

AMERICAN POLITICAL FILMS: 1968-1980

By

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In loving memory to my parents

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER	
1 BACKGROUND.....	1
Significance of the Study.....	1
Film Studies.....	8
Film History.....	10
The Developmental School.....	11
The Economic School.....	13
The Cultural School.....	15
Film History as a Genre.....	19
Politics in Film.....	20
The Historical Analysis of Film	28
2 FROM POSTWAR CONSENSUS TO THE TURBULENT 1960s IN AMERICAN POLITICS AND FILM	32
American Political Consensus 1940s -1960s.....	34
The 1960s: Ferment in America	37
National Trauma and Social Disruption	45
American Consensus in Films: 1940s – 1960s.....	46
Presidential Biographies and Political Films	48
The 1960s: Ferment in the Film Industry	52
3 REVOLUTION: <i>WILD IN THE STREETS</i> (1968), <i>MEDIUM COOL</i> (1969)	57
Key Political Events of 1968	59
Fourteen or Fight	61
Film Style.....	64
American International Pictures	66
Meet the New Boss; Same as the Old Boss.....	69
Music and Politics.....	70
The Whole World is Watching	73
Personal and Political Commitment	76
Production History.....	80

	Mediated Realities	84
	Marginalized Socio-Economic Groups.....	86
	Messages in the Medium	87
4	REFORM: <i>THE CANDIDATE</i> (1972), <i>WALKING TALL</i> (1973)	93
	The Campaign.....	95
	Fathers and Sons	98
	The Debate.....	99
	The Home Stretch.....	100
	A Touch of Evil	101
	Campaign Experiences of the Filmmakers	104
	Critical Reaction	108
	To Thy Own Self Be True	110
	Law and Order in America	112
	Walk Tall or Don't Walk At All.....	114
	Coming Home.....	115
	Nice Versus Vice	116
	Buford and Obra	118
	A Touch of Evil	119
	Reaction to the Film.....	121
	Print the Legend.....	125
	Political Values	126
5	COVER-UP: <i>CHINATOWN</i> (1974), <i>THE PARALLAX VIEW</i> (1974), and <i>ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN</i> (1976)	129
	Politics as Usual.....	132
	Chinatown as Metaphor.....	134
	Parallels to Watergate	138
	The Creative Process	141
	Values	143
	The Fourth Estate.....	146
	Critical Response.....	150
	The Journalist as Hero	152
	Falling in Love with The Post	153
	Follow The Money	156
	What Ever it Takes	158
	Your Lives Are In Danger	161
	Critical Response.....	163
	The Role of The Press in the Political Process	164
6	REPLACEMENT: <i>NASHVILLE</i> (1975), <i>TAXI DRIVER</i> (1976).....	167
	New Roots	168
	200 Years.....	172
	New Leaders	174

Management	177
Assassination	178
Production of the Film	180
Critical Response	183
Replacement	186
Alienation	188
Crazed Loner As Ironic Hero	192
Disengagement	196
Critical Response	199
A New Generation Has Gone Forth.....	201
7 INTROSPECTION: <i>THE SEDUCTION OF JOE TYNAN</i> (1979) & <i>BEING THERE</i> (1979)	203
Industry Trends	204
Charisma	206
Ambition	208
Domestic Conflict.....	210
Creative Influences	213
Critical Reaction	215
Dual Nature.....	217
The Me Decade.....	219
Changing Channels.....	221
The Rich, They Are Not Like Us.....	224
The Wise Fool.....	225
Media Reality.....	228
Production History.....	231
8 CONCLUSION.....	239
Rituals of Power	240
Political Critiques	245
Values	250
Conformity to History.....	255
Future Political Values, Films, and Events.....	260
Implications for Future Research.....	264
What Do We Do Now.....	266
APPENDIX: FILMS IN STUDY	269
WORKS CITED	271
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	294

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By

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My study examined the values, attitudes, and beliefs depicted in American political films from 1968 to 1980. A historical analysis of eleven films was used to chart the changing landscape of an important transitional period in both American film and political history.

Motion pictures are instruments of mass communication. As such, they are products of their times and are answerable to market forces. For this reason, they can be used as artifacts of cultural history. Examination of the political film genre contributes increased knowledge into the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. The political film genre has reflected society's changing attitudes toward political leaders, the role of the electorate, the role of the media, the proper response to national crisis, the proper agenda of public issues, and the ethical responsibilities of governmental leaders.

Historical analysis of eleven films was used to chart the changing landscape of an important transitional period in both American film and political history. Films were chosen based on the inclusion of recurring genre conventions of character and plot, including major characters that aspire to or hold political office, are removed from political office, or report on the political activities of governmental office holders.

Political films of this era reflected and abetted the erosion of the American political consensus of the post World War II era. These films found fault with political leaders and the political process, offered harsh critiques of the pace of social reform, questioned the value of existing economic and media structures. As a result, an era of American self-confidence was replaced by an era of ironic detachment and political cynicism.

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND

This study examined the depiction of politics in American motion pictures from 1968 to 1980. Motion pictures have been one of the most important entertainment forums of the last century. Because of their influential status, films can be used to help identify the values that were deemed important by a particular society at a particular time. The study of films can contribute another facet to the mosaic of historical truth. For this reason, they are worthy of historical analysis. The study of film provides insight into how filmmakers reacted to the changing political climate of the time, which political norms, attitudes, and beliefs were challenged, and how these norms, attitudes, and beliefs have altered over time.

Significance of the Study

Creators of popular entertainment have often commented on the political climate of their times. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* satirized pacifism, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* addressed the choice of regicide, and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was an allegory for the excesses of McCarthyism. Filmmakers have also utilized their medium to comment on politics. Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) cautioned against the evils of political corruption, *The Candidate* (1972) depicted the corrosive effects of personal ambition and *Wag the Dog* (1997) illustrated the ease with which political reality can be manipulated.

Artists who operated within popular entertainment forums created all of these works. Market forces compelled them to reflect the perspectives of their audiences. Individual beliefs motivated them to inspire new ways of thinking. This is also true of many filmmakers who have worked in the American motion picture industry.

