georgia says, "Why does everything have to take so long?" The reconciliation obscures a key element of the scene, however. Danilo has chosen to move beyond his class to take a college teaching job. This represents a real break from his past, not just a geographic break.

This break is reinforced in the following scene when he sees his parents off at a shipyard as they prepare to journey back to Yugoslavia to live out their latter years. With his parents in Europe, he will no longer be rooted in East Chicago. His choice to move and to

teach becomes a more permanent one because of that. The departure scene also provides an opportunity for a second reconciliation, this time with his stone-faced father. The bitterness of their earlier relationship has been replaced by a more adult acceptance of their differences. The father, however, still does not pretend to understand his son:

Father: What do you want?

Danilo (clearly more relaxed in his relationship with his father as an adult): I sure would like to see you happy just once. I want to see you smile.

Father: When you were born I smile . . . I think I took off my hat and beat the table with it. I'm almost sure I was smiling.

Danilo (referring to his father's smile): That looks good on you papa.

The two men share a laugh with Mrs. Prozor, maybe the first time they have done that as a family, certainly the first time they have done that for the film's audience. Danilo ends the scene with a gesture that returns us to the first scene of the film as he kisses his father's hand in respect. Although the father is returning to his old home after failing to adapt to his new one, and the son is preparing to live the American Dream as he melts into the American pot, this shot demonstrates that elements of ethnic tradition remain alive in the late 1960s.

The final scene of the film takes place on the beach near East Chicago as Danilo, Georgia, Tom, David and their families all gather to spend the night together before Danilo and Georgia head off to the college where Danilo will teach. This scene has been characterized as a conservative move because it represents a return to the familiar, in this case the working class. In *Camera Politica*, Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, who regard *Four Friends* as a liberal film, compare it to *Breaking Away*, another film penned by writer Steve Tesich:

Liberal films question the template of success through individual effort, although their alternative seems to be a romanticizing of working-class life that fails to view it critically as a condition to be abolished structurally. . . . *Friends* is a more overt critique of the attempt to rise on the class ladder [than *Breaking Away*]. Those who do, disappointed by what they find at the top, return to their working-class world and their true friends. (111)

I initially agreed with this assertion. But after more closely viewing the film, I think Ryan and Kellner miss the key point I noted earlier—Danilo is leaving his class behind by taking the college teaching position. In another way, he is also leaving behind his Yugoslavian heritage. As he says to Georgia when she asks him what he will be teaching, “What else does a Yugoslavian teach?” he laughs. “English.” He may have been temporarily stopped from entering the middle class, but he is transcending class on his second try, and he is doing it by teaching the language of his adopted country. Whether the film is saying that the working class is a condition that should be “abolished structurally,” as Ryan and Kellner note, seems to be a different point, one that could be argued. But in Danilo’s case he does transcend class, even if to do so he has to say farewell to his heritage, literally in the departure of his parents, and his childhood home. It just takes him a long time to do it, however, and he must pay a dear price.

The final scene also offers another perspective on the transcendence of class. Georgia, who has danced, flirted, and flitted her way through almost thirty years, pursuing that elusive stardom that the American Dream offers as a carrot for anyone willing to take big chances with her life, is still the dreamer despite her brief return to her hometown, working-class roots. As she and Danilo describe their plans to their friends around the campfire, she turns to

him and says, "This move's yours. The next one's mine." She continues, "Do you know what we've never done?" He answers, "Lots of things." She responds, "You got it, kiddo," returning the audience to that first time it met her outside her home. Her assertion demonstrates that she will not be another Mrs. Prozor like Danilo's mother, who stayed in Yugoslavia until her husband sent for her and who left with him when his homesickness finally overtook him in old age. She will be an equal partner in the decision making in the new Prozor household. Although her dreams have often been fantastic, she still refuses to give up on them even as she approaches thirty. Yes, she has returned to the warmth of her working-class background for regeneration and healing, but she will again embark on journeys far from her working-class roots.

The message here is ambiguous. While the working class is depicted as a place of safe haven and regeneration for those who emerge from it and for those who remain in it, it is also depicted as something that can and should be transcended by those who desire to transcend. This is where I believe that Ryan and Kellner, who seem to be saying that the film implies that anyone who leaves the working class is doomed to disappointment and a return to their roots, miss the point. I see the return to East Chicago as a fuel stop along a journey. Danilo and Georgia will probably return to their home town again and again, as long as their friends David and Tom remain behind. But their trips home will become less frequent as their roots begin to dry out. They will always gather sustenance from these visits, as long as East Chicago remains a viable community, but they will also move on to build new communities with new people in new towns. Although the working-class community will likely remain in some form in East Chicago, history tells us that the steel mill towns of that period have never recovered from the loss of heavy manufacturing. Working-class communities remain in some

form, however, and from those communities people like Danilo and Georgia will emerge, people who want to see what is on the other side of the abandoned and crumbling factory whose sounds lulled their parents to sleep on hot summer nights. That, I believe, is the message of the film.

One thing that is missing in *Four Friends*, however, is a strong sense that counterculture values persist after the 1960s. While Danilo has returned home to regenerate in order to take another shot at transcending his working-class background, there is no evidence that he will take counterculture values with him to his next stop. In fact, Danilo exists somewhere on the border of the counterculture and the working class throughout the film. The only real hope for the survival of counterculture values in the film is embodied in Georgia. As her final comments in the film imply, she will continue to look for adventure in her life as she refuses to “settle down” in one spot with Danilo. While that offers some hope for the continuation of counterculture values, it does not represent a resounding endorsement of the counterculture. This is particularly evident 28 years later because we now know that the counterculture era, although short-lived, continues to influence our culture today. The next film we discuss, *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, provides a much stronger endorsement for the counterculture values that often fueled clashes between privileged youth and the working class in the late 1960s.

Return of the Secaucus Seven

Four Friends and *Return of the Secaucus Seven* represent bookends to the late 1960s films we explored in Chapter 1, but they do it in somewhat different ways. Although *Four Friends* was filmed in 1980, it is set in the 1960s. *Return of the Secaucus Seven* is set in 1978

and offers a retrospective from the points of view of participants while *Four Friends* offers a third-person view of the sixties as its characters experience the decade. *Four Friends* concentrates primarily on the exploits of Danilo Prozor, a more conservative move in line with the Hollywood style of filmmaking that privileges a central character, while *Return of the Secaucus Seven* offers an ensemble cast and does not privilege one character above the others. In that sense, the independent film directed by John Sayles is egalitarian in its treatment of its characters, particularly the seven who make up the Secaucus Seven, and represents a more progressive, non-traditional style of filmmaking. This progressive style, as we will see, is reflected in the type of shots he uses throughout the film, which do not privilege any particular character.