Filmmakers are products of their times. They have both an economic and an artistic motivation to understand the society they live in. At the same time, filmmakers must make choices as to what is included in and excluded from their productions. Because of these factors, motion pictures can be utilized as valuable historical artifacts. An examination of the plot, characters, style, and structure contained in a film helps to explain the historical context in which it was produced. Therefore, an examination of American political films produced from 1968 to 1980 increases our understanding of the historical context within which they were created.

Films of this period are worthy of study for other reasons. An examination of motion pictures adds to the literature of mass communication history. A great deal has been written about film history in such other disciplines as English and Rhetoric. These disciplines have approached the study of film from an aesthetic point of view. They have sought to trace the history of film language and film art. Mass communications history provides a unique perspective that leads to a greater understanding of the role that each mass medium has played in the development of society.

The field of mass communication has contributed a great deal to the understanding of the effects that media have had on society, but there is a need for the reverse. It is important to discover the effects that society has had upon media. It is also important to increase our knowledge of film history. There has been a great deal of valuable research

on journalism, print, and broadcasting in mass communication history, but not as much research on entertainment media. The field of mass communication history is a proper venue for the study of motion pictures as well as journalism, radio, and television. If one wishes to understand American society in the era of the penny press, it is necessary to turn to *The New York Sun*. In order to understand American society in the twentieth century, one must go to the movies.

The motion picture has long held a unique place in the national consciousness. Motion pictures have offered an experience that other media could not. Attendance at a motion picture has always required its audience to make an effort. They have had to leave their homes, travel to the theater, and purchase a ticket. Films have also occupied a unique place in the audience's imagination. Images found on the silver screen could often seem to be more real than reality. Are schools of great white sharks to be found lurking at every beach in America? Did John Wayne really win World War II single handedly? Who is the more real Lincoln, the man pictured on our currency, or the man portrayed by Henry Fonda?

Historical reality can be mediated by film reality. It is important for society to understand how filmmakers have used their craft to mediate the reality of important issues. Issues of governance and political leadership have always been of paramount importance. The communication of these mediated realities has changed through different eras in history.

The history of American motion pictures can be divided into different eras including, the silent era, the classic era, and the current era of multinational corporate ownership. Each era has presented a different vision of America. The Great Depression,

for instance, resulted in both escapist dance movies -- *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) -- as well as antihero gangster films -- *The Public Enemy* (1931). Moments of crisis within society or within the motion picture industry have often resulted in films that have broken previous conventions. This was true of the period beginning in the late 1960s.

The late 1960s and early 1970s has been labeled the era of the "New Hollywood." This was an important period in film history because several influential filmmakers had an opportunity to exercise unprecedented creative freedom. Economic factors within the industry provided an opportunity for new filmmakers to emerge. These new writers and directors were fresh from film schools or from the television medium. They took chances both artistically and thematically. Their work remained commercially successful, but it also challenged traditionally held values regarding morality, authority, and social norms (King 25).

This period in film history was the last time that motion pictures could stand alone as important cultural events. After this time, films became but one part of a corporate media package designed to cross promote video rentals, music sales, and product endorsements. By the end of the 1970s, the American motion picture industry had regained its economic footing. That economic turn around was facilitated by the production of big budget blockbusters that could no longer afford to challenge the status quo (Biskind 343).

The period from 1968 to 1980 was not only significant in film history; it was also an important period in American political history. The year 1968 was especially eventful. Violence at the Democratic National Convention tore the party apart and provided headlines for the antiwar movement. The country was traumatized by the assassinations

of Dr. Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy. President Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection. Johnson's "Great Society" would come to be replaced by Richard Nixon's "Silent Majority." The election of Richard Nixon signaled a shift from the liberalism of the 1960s to greater conservatism of the 1970s.

The decade of the 1970s continued to bring change. This era was marked by important events that would shake public confidence in their government. These events included scandals, tax revolts, terrorism, and national malaise. By the end in the 1970s, America was a different nation. The electorate had become disenchanted with the political status quo. A new majority rejected the politics of the 1960s. This new majority would eventually turn to a man from outside the political establishment to fill the presidency. Motion pictures reflected these important real world events. They have been depicted directly in motion picture content as well as in the back-story within film plots, the characterization of major players, and in the violation of audience expectations.

Films involving the depiction of the political process in the United States are the subject of this study. Other genres of motion pictures, no doubt, would provide insight into certain aspects of American society as well. Important public issues have been the subject of a broad array of film genres including the gangster film, the labor film, the prison film, the juvenile delinquent film, the racial conflict film, the ecological disaster film, and the war film. Each one of these genres addresses a social problem. Social problem films are differentiated from political films by their presentation of a single topical issue rather than an examination of the established political structures designed to govern over the long term. It is the political film genre that best illustrates the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. The political film genre has most

directly addressed society's attitudes toward political leaders, the role of the electorate, the role of the media, the proper response to national crisis, the proper agenda of public issues and the ethical responsibilities of governmental leaders.

At this point, it should be asked what the definition of a political film is. Some authors rely on personal experience to recognize a political film when they see one. Noted film critic Andrew Sarris remarked, "Even the most escapist movies manage to make statements about society and its ideology" (9). Many scholars have accepted a broad definition, based on the presence of ideological content within each film. This is especially true of radical film theorists. In his definition of political films, Mike Wayne considered issues of social and cultural emancipation of prime importance. According to Wayne, political films are those designed to radicalize the masses in their struggle against dominant culture (5). Mas'ud Zavarzadeh agreed with Wayne's analysis, adding that western political films are often designed to homogenize the past or to make dominate culture appear harmless and therefore inevitable (153). These are rather broad definitions of political films because almost all Hollywood films tend to reflect the dominant culture.

Beverly Kelly agreed that filmmakers utilize a diverse range of vehicles to deliver a political message, from screwball comedy to biography to western. In an attempt to narrow the field of discussion, Kelly suggested a definition based on the presence of political ideology defined as "integrated assertions, theories, and aims that constitute a governmental policy" (2). The presence of ideology alone, however, still would result in the inclusion of most Hollywood productions.

In *Films by Genre*, Daniel Lopez defines political films as those that attempt to reaffirm the political beliefs shared by a social group, convert others to that point of view,

or discover the hidden motivations behind the actions undertaken by an established political bureaucracy. This definition of the political film genre is quite useful because it includes the presence of both ideological content, as well as an examination of the underlying political structure of a society. As an example of this definition, Lopez cited the Greek film *Z* (1968) as a seminal work in the political film genre because of its critique of political expediency and injustice in the 1960s Greek political system (228-229).

Political films are defined as those that seek to examine the shared ideology, as well as the underlying political structure of a society. In addition, the political film is more narrowly defined as those films that incorporate recurring genre conventions of character and plot, including major characters that aspire to or hold political office, are political staff members, organize anti-governmental protests, or report on the political activities of governmental office holders.

Based on this definition, *The Internet Movie Data Base* online film bibliography was consulted <<http://imdb.com>>. The resulting eleven films were judged to represent the selection criteria and to provide the most valuable historical film artifacts of the study period. No attempt was made to favorably or unfavorably judge the ideology found in the work of writers, directors, or producers. Because filmmaking is a collaborative business, the work of all key contributors was examined. Only profitable films produced and distributed in America, from 1968 to 1980, were considered. The most complete DVD versions of the films were then secured for viewing. They are as follows:

All The President's Men. Warner Brothers, 1976.

Being There. Lorimar Film Entertainment, 1979.

The Candidate. Warner Brothers, 1972.

Chinatown. Paramount, 1974.

Medium Cool. Paramount, 1969

Nashville. American Broadcasting Company, 1975.

The Parallax View. Paramount, 1974.

The Seduction of Joe Tynan. Universal, 1979.

Taxi Driver. Columbia, 1976.

Walking Tall. Bing Crosby Productions, 1973.

Wild In The Streets. American International Pictures, 1968.

Film Studies

Motion pictures have always generated intense popular interest. The exploits of early pioneers were enthusiastically reported on in the press of the day. To most people, motion pictures were an interesting new technology that provided harmless entertainment. Others saw them as escapist and not worthy of serious thought. Many people still do. The early study of motion pictures suffered because of these popular perceptions.¹

The movies became the subject of countless fan magazines, gossip columns, and movie star biographies. These writings were beamed toward the popular mass market. There was, however, some early academic interest in film. In 1916, the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg commented on motion picture's ability to break down rational notions of space and time within the minds of the audience (401). In 1929, Russian director Sergei Eisenstein explained the art of film editing and its mastery by D. W. Griffith (25).

¹ The study of film did not become popular until the latter half of the twentieth century. The 1960s saw an explosion of film studies classes and in the number of film related publications. See Jowett and Linton 13).

In 1933, a team of sociologists, under the direction of the head of the Bureau of Educational Research at Ohio State University W. W. Charters, produced a series of ten volumes that became known as *The Payne Fund Studies*. *The Payne Fund Studies* found that children were frequent viewers of movies and that these movies depicted themes of crime and sex that had ill effects on America's youth (Rogers 191). In addition, noted critics such as James Agee and Manny Farber wrote serious pieces about films and the motion picture industry. *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Time Magazine* published their work in the 1940s and 1950s.

Film continued to be studied throughout the mid-century, but it was primarily through the work of European writers that Hollywood films finally achieved artistic legitimacy. The auteur theory of film, promoted by the writers of the French publication *Cahiers du Cinema*, elevated underappreciated American directors to the status of artists. The Auteur movement was soon endorsed by American film critics who began to champion directors working within the Hollywood studio system (Schatz and Perren 495).

The idea that American filmmakers could be worthy of the term "artist" would eventually lead to an explosion of academic interest in motion pictures. Knowledge of critically acclaimed films and filmmakers became the mark of intellectual hipness. Universities initiated degree programs in film studies and in film production. These programs led to the development of more scholars as well as a generation of directors who would begin to create innovative films in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to Schatz and Perren, the study of film has continued to evolve. It has now achieved academic legitimacy. The field has diversified over the last quarter century

to include the study of genre, structures and semiotics, feminism, power, and economics among others. However, the development of film studies “has been a bumpy one, as scholars have attempted to strike a balance between industrial/institutional analyses and textual/interpretive studies” (510). Significant advances in the field of film history have helped to strike this balance by situating Hollywood “within the larger social and cultural context” (510).

Film History

Film history can be seen as a part of film studies as well as mass communication history. According to James Startt and William Sloan, the study of mass communications history can be approached from three different perspectives including ideological, professional, and cultural. Each of these perspectives has developed over time and has subdivided into various schools.

The ideological approach encompasses the four earliest schools of mass communication history. The Nationalist School interpreted early journalists as patriotic figures; The Romantic School promoted the “great man theory” of history, The Progressive School brought a reformist view to their work and The Consensus School, which sought to emphasize the achievements of America and its mass media; especially during times of national crisis. Those working from the professional perspective can be found in the Developmental School. This group of scholars examined the professional development of the media. The final perspective of mass communications historians would be from the perspective of culture. Other perspectives assumed that media had a major impact on society, but the Cultural School sought to study the impact of society on the media. The cultural perspective enabled scholars to provide a better understanding of

how sociological forces, economics, and technology have acted on media (Startt and Sloan 22-39).

The Developmental School

Motion picture technology developed at a much later date than print technology. Film is a relatively new medium when compared to newspapers or books. Consequently, many film histories have fallen into the more recent Developmental and Neo-Romantic Schools. The primary focus of the Developmental School has been on the creation and advancement of a new mass media industry. The contributions of pioneers and the discovery of early inventions have been told continually. Biographies of important writers, directors, producers, and movie stars have been written throughout every film era. The structure of the Hollywood studio system and issues of film censorship also have been explored.