The films also differ somewhat ideologically, although it could be argued that both are more conservative than their reputations may imply. Although set in the 1960s, *Four Friends* sidesteps the tough ideological arguments of the time, in regards to both the counterculture and the war, to present a film about working class characters and the concept of community. Unlike Arthur Penn's earlier film *Alice's Restaurant*, which was invested in the issues of the late 1960s despite its concentration on the experiences of Arlo Guthrie, *Four Friends* focuses primarily on Danilo Prozor with the ideological realities of the 1960s playing only a small role in the film. Set in the 1960s, it more accurately reflects the late 1970s. *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, on the other hand, looks at the 1960s through the eyes of its seven key characters, whose views are clearly progressive. But the film does not deal directly with any of the difficult issues of the epoch, including the Vietnam War or Civil Rights, even from a retrospective point of view. The film instead offers a somewhat nostalgic view of the 1960s through its characters, some of whom remain far to the left, and others

who have drifted closer to the center. In short, the film tells us more about how the sixties shaped the relationships between the characters and the lives they have chosen than it does about the politics or cultural upheaval of the sixties. By concentrating more on the concept of community—some of it lost, some of it retained—than it does on the political and cultural upheaval that its characters lived through, the film reflects the more conservative epoch of the late seventies than the late sixties despite the liberal characters who populate it and the form in which it is filmed. The late seventies remained a time when the working class and American ideals were popular subjects for Hollywood.^{xi} The history of the 1960s was still not considered box office. Even a film as benign as *Return of the Secaucus Seven* had to be produced independently. When Hollywood finally did decide to take a look at the 1960s, it did so with the conservatively themed *The Big Chill*, a more Hollywood version of *Return of the Secaucus Seven*. As Ryan and Kellner write in *Camera Politica*:

If *Secaucus* presents the sixties as a lost golden era that survives by fragile collective threads, [This is an arguable point. I see it in a more positive way, as a sort of homage to the potential of community.] Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* (1983) is a yuppie anthem celebrating the burial of sixties radicalism and the passage to a more "mature," self-interested, upwardly mobile outlook on life, in which a group of ex-sixties friends gather to mourn the suicide of Alex, the one among them who had not sold out. (277)

If selling out is defined as abandoning one's ideals in the pursuit monetary gain, it appears clear that none of the characters in *Secaucus* have "sold out," even if most have joined the mainstream as teachers, political aides, or doctors. Each of them can argue that their career pursuits work in concert with their ideals, although as they approach 30 it is becoming clear

that compromises have been made, and probably will continue to be made. As one character notes during the film, it is one thing for someone to be bouncing around the country with no regular employment in one's 20s, but it's another thing to be doing it in one's 30s. But despite the depiction of the individual characters and the privileging of their progressive views, the choice not to explore the cultural and political upheaval of the sixties is in line with more mainstream films of the era.

Because *Return of the Secaucus Seven* is set in 1978, it allows members of the Secaucus Seven to take an ironic, more mature, even detached look at their "exploits" almost a decade after their experiences as members of the late 1960s counterculture. This is not out of sync with David Cook's observation that successful films of 1979 were often "self-reflexive and revisionist" (220), although in the case of *Secaucus Seven* the film was clearly more self-reflexive than revisionist. It does not attempt to offer a revisionist view of the sixties as much as it tries to show that era as it was remembered, both fondly and with some detachment, by those who experienced it first-hand. By spending a weekend with the "notorious" Secaucus Seven, we learn that they are not unlike the commune members at *Alice's Restaurant*, or the protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in *Medium Cool*, or the teachers at the Indian school in *Billy Jack* if we had met them ten years later. They could even have been the brothers and sisters of the hippies who picked up Lion and Max in *Scarecrow*. As a group they represent the part of the counterculture that survived the sixties and went on to live traditional lives, even if they still carry with them the leftist views that made them who they were a decade earlier. But by meeting them a decade later, we also are made privy to their occasionally ironic treatment of their own past.

What distinguishes some of the Secaucus Seven from the inhabitants of *Alice's Restaurant*, however, are their roots. Several members of the Secaucus Seven emerged from the working class, including Mike Donnelly (Bruce MacDonald) and Katie Sipriano (Maggie Renzi), the unmarried couple that brings the group together for the weekend in New Hampshire, and J. T. (Adam LeFevre), the struggling musician. Two other pivotal characters, although not members of the Secaucus Seven, are obviously working class. Ron Desjardins (David Straithairn) is a former high school classmate of Mike Donnelly's who has chosen to remain in their home town and run a gas station and automobile repair shop, and Howie (John Sayles), another classmate, is raising three children with his high school sweetheart as he works two jobs to support his family. Mike and Katie live in an apartment in Boston and struggle on teachers' salaries to teach inner-city high school students. J. T., as we learn early in the film, has no money, his own or his family's, and has somehow survived by bouncing from gig to gig and job to job in search of his voice as a songwriter and singer. Collectively, these characters represent the working class in the film, even if Mike and Katie have transcended their working-class roots through their careers.

The working-class roots of several characters in *Secaucus Seven* shape their relationships with those who remain in the working class. Because characters like Mike, Katie, and J. T. have emerged from the class, they remain on good terms with friends who have taken the working-class path, although they may occasionally judge those friends harshly or even patronizingly. This kind of relationship contrasts sharply with the relationships between the counterculture and the working class in films like *Easy Rider* and *Alice's Restaurant*. In *Easy Rider*, as we discovered, the relationships between the counterculture and working class were antagonistic for the most part, and deadly at their

worst. One might point to Alice and Ray in *Alice's Restaurant* as an exception—they were working class characters who earned the love and respect of their counterculture friends. But it is important to remember that Alice and Ray embraced the counterculture because they found themselves caught between generations and identified with the counterculture lifestyle, and because of that their embrace was returned. Throughout *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, director John Sayles is also careful not to privilege any character or class. He is able to establish these equal relationships through realistic dialogue, simple camera work, and basic editing techniques, which we will explore later in this chapter.

The two primary working class characters in *Secaucus Seven* are Ron Desjardins and Howie. Ron is the more prominent of the two because of his much larger role and his more intimate interaction with members of the Secaucus Seven. Both men are at least a decade removed from high school, a time that they spent with Mike Donnelly playing basketball and living the lives of popular “jocks.” But while Mike has gone on to college and a life as a teacher in Boston, they have remained in their New Hampshire town. Mike makes it clear early in the film during a conversation with J. T. that he doesn't understand Ron's decision to settle for a working-class life in their hometown. *Settle* may be the operative word here, because it is clear that Ron has never left his hometown for any period of time, and thus he has not experienced the 1960s, or the 1970s for that matter, in the same way that Mike and the others have. As someone who is politically and socially engaged, Mike sees this lack of curiosity as a weakness. After Mike has made a condescending remark about Ron's career choice—“It was a major career decision whether he should go with Sunoco or Exxon”—J. T. takes Ron's side, but in doing so he draws a similar conclusion about Ron's decision to stay close to his roots:

J. T.: What's wrong with Ron?

Mike: Nothing's wrong with Ron. I like Ron. He's a nice guy. We just don't

have that much in common anymore. I mean, high school was ten years ago. I teach high school now.

J. T.: I like Ron a lot. He's just got to get out of this town.

The solution to Ron's restricted life, both to Mike and J. T., is to "get out of this town." (Ironically, J. T. has apparently left many towns but still finds himself homeless and drifting as he turns thirty.) But their judgment of Ron does not take into consideration Ron's view of his own life. Later in the film, the full irony of J. T. and Mike's judgment about Ron becomes apparent as Ron speaks to Frances (Maggie Cousineau) in a bar that the group has gathered in for a night out. Frances, the soon-to-be doctor who has a crush on Ron, finally asks him why he hasn't left his hometown or tried to explore the world. Ron responds in an almost poetic way, describing his life in terms that explain his contentment with his working-class status. As he and Frances sit across from each other in a booth, a medium two-shot dramatizes the intimate moment, and as he leans forward to explain his choice he is captured in a close-up. He says, "I fix cars. That's what I like to do. In town here, if somebody's engine is running a little rough, the brakes are shot, things won't start, they say, 'Take it to Ron.' But if I move somewhere else, a city or something, I'm just another guy in a grease-monkey suit." Although some may consider Ron's explanation a rationalization, or, in sixties jargon, a "cop-out," it may also be a way of saying that not all lives have to be lives of adventure and social activism. Some lives can be quiet and not be ruled by desperation.

In another scene, Howie, who often appears to be worn down by the responsibilities of fatherhood, describes what it is like to be a father on a good day. His brief monologue

about the wonders of fatherhood is juxtaposed, although not directly, to a discussion between middle-class Frances and Katie about birth control and the appalling lack of sex education in the high schools. It also contrasts to a conversation between Katie, Maura (Karen Trott), and Irene (Jean Passanante) about motherhood, in which it is clear that none of the women, all 30 or older, are yet ready to make the sacrifice that motherhood would require. Howie compares the feeling he derives from fatherhood to what he imagines an old high school buddy “Ace” Campana must have felt when he “bombed down the street” in his “souped up” car, the car that took up virtually every minute of Campana’s day. Sipping a beer, Howie turns to Mike and Jeff (Mark Arnott), the big city drug counselor, and discusses the wonders of fatherhood:

Howie: And then sometimes I go out with Carol and we’ve got all three of them with us and none of them is screaming and they’re being good and they’re my kids, you know, I want everybody to look. Stacey, Stacey, she is a little person, she’s got little arms and little legs that work, and she talks now and she’s a person and she didn’t used to be there before. Except for Carol and me she wouldn’t exist. I feel like Ace Campana must have felt, bombing down main street.

Yes, he’s tired from working two jobs and trying to support a wife and three children, but the payoff is worth it—at least on some days. If he had waited to get married and had children later, maybe he would have been in better financial shape to support a family of five. But in some ways, Howie’s life seems more genuine and less self-serving than the lives of the Secaucus Seven, who, despite their good intentions are still growing up at the age of thirty while he, who apparently did not attend college, is supporting a family.

Ron and Howie are working-class characters who, although often worn down by the grind of everyday life, appear genuinely content to live quiet lives of dignity in a world that demands that everyone reach for more. They are the kind of characters that are virtually impossible to find in films of the early counterculture period. Of the films we have explored of that era, the only character who approximates Ron or Howie is the New Mexico farmer that Billy and Wyatt encounter during their cross-country trip in *Easy Rider*. For the most part, even when working-class characters are shown in a good light, as Eileen and her son Harold are in *Medium Cool*, they are often depicted as voiceless victims of a society that has moved beyond the needs of the everyday person to larger issues like war and civil rights. Or, as in the case of the induction center employee in *Alice's Restaurant* who conducts her business with dignity and skill, they are depicted as drones who simply perform their small role in "the machine" that governs. Their voices, unlike Ron and Howie's, are never really heard. Too often, working class characters in the early counterculture films are depicted as either tools of the establishment whose job is to keep the counterculture in its place (police and National Guard), or as self-styled vigilantes who take it upon themselves to rid the countryside of those who would attack what they perceive to be the American way (racists and rednecks).

It should be noted that Ron and Howie, although not part of the Secaucus Seven, are accepted by the group of former "radicals." I use quotes here because with the exception of Jeff, who has continued to live an unconventional life as a drug counselor and radical leftist, most of the other members of the Seven seem likely to have operated on the periphery of the movement. While it is true that his long-time lover Maura accompanied Jeff on most of his protests in the 1960s and Irene continues to push for progressive action as a speech writer for

a Democratic politician she believes is too conservative, the group appears to have been less than radical. That is the irony behind the title *Return of the Secaucus Seven*. The group earned its tag not for bombing a government building in 1969 or burning an American flag at an anti-war protest, but for being pulled over in a van they borrowed on the way to a Washington march and being charged with possession of a rifle because the owner of the van had left his hunting gear in it. That irony does not diminish their progressive stance on the issues—it just puts their “radicalism” into perspective.

Director John Sayles also explores the bonding that takes place between the men in the film, and in doing so he demonstrates how sports can build lasting bonds between people who later go in different directions. These kinds of bonds are particularly common in the working class. These moments are most obvious in the basketball and swimming sequences of the film, where the bonding, particularly between the men, is most obvious. In *American Films of the 1970s* Peter Lev downplays these scenes when he writes, “A few action scenes . . . were added to show that Sayles could handle visually dynamic material” (70). He bases his position on a 1981 interview Sayles gave to Tom Schlesinger in *Film Quarterly*. In 1978, Sayles was a young, independent filmmaker trying to establish a reputation, and he apparently felt a need to show his versatility as a director. But I think Sayles shortchanges himself when he attributes the scenes solely to his need to prove his directorial talent. These scenes, the basketball ones in particular, are vital to demonstrating the dynamics of the relationships between characters.

There is no question that the scenes are visually interesting. Sayles creates dynamism and serves the narrative with his use of multiple angles and cross-cutting. In the basketball sequence he offers shots from extreme low-angle to bird’s-eye views, and he uses rapid cuts

and a pounding soundtrack to create energy and to foreshadow a confrontation between Jeff and J. T. He also uses jump cuts to add to the energy and confusion of the basketball scenes while cross-cutting between the physical, animalistic ritual of the increasingly competitive game and the quiet, cerebral conversations between the women beside brooks and along country roads. These scenes and his use of cross-cutting are also important to character development and plot movement, and they are essential to establishing and explaining the strong bonds that remain between the working class characters and those who have moved to the middle class.

Of the two action sequences, the basketball game is most important to the flow of the film. During the approximately ten minutes of intercutting between the men playing basketball and the women conversing in various outdoor locations, several plotlines are played out. J. T. admits to Jeff that he slept with Maura after Maura told him that her relationship with Jeff was over. This leads to some physical play on the basketball court, ending with J. T. being pushed into the metal standard that holds the basketball hoop by Jeff. They later resolve the issue over beers. As this scene is playing out, Sayles cross-cuts between it and several conversations between Irene, Frances, and Maura, and the audience learns more about these women and what brought them to this moment in 1978. The sequence also helps to establish Chip as a “game” combatant who plays despite lacking the requisite skills, occasionally providing a comic moment on the court. Most importantly for our purposes, the film brings the former high school teammates Howie, Ron, and Mike together in a way that explains why they have been able to remain friends despite taking drastically different paths in life. As they play basketball and then walk off the court together

to cool down by a stream, the old bond between them is evident. They make physical contact, bump shoulders as they walk, and revisit some old high school memories.