The work of early inventors has been a popular subject of the Developmental School. The perfection of the first moving photographs by Eadweard Muybridge led to the refinement of the first motion picture camera by Etienne Jules Marey. These developments, along with the invention of the perforated film strip by the Edison Laboratories and the first large screen projector by the Lumiere brothers in 1895, made it possible for motion pictures to become both commercial and artistic successes. Soon, millions of Americans thronged to nickelodeons and theaters to see the latest movies.²

A large body of work has celebrated the great films that were produced by the great men in film history. This emphasis on great men would also indicate that the authors

² For accounts of the development of the early motion picture industry, see Hampton; Bordwell and Thompson; and Sklar.

were writing from the point of view of the Romantic School. Stories of individual achievements can be found in works including Peter Bogdonovich's biography of John Ford and Richard Schickel's book containing a series of interviews with other noted directors such as George Cukor, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Raol Walsh. Other works examined the lives of studio heads such as the Warner brothers and Louis B. Mayer. These biographies portray their subjects as vital to the development of the American film industry and reveal a great deal about the development of production techniques. They also provide insight into the structure of the Hollywood studio system and the industry's response to external attempts to control content.³

Issues of cinematic censorship have also been explored within the Developmental School. The demise of the production code was researched by Brook. The history of the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency was studied by Skinner. Other challenges to the ability of filmmakers to exercise their craft are found in Eckstein's account of events surrounding the actions of the U. S. Congress House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). (Brook; Skinner; Eckstein).

Those writing in the Developmental School sought to explain how the motion picture industry became successful. The contributions of early pioneers were highly praised. This school's perspective has been favorable to its subjects. They have been depicted as contributing to free enterprise and artistic expression. More recent writers in this School have congratulated filmmakers as promoters of freedom of speech.

³ For biographies of early pioneers of the motion picture industry, see Bogdonovich; Schickel; Freedland and Eyeman.

The Economic School

The economic structure of the film industry has become a prime subject for film historians. The movie business, however, has been difficult to analyze because of its uncertain nature. Financing a motion picture is a gamble at best with investment decisions made before anyone knows if the end product will be marketable. According to J. E. Squire:

Many essential choices spring from intuitive leaps; most successful practitioners possess a personal mix of creative and business sense; judgments frequently rely on relationships and personalities; decision are often made with a long lead time, making it harder to anticipate audience trends; and as far as profits are concerned, the sky's the limit. (5)

For the first half of the twentieth century, the motion picture studios enjoyed vertical integration. They controlled everything from production to distribution. Creative personnel were signed to long term unbreakable contracts forcing them to work on whatever project management deemed appropriate. The final product was distributed to theaters owned by the movie studios. As a consequence, competition was kept to a minimum. During this period there were only seven major studios in the industry, and studio heads ruled with almost complete autonomy.⁴

Hollywood's artistic and economic golden era spanned the period between the invention of synchronous sound in 1927 and the peak years for movie theater attendance in the United States, 1946-1948. After this time, the industry faced many challenges including antitrust lawsuits, the growth of the television industry, the increased availability of highly innovative European films, and demographic changes in audiences. The motion picture industry's response to these challenges proved to be inadequate.

⁴ Accounts of the early structural development in the film industry can be found in Sklar; and Gabler.

Highly publicized productions such as *Cleopatra* (1963) lost considerable amounts of money. A series of expensive theatrical failures had a negative influence on both the Hollywood establishment and the nation's movie critics. Both groups began to believe that European filmmakers had surpassed their American counterparts. Hollywood studios had no solution for changing market situation and began to hemorrhage money. By the decade of the 1960s, the vertical monopolies of several major studios were broken and an era of corporate conglomeration had begun (Monaco 3-9).

Bernard Dick's *Engulfed: the Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood* (2001) on Gulf and Western's take over of Paramount Pictures illustrated how control of the film industry was wrested away from the old time studio heads by modern corporations. Film moguls who, for all their faults, still loved movie making no longer controlled the motion picture industry. Corporations replaced the studio system with a cold, dispassionate emphasis on profits. This led to an increased number of blockbuster productions that served to maximize the corporate bottom line.

All schools of film history have addressed budgets and box office--at least to some degree. Those who wrote about the great studios of the 1930s would certainly include analysis of the struggle for power between the moguls in Hollywood and the financial executives of the studio who worked in New York. The Economic School, however, has reflected a cultural perspective of history. They have moved away from the "great man" theory of history to an investigation into motion pictures as an industry in the larger national economic system. This industry-wide perspective has usually been negative and has become even more prevalent in the modern era of corporate convergence.

The Cultural School

According to media historian Daniel Czitrom, the invention of motion pictures initiated a new kind of art form that was made for a new kind of mass audience. Movies used pictures and common language to convey their narrative. They brought together large numbers of the working class and newly arrived immigrants to comprise their audience. Films were shown in urban slum neighborhoods by enterprising exhibitors who soon came to control the industry. The exhibitors and the audience were not members of the upper class or the cultural elite. This was an art form for the masses. As such, it caused growing concern among cultural traditionalists who sought to control this new popular entertainment medium (44-45).

When members of the upper class pressured those in government to examine the buildings in which films were presented, they found conditions to be wanting. Theaters were dark and sanitation was poor. In 1908, the licenses of 550 movie theaters were revoked in New York City. It was not until exhibitors began to build movie palaces in neighborhoods beyond the urban slums that movies became socially acceptable. By the 1920s, films attracted not only lower class audiences, but middle and upper class audiences as well (Czitrom 50).

Czitrom's concern was to discover how Americans thought about and reacted to the creation of new media including telegraph, film, and radio. Because of his interest in early development, he limited his study of film history only to the first three decades of the last century. A more comprehensive cultural history of motion pictures can be found in the work of Robert Sklar.

In his book *Movie Made America: A cultural History of American Movies*, Sklar wrote of the Hollywood Dream Factory and the importance of cultural myths in the

maintenance of social stability during the trying times of the 1930s and 1940s. According to Sklar:

The high priority the nation's leaders placed on recementing the foundations of public morale was not lost on those producers and directors whose goal was enhanced prestige, respectability, and cultural power. Moreover, they were quickly gaining considerable skill at communicating their messages with subtle nuances beneath the surface of overt content. (196)

Perhaps two of the most influential Hollywood mythmakers of mid century were studio head Walt Disney and the director Frank Capra. In his discussion of Disney, Sklar was able to incorporate anthropological research of Claude Levi-Strauss to show how Disney's cartoons moved from fantasy to idealization. In his discussion of Capra, Sklar illustrated the director's ability to tackle contemporary social themes in fictional films as well as in documentaries about World War II (199-214).