The bond between the men is most obviously demonstrated as the combatants walk off the court after Jeff has pushed J. T. into the metal standard. As J. T. clutches his head in pain—he is not hurt badly, just stunned a bit and angry with his friend—Ron, Howie, and Mike chime in. Ron tells J. T. to “Go get an Epsom salt.” When J. T. asks incredulously, “My head?” Ron responds, “Sure, coach used to prescribe it for everything. Sprain an ankle, sprain a wrist, break a leg . . .” Howie finishes Ron’s sentence, “Soak it in Epsom salts.” At this point, Mike, walking side-by-side in a tight shot with Ron as Howie follows, grabs Ron’s buttocks and says, “Hey, go soak it, Desjardins,” to which Ron replies, “Go soak it, Donnelly.” Howie then pushes both men from behind and says, “Soak it, both of ya,” as the three walk off the court together. The repetition of an old coach’s refrain and the physical contact between the three men tell the audience that old bonds are not forgotten. As the three men retreat from the court, the scene cuts to Chip, who has had to borrow athletic shoes to take part in the game, massaging his aching feet. While this provides a brief comic moment, it also underlines the fact that Chip is not one of the Secaucus Seven. He has been accepted by the group and treated cordially, but he remains an outsider. But in the spirit of community, it becomes more obvious as the weekend progresses that he would be accepted if he were to remain with Irene. In another brief scene, J. T. and Jeff are shown working through their issue in a private conversation as Mike, Ron, and Howie commiserate by a stream.

Although the dialogue in the basketball sequence is unremarkable, it is also realistic and points to the kind of shared memory that binds people ten years after they graduate from high school. As the three men leave the basketball court, one a teacher, another a driver and a

hotel desk clerk, and the third a mechanic, they are no longer 30-year-olds with real lives and real responsibilities. They are again 17-year-olds who make fun of the coach when he is out of the room, and who turn every coaching cliché into a sexual innuendo. Although it is a bond that transcends class, it is also a bond that keeps Mike rooted to the working class that he emerged from. None of the disapproval that he voiced earlier about Ron is evident in the scenes at the basketball court or after. On the basketball court, they are equals. Class plays no role in their play or the camaraderie they share afterwards. It is also important to note that Mike and Irene rent the same house every summer near his hometown. Every summer they invite their friends to spend a weekend with them, and every summer Ron is invited along. While it is true that Mike can speak disparagingly about his friend at times, maybe he isn't quite as judgmental about Ron and his hometown as he sometimes pretends to be.

This camaraderie is reinforced in one other scene that deserves brief mention. As the Secaucus Seven and their "townie" friends enjoy a night at the local bar and several secrets are shared between the various participants, Mike, Howie, and Ron find themselves sitting together on a bench in the corner of the bar, captured in a three-shot. Suddenly, Mike calls out, "Sunday," and is followed as if on cue by Ron and Howie, who repeat the word in order. "Sunday," "Sunday." Mike then repeats, almost word for word, a common broadcast ad for local automobile speedways at the time. With each pause he takes after naming an attraction to be seen at the speedway, Ron and then Howie chime in with "Sunday." The scene not only demonstrates the familiarity the three have with each other, but it also reveals that the three men share memories of a youth spent together, the kind of memories that don't dissipate if one moves away or enters a new social class.

Technically, *Return of the Secaucus Seven* is generally unspectacular. The camera work is basic, almost amateurish, with little movement besides the occasional pan and the occasional tracking shot of a conversation. Except for the basketball scenes and the nude skinny-dipping/diving shots at the local swimming hole, the only action during the film is a couple brief shots of the group playing volleyball. Much of the film is shot in medium shots to capture both parties in conversation. Very few shot-reverse-shots are used in the conversations. The two-shots, and the occasional three-shot, serve a purpose, however. They give the audience the feeling that they are listening in on intimate conversation between friends. The audience gets to see both the speaker and the listener at the same time and is able to capture reactions as they naturally occur. The shooting of many of the conversations in the film—and the film is filled with conversations—is reminiscent of the shooting of the conversations between Billy and Wyatt in *Easy Rider*. Both films were independently shot and had small budgets, so finances probably played a role in the decision to use a neutral camera to shoot conversation scenes. But the artistic effect cannot be disregarded. As in *Easy Rider*, the neutral camera in *Secaucus Seven* does not comment on the conversations or take a particular character's point of view. The neutral camera also gives the conversations the same realistic feel that the *Easy Rider* scenes provide, and it allows us to get to know these people in the same way we might get to know a group of people we meet at a weekend retreat.

Throughout the film, Sayles also makes consistent use of close-ups of commonplace things and occasionally comes back to them when he wants to make an ironic or comic statement. Early in the film, for example, he opens a scene with a close-up of a skillet full of scrambled eggs as an unknown hand stirs them. It is early in the weekend, and most of the visitors have arrived and are eager to eat. Later in the film, after the night out at the bar,

Sayles opens another scene with a skillet full of eggs. But this time only Chip, the “conservative” of the group who behaved himself the night before, is eager to eat. But the most important close-up of the film is probably the film’s opening shot. Before the audience meets any of the characters, Sayles sets the tone of the film with an opening shot of a plunger in a commode. The audience immediately knows that this film is about real people who do real things. Mike, who is at the other end of the plunger, and Katie, who is heard in the other room but not seen, are immediately accepted as “regular” people. That is important, because the audience must like Mike and Katie if they are going to like their friends. The shot is also important because it makes a statement about class—the rich generally aren’t pictured plunging their commodes.

The shot also tells the audience something else. The former “radicals” are now ensconced in traditional lives. No longer are they hopping into vans and driving three hundred miles to take part in an anti-war protest. They are teachers, prospective doctors, and struggling musicians. They are not radicals, not even the benign sort. By opening the film with a shot of the inside of a commode, Sayles immediately creates distance between the idealism of the sixties and the mundane reality of the 1970s, particularly in the lives of the former activists. If anything, the film is saying that even the most active of activists is eventually drawn into the system when bills begin to pile up on the kitchen table. They may still carry that idealism with them, but now they’re carrying it to work and to the supermarket, not to the reflecting pools of the Washington Monument.

Cross-cutting is also used throughout the film as a means to introduce characters, juxtapose action, and permit the audience to become more intimately involved with the characters. In addition to the basketball sequence, where Sayles cuts back and forth between

the men and the women, he uses cross-cutting on several occasions to take us from one conversation to another, sometimes to move the narrative along and sometimes to make an ironic statement regarding a particular line of dialogue. Sayles introduces the audience to virtually the entire cast in the opening sequence as he cross-cuts between scenes of Mike and Katie preparing the house for the weekend and the visitors making their way to the house from various points in New England. Scenes of J. T. hitchhiking, Irene and Chip fixing a flat, and Frances pulling over to pick up J. T. are all cross-cut with scenes of Mike and Katie cleaning and discussing the impending arrivals of their friends. Through the dialogue of the characters and their wardrobes the audience learns a lot about these people on the road even before they know their names. Chip in particular is immediately characterized as an outsider who is concerned about being accepted by Irene's friends. His dress is conservative, a buttoned-down Izod shirt and khaki pants. He is also not a "regular guy" like Mike—he must read from a manual to give Irene directions on how to fix the flat. His "young Democrat" demeanor is occasionally explored for humorous effect in the film. The humor is gentle, but it does set him apart from the Secaucus Seven. J. T. is dressed in jeans and a vest with a casual shirt, and Frances is dressed almost identically as she jumps out of her car to hug J. T. as he hitchhikes. Back at the house, Mike and Katie are dressed casually in jeans as they scramble around cleaning and repairing the old, wood-framed house that serves as their summer home.

But, while the cross-cutting, the close-ups, and the eschewing of shot-reverse-shot are important to the flow of the film, the most important technical aspect of the film is probably the neutral use of the camera. Sayles chooses not to privilege any of the major characters

with his camera work, and by doing so he creates an egalitarian tale that does not privilege one character or class over another. As Ryan and Kellner write in *Camera Politica*:

The camera assumes multiple points of view on different people, creating a sense of emotional and experiential stitching between them. For this to work, they must all be on the same general social level, and this leveling is evident as well on the plane of meaning construction. (278)

Here, Ryan and Kellner are speaking primarily about the Secaucus Seven. But I think the camera work creates a similar “emotional and experiential stitching” between the counterculture characters and the working-class friends they engage during the weekend.

Return of the Secaucus Seven is ostensibly a film about a group of activists looking back at their college years with irony and a touch of nostalgia. But it is also a film about working and middle class youth and how they have retained their progressive views into their adulthood, even if they occasionally look back on their youthful exploits with irony. The film is careful not to idealize the activists or to elevate one of them above the rest, as a Hollywood film would do in order to hold its audience.^{xiii} By treating the characters as individuals, no better, no worse, warts and beauty marks alike, it also allows for the equal treatment of members of both the middle and working classes.

Mike may not approve of Ron’s choice to remain in his hometown, but the film does not elevate Mike’s point of view by making him the center of the film. In fact, once the audience gets to know Ron, they are probably a bit angry at Mike for his earlier criticism of his hometown buddy. Frances would probably agree with the audience. Although she is a doctor in waiting and a former activist, she is clearly attracted to Ron for his sense of humor as much as for his physical attractiveness. Howie, the other pure working-class character in

the film, may be dead tired most of the time because he works two jobs to support his family of five, but he is just one of the guys at the basketball court. Later, when they gather in the bar, the camera is trained on him as he tells his poignant story about fatherhood.

The point that no one is privileged may be best illustrated through Jeff, the one character who has continued his activism through his 20s. Although he is deeply committed to the Left politically and socially in his position as a drug counselor, he is also the darkest of the characters. He is the one who must go off by himself at the end to chop wood in order to avoid saying goodbye to his departing friends, and who later simply leaves a note for Mike and Katie without saying goodbye to his hosts. He is also the one character who seems most attached to the past and most desirous of reliving those days when the Secaucus Seven hopped into vans and joined fellow activists in protests. That attachment to the past and the community that it represented may very well explain his inability to say good bye to his friends at the end of the weekend.

This darker side of Jeff is also illustrated by his decision to carry with him a small amount of heroin that was given to him by one of the addicts he counsels. (When he, J. T. and a couple others are humorously arrested after they find a dead deer on the road and are accused of hunting out of season, he forgets he has the drugs on him. Luckily, he is not searched, or he would have added another charge to his long list of arrests as a young activist.) When questioned by Mike about why he is carrying the heroin shortly after his arrival in town, he doesn't have a good answer. It is even implied that he subconsciously wanted to be caught with the drugs on him. Some may say that his complete immersion in "the movement" and close association with drugs cast a negative light on the counterculture, but I don't see it that way. Too much of the film counters that argument.

Far from criticizing the counterculture moment of the late 1960s, the film generally celebrates its idealism. The movement is presented as a rewarding part of the early lives of the Secaucus Seven. But it is nonetheless part of their past. Most of the characters are relatively content with their lives, lives that allow them to maintain their idealism while accepting the hard realities of surviving within a capitalist system. But, while this contentment with middle-class life can represent a conservative move, the film also carries a more progressive message. By not privileging the counterculture or the working class, or even the middle class, the film becomes more than just a nostalgic look at the counterculture or an equally nostalgic look at an imagined working class world that has perished, like East Chicago, Indiana; Bloomington, Indiana; or Clairton, Pennsylvania. It becomes a film that demonstrates how the working and middle classes can co-exist in a community outside the boundaries of class.

The late 1970s in American cinema clearly reflected the times. The culture wars of the 1960s, while still alive and churning under the surface, receded for the most part from the Hollywood screens. Films about the war were arriving on screens across America, most notably *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Coming Home*, but films about the culture wars of the 1960s had for the most part disappeared from those same screens. When Hollywood tried to bring sixties-themed films to the public, like *Hair* and *The Wiz*, the public generally yawned or paid no attention at all. The working class, however, remained a viable and important subject for films in the late 1970s. Working-class communities that had sent their young to fight the war in Vietnam were still recovering from their many losses. Many of these same communities, particularly in the East and Midwest, struggled to survive at a time of economic downturn and the flight of manufacturing jobs to the Sun Belt or overseas. Films

that depicted those losses, like *The Deer Hunter* and *Breaking Away*, and to a lesser extent *Four Friends*, touched on themes that were more in tune with the times.

Each of the films that we have discussed in this chapter shares one major theme, and that is the theme of community. While they approach the concept from varying angles, each of the films privileges and ultimately venerates the concept of community. At least in part in response to the era in which they were produced, nostalgia also plays a role in several of the films. In *The Deer Hunter* that nostalgia is for a time represented by a pre-war community immersed in ethnic solidarity and tradition. In *Breaking Away* it is nostalgia for a time when a community could grow up around one industry that promised to sustain it through the toughest of times. In *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, it is a nostalgia for a time of great energy and involvement that created a more metaphorical community that continues a decade later, even though its members have all moved on to other ventures.

Just as the counterculture was often privileged in the films of the late 1960s when social upheaval and national wealth were both at their zenith and the Left was on the move, the working class was often privileged in the films of the late 1970s when America was attempting to recover from a series of blows that had damaged the national psyche and mobilized a radical Right. These new films about the working class were not like the films of the mid-decade, though. Instead of “super men” who went the distance with the champion or killed the monster terrorizing a seaside town, these new working-class subjects were victims of forces that had disrupted their communities and made them vulnerable to an uncertain future. Films from both the Right and Left continued to be made—some supporting the war effort, others deriding it; some exploring “redneck” ideals and others exploring feminist

positions—but one constant remained: the counterculture was rarely the subject of films from either direction.

At a time of great anxiety in America due to economic fears and international crises, Hollywood took several tacks. One tack was to try to distract people from their daily woes by offering blockbusters like *Star Wars* or escapist fare like *Smokey and the Bandit*. Another approach was to offer films like *Grease* that returned to a supposedly simpler time. But Hollywood also attacked the issues of the time head-on, and when it did it often turned to films about the plight of the working class and working class communities. These films remain films of and about their era, and they reflect their times just as much as the youth/cult films of the late 1960s reflected theirs.

ⁱ One exception to the singer-songwriters of the earlier part of the decade was Jim Croce, who sang of the working class in the early 1970s before dying in a plane crash in September of 1973. One of his songs, “I’ve Got a Name,” played a prominent role in the Jeff Bridges film, *The Last American Hero* (1973), a fictionalized version of the life of Junior Johnson, a famous stock car racer who began his career as a moonshine runner. The film was a precursor to other working-class themed films of the decade.

ⁱⁱ It should be noted that economists generally agree that the real unemployment numbers were higher than official numbers because many people had become disillusioned after exhausting unemployment benefits and being unable to find work. These people no longer showed up in the government unemployment figures.

ⁱⁱⁱ The inflation and unemployment figures are available at www.miseryindex.us, a website that collects data from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Financial Trend Forecaster (NPA Services Inc.)