According to Robert Ray, Hollywood's ability to maintain social stability has been related to structural and thematic elements of filmmaking. The continuity editing system became the standard procedure for crafting a mainstream film. This system was developed in the silent era and codified during Hollywood's Classic Era. Continuity editing was meant to be seamless and imperceptible by the audience. As a consequence, audiences were unaware that they were being swept away by the underlying ideology of what they viewed (32).

The underlying ideology of classic period Hollywood productions was "the avoidance of choice" between the outlaw hero and the official hero. According to Ray, the outlaw hero represented American belief in self-determinism and freedom from entanglements whereas the official hero stood for communal action and the rule of law. The antihero and the hero have been present in numerous motion pictures. They have echoed America's tendency to mythologize historical individuals such as Davy Crockett

and George Washington. Film audiences encountered both outlaw heroes as well as official heroes and the American film industry encouraged them to believe that they could reconcile the values reflected by the two opposite film personas (59).

Ray's argument was that this reconciliation cultivated a cynical view of the world and political inaction on the part of the audience. In their book *Manufacturing Consent* Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky maintained that motion pictures tendency to induce political inaction is evidence of hegemony. These social critics have been interested in exploring how powerful elites maintain the political status quo through manipulation of film and other mass media (Herman and Chomsky).

Challenges to America's status quo have been depicted in the genre of the American social problem film. The history of this genre was researched by David Manning White and Richard Averson. The authors found a long history of motion pictures that have explored social problems of "racial and ethnic prejudice, drug addiction, alcoholism, labor inequities, penal inhumanity, crime and juvenile delinquency, corruption in politics and government, and that most cancerous of all social ills, war"(260).

The cultural perspective has provided a consideration of efforts by marginalized groups to claim their stake in American popular awareness. The stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans and the work of current Native American filmmakers have been studied by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick. The identification with, and resistance to, the black American cinema experience has also been explored by Ed Guerrero. In addition, Cynthia Lucia has examined the theme of patriarchy in crisis in the female lawyer film genre. (Kilpatrick; Guerrero; Lucia).

The study of genre history has provided a valuable entrée into American cultural history. The film portrayal of a particular sociological group can tell us how they were regarded by society at different periods of time. The changing nature of an individual genre can provide insight into the changing needs of an audience. The western has been a staple of the American motion picture industry. Gary Wills' *John Wayne's America* goes beyond the Developmental School to examine why America has needed a frontier myth and how a particular star has personified that myth.

A markedly different vision of the American hero was depicted in the “post-traumatic cycle of films” that was produced in the period from 1970 to 1976. These films reflected a loss of confidence in America and its institutions. The protagonists of the films produced in this cycle were confident that they could control events, but their sense of control is revealed to be an illusion. Eventually, the protagonists become trapped in events that spiral out of their control. The result for the protagonist was tragedy, trauma, and an inability to respond.⁵

Fictional characters were subject to lost illusions in films of the 1970s. According to David Cook, this was also true of filmmakers. The late 1960s through the early 1970s was a period of great social activism. The antiwar movement encouraged belief that a new liberal consensus would emerge. Filmmakers bought into the permanence of this new consensus and reflected this belief in the creation of more politically liberal films. There was to be no permanent shift to the left however. The new consensus was an illusion. By 1980, conservatives had regained control of the presidency and the country.

⁵ Films in this cycle include *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Night Moves* (1975), and *Heaven's Gate* (1980). See Keathley 297.

A second illusion, on the part of the filmmakers, was that mainstream American audiences had become more interested in serious social and political films. This illusion was shattered by the success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) both of which promoted “a juvenile mythos of ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’ in movies that embraced conservative cultural values, yet did so within a superstructure of high-tech special effects and nostalgia for classical genres” (Cook xv-xvi).

Film History as a Genre

Motion pictures have served as both conscious and unconscious recorders of history. American motion pictures have often turned to historical events or biographies for their subject matter. History has been used to apply a patina of prestige to fictional works. This has been especially true of biographies. As a measure of this prestige, one can tally the numerous awards that have been earned by this genre. In fact, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated at least one historical film for Best Picture every year from 1986 to 2001 (Toplin 6).

Not everyone has been pleased with the success of historical motion pictures. The portrayal of historical events on film has been chastised by historians for its inaccuracy. These films have often been misleading in their depiction of real events, and academics fear that the public will obtain their knowledge of history solely from cinema. Those who learn from false history are doomed to repeat this falsehood.

On the other hand, Robert Toplin maintains that a blanket condemnation of the historical film genre has been unrealistic because filmmakers must operate under different commercial and structural constraints than historians. In addition, to dismiss

cinematic history “comes with a price. It segregates scholars from important discussions of the subject that are taking place beyond the academy.”⁶

An interesting facet of motion pictures is that they can also perform the function of unconscious recorders of history. According to Charles Maland, Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, was created within the dominant American cold war paradigm, but used satire to reject the ideology of liberal consensus. This nightmare comedy rejected the two cornerstone assumptions of that ideology: “that the structure of American society was basically sound and that Communism was a clear and present danger to the survival of the United States” (191). This film marked a turning point in American thought. The national complacency of the 1950s was soon to be replaced as Americans began to question its political leadership and that leadership’s foreign policy.

The history of motion pictures has been examined from the perspective of various schools of thought. Films have been viewed as examples of artistic expression, technological innovation, economic development, governmental regulation, sociological impact, cultural transmission, mythic reality, and recorders of history. Each perspective has increased our understanding of the medium. An examination of the history of the depiction of politics on film has benefited from a variety of perspectives as well.