^{iv} In “The Bohunk in American Cinema,” writer Danusha V. Goska refers derisively to the “Boris Badenoff” accent used by the actress who is “dressed in all black” and is wearing a “babushka” (415). Goska takes umbrage at the stereotypical representation of the men and women in the film: “*The Deer Hunter’s* unique use of Bohunk cultural markers is combined with grotesque exaggeration that well represents stereotypes, but

does not represent real people” (416). While I agree with her on some points and will discuss them in this chapter, I believe director Michael Cimino also offers counterbalances for some of these stereotypes.

^v According to Goska, the Lemkos are a Slavic ethnic group who emigrated from what is today Poland and the Ukraine (414).

^{vi} Michael discovers that Nick is still alive when he visits Stevie in the Veteran’s hospital. Stevie, who has lost both of his legs as a result of a fall from a helicopter into a rocky river in Vietnam, shows Michael a drawer filled with \$100 bills that he has been receiving anonymously from Saigon. Michael realizes that the money must be coming from Nick, whom he last saw playing Russian roulette in the back alleys of Saigon.

^{vii} Dave, who has a fascination with Italian life and bicycling during most of the film, has feigned being an Italian exchange student in order to court a coed who was previously involved with the most notorious and obnoxious “big man on campus.” When Mike almost drowns at the quarry while competing with the BMOC, Dave, Cyril, and Moocher rescue him and risk having Dave be recognized by Catherine, who is with the college group at the quarry that day. Dave later confesses his ruse to her, and she is devastated.

^{viii} As Ray pulls up in his large Cadillac and walks towards what appears to be a loading dock, two older men eat their lunches on the dock. One turns to the other: “He looks like a government safety inspector.” The other responds, “Or a union organizer.” While these two lines of dialogue delivered by two amateur actors may seem to be innocuous, they raised the ire of some in the labor movement. William J. Puette considers the exchange a “swipe at unions,” because it implies that union organizers drive big cars because they are corrupt (28-29). But in re-watching the scene, I believe Puette is mistaken, or at least over-sensitive in this case. While it is clear that the car Ray is driving is a big Cadillac, it is also an older model. I believe the two men, who we soon discover know Ray well from his days as one of them, are referencing his clothing—a shirt, tie, and hat—more than the car. But it is understandable that Puette draws that conclusion, based on the bashing, both overt and subtle, that unions have received in Hollywood films over the years.

^{ix} That is not to say that all affluent students joined the anti-war movement. Most did not. But the films of the late 1960s generally, and rightly, portrayed the counterculture as a product of the middle and upper classes.

^x When I first watched this film in 1979 as a young man, the audience laughed out loud at the freeze frame of Ray's look back at his son. When I screened the film for a college film class earlier this year, about thirty years later, the college students laughed just as hard.

^{xi} In his 2002 dissertation, *Hard hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class Identity in 1970s American Cinema*, Derek Richard Nystrom discusses Hollywood's juxtaposition of the "redneck" and the "good ole boy" in many films of the era, including films like *Smokey and the Bandit* (25). Although I do not address those films in this work, they represent a significant part of the working-class cycle of films that came to the screen beginning in the mid 1970s.

^{xii} Ryan and Kellner cite Harold in *The Big Chill* as an example of a Hollywood character who is granted "special status" in an ensemble film (278). Harold, played by Kevin Kline, is the "adult" of the *The Big Chill* crowd who has constructed a relatively traditional life while maintaining interest in the music and cultural artifacts of his youth. I would add Danilo of *Four Friends* to that list of characters granted "special status." He is clearly privileged as the center of that film.

EPILOGUE

The working class has been the subject of filmmakers since the earliest 19th Century films of Thomas Edison and William S. Porter in the United States and the Lumiere brothers in France. In each epoch, the portrayal of the working class, as well its employment as the subject of film, has often reflected the political climate of the times. In more conservative times, the working class has been rendered as the foundation upon which the nation is built, the irreplaceable part that keeps the engine of the nation running. In more liberal times, the working class has at times been portrayed as the narrow-minded, sometimes ignorant, enforcers of the status quo. In reactionary times, Hollywood has often valorized the working class at the expense of progressives, while in times that lean to the Left, progressives or counterculture agents have been valorized at the expense of the working class. But throughout the history of film, particularly since its emergence as a mass-culture business, it can be said that Hollywood, no matter what the political times, has consistently produced a product it believed would sell in the political and social environment of the time. In doing so, for better or worse, it has also helped to define what America is and has helped to shape how Americans look at themselves and those around them.

Never has Hollywood provided a more accurate mirror to American society than during the counterculture era, defined here as 1967 to 1982. During this period Hollywood seized every opportunity to read the mood of America so it could provide mass entertainment to a fractured society. From the counterculture films of the mid- and late 1960s to the working-class films of the latter years of the epoch, Hollywood consistently attempted to read the minds of its audience, sometimes succeeding and sometimes coming to the party too

late. Throughout the 15-year era, whether the country was leaning Left or Right, one theme consistently surfaced in American film. Whether the film was about two counterculture drug dealers searching for America or about four working-class high school friends trying to find themselves in a small town in Indiana, the concept of community—the search for it and the sometimes painful loss of it—operated at the core of countless films. Yes, films were produced during the “Hollywood Renaissance” that emerged from the individual visions of directors like Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Hal Ashby, and John Cassavettes. In each era the individual visions of exceptional directors find their way to the screen. But even the films of these men explored community, and some of them are examined in this dissertation. Yes, too, there was a period in the early and mid-1970s when blockbusters and “disaster” films ruled at the box office. But as we saw in the study of *Jaws*, even many of those films mourned the loss of community and sought a return of the strong patriarch during a time of great doubt and insecurity about America’s future.

In exploring the effect of modern life on community, the counterculture era in film not only mirrored the real divides in the nation along the lines of class, race, gender, and generation, but it also helped to shape, or at least validate, how Americans viewed themselves. Ultimately, by putting a mirror up to the epoch and trying to stay ahead of the cultural curve—often falling a step behind as we noted in earlier chapters—Hollywood played its role in helping to constitute what became the new communities of the latter part of the 20th Century, communities often based on Left and Right politics and cultural beliefs rather than neighborhoods and extended families.

The idea that film shapes our perceptions of ourselves and the perceptions others have of us has been around for a long time. It goes back at least to the Frankfurt School and

theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who found film to be a prime example of how the “Culture Industry” works. As Vincent B. Leitch writes:

In contrast to [Walter] Benjamin, who on occasion was optimistic about the emancipatory potential of mass art, Adorno and Horkheimer contend that the culture industry serves the totalitarian impulses of modern capitalist society, not least because the interests of the leading broadcast firms, publishing companies, and motion picture studios are economically interwoven with those of all other capitalist industries. In its attempt to produce and reproduce the social relations of a homogenized society, the culture industry contributes to the liquidation of the individual and the maintenance of the status quo.

(1221)

As we noted in the Introduction, Hollywood studios from their inception in the 1910s were business enterprises that could survive only by creating a product that would reach a mass audience and simultaneously avoid government censure. That meant that Hollywood films were by definition less likely to criticize the status quo, as many working-class films of the pre-studio era did. These films generally produced “safe” characters. These characters either represented mainstream American values, as defined by the businessmen at the studios, or they did not seriously challenge the status quo. The audience, often consisting of large numbers of recent immigrants and other working-class viewers, learned in large part what it meant to be an American from the characters in these films.