Politics in Film

Politics plays a vital part in the life of every citizen. The allocation of goods and services can mean life and death to a community in crisis. The application of power can

⁶ For a series of articles on inaccuracies in historical films, see Carnes. For a defense of the film history genre, see Toplin 4.

change the course of history for good or for ill. Those who wield political power inspire great passion as well as ambivalence. According to Philip Gianos:

It is difficult to imagine an area of human life more fraught with ambivalence than politics. It is not that we love politicians or hate them; it is that we love *and* hate them. Political life embodies, simultaneously, great aspiration and great disillusionment, and this mix of aspiration and disillusionment is simultaneously individual and collective. The success or failure of an individual politician becomes the success or failure of the community from which the person comes and which that person, at some level, represents. Everyone is happy when Jefferson Smith wins. (169)

According to Beverly Merrill Kelly, this tension between the individual and community is the most reliable method of recognizing a truly American film. The first American settlers arrived on these shores seeking independence from their native lands. Once they established a new country, they faced the duality of political reality. Since the beginning of the republic, Americans have both hated strong central authority and idealized group consensus. Other dualities exist in the American political psyche including contrasting goals of populism/elitism, fascism/antifascism, interventionism/isolationism, and personal responsibility/social safety nets. According to Kelly, these contrasting ideologies typify classic Hollywood productions such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) (4).

Jefferson Smith, the protagonist in Frank Capra's film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, is the archetypal American political film hero. He represents populism, antifascism and personal responsibility, with just a touch of elitism included for good measure. This motion picture, produced during the classic period of American Hollywood cinema, totally captures the values of depression era America. It also falls within the first of three historical periods within the political film genre.

According to Harry Keyishian, motion pictures of the first period, from 1900 to the mid 1940's, depicted a hero who could maintain both integrity and political power. The hero would often be an amateur or an outsider who would redeem society. In the films of the second period, from the mid 1940's to the 1990's, the protagonist was forced to make a choice between integrity and political power. To choose one would serve to forfeit the other. In films from 1990 onward, there has been a return to the outsider who has attempted to redeem the political process. These films present a more sophisticated political hero than the innocent protagonists of the classic period.⁷

There would appear to be little ambiguity present in the film character of Jefferson Smith. He appears to be the quintessential film hero and is depicted as "a simple man whose strength comes from the land and his family and friends" (Gianos 100). Jefferson Smith believes in the purity of the American constitution and the rule of law. This is in contrast to the sophistication of the corrupt city dwellers and their "jungle law." Smith is an example of the official hero. He has confidence in the nobility of the average citizen and it is he who tries to redeem the corrupt political system by refusing to compromise. the strength and purity of Smith's personality save the soul of the Senate (Gianos 100).

The depiction of Jefferson Smith as a hero of the little people resonated with depression era progressivism and the audience's distrust of class elites. Smith also can be seen as a member of the elite class. Throughout the film he claims to speak for the downtrodden, but he refuses to listen to their telegraph messages urging him to stop his Senate filibuster. According to Gianos, this makes Smith a more ambivalent character

⁷ Examples of films from the first period include *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *Wilson* (1944). Films from the second period include *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979). Films from the last period include *Bob Roberts* (1992) and *Bulworth* (1998). See Keyishian.

and changes the meaning of the film into a question of which elite should rule, rather than which class (100).

According to Keyishian, political films of the second period included films about a corrupted hero such as *All The King's Men* (1949). This film was based on a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Robert Penn Warren. The book, as well as the film, was a thinly veiled retelling of the political career of Louisiana Governor Huey Long. *All The King's Men* contrasted the idealism of Governor Willie Stark's early campaign rhetoric with his later dishonesty in office. The film asks whether Stark's downfall is the "product of free will or of original sin; whether he is a good man corrupted by the political process; or a bad one whose inherent vice emerges when he gets a chance for power" (Keyishian 18).

Political films of the third period have been studied as well. Films such as *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Wag the Dog* (1997), and *Bulworth* (1998) continued the ambivalent trend toward politics and politicians. In contrast to Keyishian however, Brian Neve has maintained that the films of the 1990s have emphasized the self-interest of politicians and have provided no sense of their possible redemptive qualities (19).

Political films have been studied according to the chronological era in which they were produced. In addition, films have also been categorized according to how directly they have addressed the subject of politics. Films can be either overtly concerned with the political process as in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), partially concerned with certain elements of the political process as in *Citizen Kane* (1941), or they can introduce political themes into other genres as in *Stagecoach* (1939).

The American presidency has been central to the plot of numerous films in the political genre. Abraham Lincoln has been the subject of over thirty theatrical releases.

Lincoln was a great man, in history as well as in film. The deliberate and skillful casting of certain actors reinforces his positive image. In particular, three legends of the silver screen—Henry Fonda, Fredric March and Spencer Tracy—stand out as being “the prototypical heroic Hollywood president” (Schleben and Yenerall 87).

This focus on presidential character has moved from the movies to real life. Character issues hounded Gary Hart during the 1988 Democratic primaries and President Bill Clinton endured “Monicagate” in 1998-1999. The way that the presidency has been portrayed has come to influence the way the public perceives the executive branch (111).

How can a modern president possibly measure up to the public perception of a man perceived to be as noble as Lincoln? One way would be to adopt the myth making strategy of American motion pictures. President John Kennedy had a natural gift for projecting a likable image. President Richard Nixon did not. According to Neal Gabler, his solution was to provide the media with set pieces that:

Presented you as having achieved what you had said you wanted to achieve whether or not you had actually achieved it, just as during the campaign one provided set piece that showed you were what you said you were whether or not you actually were. (109)

The modern politician has become a skilled manipulator of image. He has also blended popular film culture with reality. President Ronald Reagan adopted *Star Wars* (1977) terminology in his proposals for national defense against the “evil empire.” At a more subtle level, the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) reversed the role of the robot from the future portrayed by actor, now governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. The robot, once evil, was now good. This simplistic reversal echoed and eased other real policy reversals “toward Saddam in the Gulf and, two years earlier, Noriega in Panama” (Rosenbaum 3).

According to Gianos, an example of a film that is partially concerned with politics would be *Citizen Kane*. The political aspects of this film are used to reveal the psychological makeup of its main character. The young Kane was deprived of maternal love and substitutes a drive for power for that loss. He maintains that he is running for office because of a motivation for political reform, but he is really interested in public adoration. Ultimately, the film is about “the tragedy of wealth and idealism gone wrong” (170 -184).

It would not seem likely that a traditional American western movie would address serious political issues. *Stagecoach*, directed by John Ford, is the story of how a mismatched band of people struggles to survive a perilous trek through Indian country. Ford’s film, like many of his other westerns, trades on the American frontier myth of civilization’s triumph over nature. According to Jeanne Heffernan, a closer inspection of his films reveals that Ford’s use of setting:

Provokes a thoughtful uneasiness about the very myths the films present. Indeed, Ford’s Westerns reveal a subtle appreciation for the complexity of human relations, a wariness of pretensions to virtue, and a profound ambivalence toward the possession of power. (147)

A number of film scholars, including Michael Parenti, have maintained that American entertainment films, including classic westerns, propagate images supportive of imperialism, capitalism, authoritarianism, and militarism in what he considers to be an insidious mix of entertainment and reality. Other authors, including Dana Polan, contrasted American avant-garde films with mainstream productions such as *Grease* (1978) finding that they contained escapist fantasies and a promotion of capitalism. In addition, M. Keith Booker provided a comprehensive survey of film and the American

left identifying political films as those that addressed an inherent conflict between proletariat ideals and majority repression (Parenti 2; Polan 59; Booker x-xii).

Dan Nimmo and James Combs also examined films as rituals of power. They maintain that the movie-going experience serves to mediate reality for the audience. The Hollywood Dream Factory bridges the real world and the reel world through the creation of fantasy. The Hollywood Dream Factory constructs stories that tap into the “mythic folklore and narrative tradition of a culture.” Audiences recognize and respond to these metaphorical representations of reality and fables of cultural heritage through “fantastic learning” that results in “a learned sense of who and where they are” (109-110).

Nimmo and Combs go on to identify the different fantasies of ritualized political power that Hollywood has created during the decades of the last century. The Populist Fantasy, found in films from the 1930’s, helped audiences find scapegoats for hard times. The Commitment Fantasy of the 1940’s was personified in the choice of political reengagement made by the Rick Blaine character in *Casablanca* (1942). The Alien Fantasy, of the 1950s, could be manifested by different audiences in different manners even when watching the same film. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) invited dual interpretations as a fear either of creeping socialism or of creeping fascism. The Fantasy of Change and Hope, of the 1960s, was seen in films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) that promised the triumph of a “transcendent power that would bring to earth reconciliation through benevolent technology legitimized through higher truths.” The Fantasy of Renewal and Reflection of the 1980s brought nostalgia for a fantasy America that never quite existed (112-126).

The authors categorized the 1970s as “the big chill” era and the “me decade” when “The American Dream drifted, and no political leader or force seemed able to capture the public imagination.” Nimmo and Combs also found it difficult to identify the focus of political power in films of the 1970s. According to Nimmo and Combs “the social hopes and commitments of previous movie heroes seemed to dissipate in the confusion and even cynicism of the decade.” This resulted in the creation of the *Fantasy of Doubt and Drift* in motion pictures of the period (123-124).

The decade of the 1970s was a transitional period. Nimmo and Combs intimate that nothing much happened in this period. The popular conception of the era was one of self-indulgence and inactivity, as in the “me decade.” It is not necessarily true that the 1970s were inconsequential. Periods of transition are interesting because they set the stage for the next period of history. America did not just jump from Camelot to the Reagan era. It would be wrong to overlook the history in between. Finding artifacts of this historical journey is important because they provide us with a road map from one era to the next.

The unifying theme of the literature on political dramas has been ambivalence. The political arena is where society allocates resources, settles scores, and redresses grievances. The buck stops here. When hard times befall the nation, politicians feel the heat. This is true in the real world as well as the world of fiction. Discovering the political fables that have been used to mediate the realities of film audiences has helped film historians understand different eras in the American experience.

Nimmo and Combs devoted but one chapter of their book to the mediation of political realities through film and only two pages to the 1970s. Further exploration of this decade adds to the body of knowledge within the field. In addition, Nimmo and

Combs found it difficult to identify the important political themes contained in films of the 1970s. According to Allan Nevins, periods of crisis can reveal the innermost truths about an individual--truths that even that person is not aware. This is true of society as well. The American political system experienced a continual state of crisis in the 1970s. A study of how society and mass culture reacted to those crises can reveal some of the innermost truths about the nation (Nevins 217-235).

The work of Nimmo and Combs has provided a good starting point for further research into mediated political realities. This study is an expanded examination of cinematic mediated realities. Authors such as Keyishian have provided a broad overview of political dramas. This study is an examination of one specific period of political film history. Writers from critical approaches such as Rosenbaum, Parenti, and Polan have added to our understanding of political films. There is still a need however, for research from a historical rather than a theoretical point of view. An examination of film content as historical artifact adds to our understanding of mediated political realities.

The Historical Analysis of Film

The goal of the historical analysis of film is to understand the social, economic, and cultural context within which a production was created and/or to understand how a production was received by audiences over time. In order to achieve this understanding, a coherent and comprehensive methodology must be employed. The study of film as historical artifact involves two stages of analysis (O'Connor 8).

The first stage in the historical analysis of film involves answering questions of content, production, and reception. Answering questions of content involve close, repeated viewings of the film under study. It is important to note what appears on the screen, the sounds on the sound track, editing patterns used, point of view favored, and

characterizations that are included in the production. Are the costumes, dialects, and rituals authentic to the time period of the film? It is also important to note how signs symbols and narrative structures are utilized in order to communicate the film's message (O'Connor 11-17).

Answering questions of production involves finding out how and why things were included in the final work. A single person often creates historical manuscripts. Filmmaking is a collaborative process. It is useful to discover who or what most influenced the shaping of the film, the orientation and background of those involved in its creation, the institutional constraints imposed by the film's financial backers, and any unexpected experiences that occurred during its creation. It is also important to discover the historical context that the film was created in and to what extent the film was true to that period (O'Connor 17 -19).