After several scandals rocked Hollywood in the 1920s and the industry came under government scrutiny, the Motion Picture Production Code was instituted in 1930, making the industry even more cautious, mainstream, and homogenous. In their *Dialectic of*

Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer write, “The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry” (1226). The audience, they added, had become conditioned by the film industry to accept the world of film as an extension of its own world, and nowhere was this more evident than in the genre films that emerged during the studio era. That is not to say that criminals, sociopaths, and other marginal characters did not appear in Hollywood films. They did. But if they were criminals, they were punished; and if they were outside the “mainstream” of social behavior, they were ostracized, marginalized, or lampooned. As Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, “All the other films and products of the entertainment industry which they have seen have taught them [the audience] what to expect; they react automatically. . . . The culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product” (1227). As we have seen in this study, that molding of men and women and that general support of the status quo continued through the counterculture era as films leaned Left and then Right as the times and society evolved.

These budding early film moguls were also not above using the medium to further their own economic causes, and this affected how the relationship between the working class and labor unions was rendered on film. Studio heads imposed their conservative views of labor on their workers, fighting to control wages and using the content of films to spread an anti-labor message. When it became clear in the early years of the studio system that Hollywood workers wanted to organize for better wages and better working conditions, the conservative businessmen of Hollywood took charge. Not only did the studios fight the emerging working-class unions for control over the production of films, but the studios also produced a number of anti-labor films. This was most effective when the politics of the time were favorable to a conservative message, as the 1920s were as the country dealt with the

Red Scare that grew out of the Russian Revolution of 1917. It was also effective during and after World War II when films discouraged dissent and offered a vision of Americans pulling together to fight a common foe. Here the idea of community was defined as the larger community, the nation. This privileging of the larger community continued into the late 1940s and the 1950s as the latest version of the Red Scare struck Hollywood and actors, directors, and writers came under suspicion from the House UnAmerican Activities Committee for perceived, and sometimes ancient, ties to the Communist Party. Although some pro-labor and pro-working-class films were produced during the height of the studio system, the vast majority of films about labor or the working class had conservative, sometimes reactionary, themes. For every pro-labor film like *Salt of the Earth* (1954), which, as noted in the Introduction, faced a fierce fight from the government, Joseph Breen and the Production Code, and conservative forces before it ever came to the screen, there were several anti-labor films like *Black Fury* (1935), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Blue Collar* (1978), and *F.I.S.T.* (1978). In these films, the individual worker was often seen as a victim of either a corrupt union or of radical outsiders who fomented strife between workers and management. Hollywood could valorize the working class when it wanted to, but it rarely showed approval for the organizing of workers. This was portrayed as un-American and leftist, and was seen as an attack on the larger community, not a desire to constitute community.

When the 1960s arrived, Hollywood found that its business model was not producing the profits that it desired and studios chose to move much of their production overseas to take advantage of non-union crews and lax labor laws. By 1960 “runaway production,” as it was called, accounted for 40 percent of Hollywood films, according to Paul Monaco (14). More

and more production was shipped overseas. This had its positive and negative effects. It certainly made filmmaking less expensive for a while, but it also left filmmakers with the task of trying to make European settings stand in for New York, or California, or Chicago, often with unsuccessful results.¹ A more experimental European filmmaking also began to influence the American studios. As the 1960s rolled on, this European influence led to more daring filmmaking in Hollywood as adult themes became more common in American films. Ultimately, this more daring approach led to the end of the decades-old Production Code.

The working class also made a comeback of sorts in Hollywood in the 1960s. Although the working class never completely left the screen—*Marty*, the story of a working class man who lives with his mother won the Oscar in 1955—it was prominently portrayed in major films like *The Hustler* (1961), *Hud* (1963), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) during this period. The latter two of these films, as we discussed in the Introduction, were really counterculture films tucked away in working-class tales. *Cool Hand Luke* was a film about a man who, when asked by his dying mother why he found himself in jail, replies, “I just can’t seem to find no elbow room,” a refrain that could just as easily have come from a counterculture character of the late 1960s. *Bonnie and Clyde* represented the ultimate in youthful protest of the status quo. Set in the Great Depression, it clearly spoke to the youth of the time who felt their lives were determined by rules that they had no role in setting. Both *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde* valorize the working class by representing their working-class protagonists as victims of the same oppressive society that many American youths were rejecting as the Vietnam War escalated and the Civil Rights movement strengthened.

Just as importantly, these films celebrated the establishment of new kinds of community. In *Cool Hand Luke*, Lucas Jackson creates a community of prisoners on a prison farm through the sheer force of his personality and his refusal to follow the rules of the larger society. Although he doesn't set out to build community, he does so simply by offering the prisoners an alternative to the oppressive society that they have failed, in large part, to assimilate to. Although he ultimately fails in his personal bid to fight the status quo, he dies on his own terms and leaves behind a newly constituted community.ⁱⁱ Although that community is subsumed by the prison system, the men within it have been changed for the better. But, as noted in the Introduction, they are a community without a leader. Hollywood had created a working-class hero in Lucas Jackson, a rugged individualist in the Hollywood tradition, but it had not offered an alternative to the system that left him "no elbow room."

In *Bonnie and Clyde*, the protagonists create their own community by joining forces against bankers and other defenders of the status quo whom they and other victims of the Great Depression blame for the economic disaster that forced farmers from their lands and workers from their jobs. Their small community of five, despite their illegal and sometimes murderous ways, become a symbol of protest for many of the working-class characters in the film. More importantly, they became a symbol of protest and collective action for youth audiences of 1967 and succeeded in arousing feelings of community in a much larger community of 1960s youths.

Despite the box-office successes of *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, the working class virtually disappeared from Hollywood screens as subjects in the late 1960s. With a war being protested and civil rights battles being fought across the country, Hollywood targeted the growing youth audience with films it believed youths wanted to see.

But instead of continuing with the valorization of the working class achieved with *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, Hollywood chose another example to emulate—*Easy Rider* (1969). As we saw in Chapter 1, *Easy Rider's* formula of counterculture protagonists who clash with conservative and sometimes reactionary working-class antagonists led the way in Hollywood for about two years, creating the binary of counterculture/working class that was exploited by the film industry for a decade. During that time, several films were released that valorized the counterculture search for community and demonized the working class as the sometimes violent defender of the status quo. But while the era that started with *Easy Rider* ended almost as soon as it began, the theme of community carried over. As Hollywood turned away from the counterculture and films like *Medium Cool*, *Alice's Restaurant*, and *Billy Jack* in the early 1970s, it looked towards the working class again in films that foregrounded community in other ways.

When the nation turned to the right in the 1970s, so did Hollywood. A few protest movies continued to be made, and Hollywood even experienced a renaissance in the early part of the decade when studios backed films by the “new turks” of cinema. But as the decade progressed and the country moved to the right, the political and cultural climates of the nation were reflected in the style and tone of Hollywood films. With this move to the right came a new perspective on the working class. Early in the decade the working class was explored in more complex ways in films like *Scarecrow* (1973) and *The Last Detail* (1974), two films that examine damaged working-class characters who seek community wherever they can find it. Both of these films, in some ways, call to mind the Hollywood of the mid-1960s when working-class characters in *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde* were perceived as victims of an unfeeling society. These were generally small stories about

average people who were struggling to find their way in a world that had too often forgotten them. But these films were also products of their time as they reflected the sense of loss and the feeling of being adrift that permeated the nation as the Vietnam War wound down and the working class began to question its economic future.

Even a film like *Joe* (1970), with its vile and murderous working-class title character, explores the theme of community. On one hand, it denigrates the counterculture community as counterfeit in many ways, portraying the “hippies” as dirty, promiscuous, drug-addled thieves. On the other hand, the film demonstrates the forging of a new community made up of the working class and the upper-middle class. Although this marriage of classes serves a vile purpose—working-class Joe Curran and his more affluent friend, Bill Compton, join forces to eradicate the community of hippies—it also presages the marriage of the white working class and the middle class later in the decade, onscreen and off.

More problematic is a film like *Dirty Harry*, a reactionary film about a lone wolf cop who has turned into a vigilante cop after a personal tragedy. But even here the loss of community hovers over the film. Not only has Harry Callahan lost his wife in a senseless and random act—she was killed by a drunk driver—but with her loss he has lost any roots to community. His only tie to anything beyond himself is his job, and he tosses that away at the end of the film. Like many in the working class at the time, he feels helpless to control or alter the world that is changing too rapidly around him. Although he kills his long-haired antagonist at the end of the film, the predatory and murderous Scorpio, he stands alone in a long shot as he tosses his badge away. It is the loss of community, his community, that he mourns, and he sees no hope to reconstitute it in a world that he believes protects the guilty and not the innocent.

Throughout the 1970s community continued to play a significant role in films from both the Left and the Right. In *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), for example, filmmaker Martin Scorsese explores how a suddenly widowed mother of a teenage boy builds a new community with her son, a new man, and fellow workers at an Arizona diner. Although the film doesn't go far enough for those who would like to see Alice emancipate herself from a world of patriarchy, it does offer hope for a new kind of family that is not patricentric.

Jaws (1975), on the other hand, takes the other tack. The film mourns the loss of the patriarch and can only reconstitute community at a New England beach town through the return of the patriarch. Although a blockbuster in the disaster-film mode, it is really the beginning of a wave of films about the working class that called for a return to "traditional" values and traditional power structures. While Hollywood reinforced these values in the earlier studio days as it played its role in the culture industry, it was now re-introducing them to a new working-class audience. *Jaws* was followed in 1976 by Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky*, a film that not only reasserted patriarchal authority, but also offered a return of the working-class brute. More importantly, the film was one of the first, and clearly the most successful, at portraying the white ethnic working-class male as the victim of everything from affirmative action to the women's movement. Rocky Balboa's ability to "go the distance" serves as a metaphor for the return of the white-male dominated community that many ethnics feared was gone forever when those communities were being torn apart by recession and the nation's attempt to right historical wrongs perpetrated against racial minorities and women.

As the decade wound down, films like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Breaking Away* (1979) explored the breakdown of working-class communities. In *The Deer Hunter*, the Vietnam War changes a Pennsylvania steel town forever, taking some of its sons and crippling others, either physically or psychologically. In *Breaking Away*, a dramedy in the current vernacular, the loss of industry in a small Indiana town forces young men to consider lives outside their small community, a choice their fathers did not have to make. Both films deal with key issues of their time. *The Deer Hunter* was the first popular film to explore the effects of the Vietnam War on an American community, and *Breaking Away* was the first Hollywood film to explore the loss of manufacturing jobs in the “Rust Belt” communities of the Midwest and the East in the mid- and late 1970s. America and its communities were changing, and films about the working class brought some of the fears about change to the screen.

The era as defined in this work ends with two films that touch on both the 1960s and the 1970s, *Four Friends* (1981) and *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980). *Four Friends* (1981) explores the relationship between four high school friends in East Chicago, Indiana, as they pass through the turbulent 1960s. Although set in the 1960s, the film looks back at the era through a 1981 lens. In doing so, it provides a rather bleak view of the counterculture and its attempts to form new communities, although it should be said that the film spends very little time exploring the counterculture. Its primary objective is to explore an ethnic working-class community and how war and personal journeys have affected it. Its lead characters deal with the dilemma of trying to hold onto one form of community, the familiar, without retarding their individual growth and the exploration of new communities. Although the film generally comes down on the side of tradition, a conservative move, it does leave the

door open for exploration of new communities. It fails, however, to show any positive collective action between the working class and the counterculture.

In *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, counterculture values survive a decade after the 1960s have ended through a group of friends who have kept that spirit alive. More progressive in many ways than *Four Friends*, John Sayles's independent film demonstrates that although counterculture values were under fire in the late 1970s and throughout the Reagan years, they remained alive and continued to help shape America. Despite attempts from the Right to marginalize the counterculture, the film demonstrates that the community represented by the Secaucus Seven remained intact and continued to thrive even after the reactionary ethnic working-class revival of the late 1970s. Just as importantly, the film demonstrates the merging of the working class and the middle class in the construction of real community, contrasting it with *Joe*, which came exactly a decade earlier and portrayed the merger of the working class and middle class as a destructive force.

The cultural and political era that was the late 1960s and early 1970s continues to have a profound effect on us today. Although the nation moved hard to the right during the late 1970s and remained there for the better part of three decades, the counterculture era left its mark on our films, our television, and our culture as a whole. Although the current era is not immune to the homogeneity of the culture industry identified by Adorno and Horkheimer, music has continued to evolve, television has become more daring in some respects, and films have continued to push the envelope in new directions. Although much of television, music, and film continue to reinforce the hegemony of the dominant culture, voices of protest—often inspired by the counterculture movements of the 1960s—have not been silenced.

It is interesting and maybe even a bit ironic to note that although films like *Easy Rider* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* became synonymous with the counterculture era in Hollywood cinema, many of the most affective and lasting films of the era highlighted working-class characters. From *Cool Hand Luke* and *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Four Friends* and *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, the working class played a key role in the films of the era, sometimes as antagonists, but generally as protagonists. As we have seen in exploring the films in this work, at the center of all of these stories is the theme of community. Whether shown from the Right or the Left perspective, these characters and their stories have become the American stories of the era. Although it is clear that Hollywood continued to perform as a business during the counterculture era, providing the entertainment it thought would sell, it is also clear that many different views of community were explored in cinema during the era despite the privileging of the status quo. Although Adorno and Horkheimer are probably right when they say the culture industry shapes our views and numbs our minds as it perpetuates the status quo, it is still encouraging to know that dissenting voices could be heard above the din of the Hollywood system in the 1970s. As evidenced by voices in film and other mass media that continue to be heard today, it is safe to say that the countercultural revolution of the 1960s continues to affect what we see and hear forty years after it reached its apex.

ⁱ Although location shooting was generally more expensive than studio shooting, the use of non-union labor overseas more than made up for the cost of location shoots.

ⁱⁱ As alluded to in the Introduction, this same basic story line was played out again in the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, based on the play adapted from the 1962 novel of the same name written by Ken Kesey. This film was considered for this study but was not chosen because, although released in 1975, it seemed to straddle the two epochs, the 1960s and 1970s, and did not neatly fit into the latter.

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