Answering questions of reception must be specific to the time of its creation and not influenced by modern responses. It is useful to know what effect, if any, the film had on the pace or direction of events at the time it was made, who saw the film and how it was critically reviewed at the time of its release (O'Connor 19-23).

The second stage in the historical analysis of film requires the selection of one of four frameworks of inquiry. According to O'Connor the frameworks are:

The Moving Image as Representation of History – The representation on film of an actual historical event either in the form of a documentary or a docudrama.

The Moving Picture as Evidence of Social and Cultural History – The representation on film of the values and belief systems of a society.

Actual Footage as Evidence of Historical Fact – Actual historical events recorded as they happened.

The History of the Moving Image as Industry and Art Form – Industrial and artistic developments within the film industry.

The second framework was chosen to examine political films because it facilitated an investigation into the widely held core beliefs of the mass audience. The other three frameworks seek to test fidelity to actual historic events or to chart the development of the creative process. It was the purpose of this study, however, to contribute insight into ongoing cultural change of the period. Motion pictures, it is true, provide but a single avenue to investigate cultural change. Other media would provide additional insights. Motion pictures were chosen because of their ability to capture the mass market, their reliance on individual ticket sales rather than advertising revenue, and their traditional role as repository of American dreams and aspirations.

The utilization of film as evidence of political, social, and cultural history involves an examination of what political values are present in the film and how those values correspond to other political, cultural, or social entities of the time. One must investigate whether the film leads or follows political, social, or cultural trends. Interpretive biases, as well as evidence of shared cultural plots, characters, symbols, or myths, must be found. Is the film a strictly commercial work designed to strike existing chords, or is it the work of an individual seeking to change the perceptions, values, or beliefs of society? Finally, it should be noted that a film does not have to be hugely successful in order to be a useful historical artifact. Productions that anger or bore an audience also produce a response that can be significant to history (O'Connor 108 -117).

Based on a consideration of the literature and methodology, this study asked a number of questions about political films of the period from 1968 to 1980. First, how did films mediate political reality for audiences? What rituals and fables were considered important and how did they change? Second, what were the political critiques put

forward in the films? Were they effective, did they change, and why? Third, what were the important political values of the age? Did they change, why and how? Fourth, to what extent do the films of the period from 1968 to 1980 conform to historical reality and other accounts of historical reality? Finally, to what extent did the films influence present and future political values, critiques, events?

CHAPTER 2 FROM POSTWAR CONSENSUS TO THE TURBULENT 1960S IN AMERICAN POLITICS AND FILM

The outcome of World War II had a profound effect on the confidence of the American people. National belief in the supremacy of the American way of life had been confirmed through victorious struggle on the battlefields of Europe and Asia. Americans had united to defeat the dark forces of fascism and the nation emerged from the war as one of the most dominant economic, military, and political powers on earth.

At the conclusion of World War II, America was one of the world leaders in terms of its standard of living. This prosperity continued for the next two decades. The per capita gross national product for the United States rose from \$2,602 in 1958 to \$4,379 in 1968. This compared to figures for the United Kingdom in the same years of \$1,254 in 1958 to \$1,861 in 1968. In 1962, America's infant mortality rate had fallen to 25.4 per 1000 live births. This compared to rates for the Federal Republic of Germany at 29.2 per 1000 live births in 1962 and India at 86.5 per 1000 live births in 1960. In 1967, the United States spent 6.5 % of its national income on education and had a comparatively high literacy rate of 97.8 % in 1959. Interestingly, the Soviet Union reported better statistics for the same years at 7.3 % of its budget for education in 1967 and a literacy rate of 98.5 % in 1959.¹

¹ See U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Per Capita Gross National Product by Country: 1958, 1963 and 1968," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1970: 810; "Vital Statistics and Net Food Supply," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1963* (84th edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963: 910; and "Education by Country," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970: 835.

The American manufacturing sector also led the world. In the 1960s, the United States was ranked first in steel production, motor vehicles in use, and televisions in use. In addition, the nation had more than six times the number of telephones in use than its nearest competitor, Japan.²

It was in consumer products, however, that America most visibly outstripped the rest of the world. America had more dwellings and more rooms per dwelling than any other country. The United States also led the world in the production of cotton, rayon, milk, beer, and cigarettes. In 1968, the United States produced 19.9 % of the world's milk, 24.5 % of the world's beer, and 22.8 % of the world's cigarettes. Perhaps the production of so much beer and cigarettes helps to explain why America also had by far the most physicians. In any event, America in the postwar period experienced ever-increasing material prosperity.³

The only possible threat to America's way of life was thought to be from the Soviet Union. In the years after World War II, the number of communist nations had increased to include The People's Republic of China, much of Eastern Europe and some emerging

² In 1968 the United States had 109,225,000 telephones in use compared to Japan with 17,331,000. See U. S. Bureau of the Census, "Coal, Petroleum, Cement, Iron Ore, Sulfuric Acid and Steel by Country: 1968," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968: 823; "Transportation-Shipping, Railway Traffic, Civil Aviation and Motor Vehicles," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1963* (84th edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963: 930; and "Communications-Telephones, Telegrams, Mail, Newspapers, Radio and Television by Country: 1968," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970: 831.

³ For consumer statistics, see U. S. Bureau of the Census, Housing- Dwellings, Rooms, Occupancy and Facilities," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1963* (84th edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963: 934; "Milk, Beer, Cigarettes, Fish, Cotton, Spindles and Yarn by Country: 1968," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970: 826; and "Education and Health," in *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1963* (84th edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963: 936.

third world nations including Cuba. The Soviets were seen as potential military rivals bent on expanding what was thought to be a monolithic Communist Block. This potential danger was met by the United States with a policy of containment designed to resist Soviet expansion at every counterpoint. This policy of containment led to a protracted Cold War but spared the nation from a direct super power confrontation that could have exploded into World War III.⁴

American Political Consensus 1940s -1960s

America's postwar prosperity, along with its ability to maintain a policy of containment, promoted a feeling of self-confidence. According to author Tom Shachtman, this self-confidence was built on a shared system of beliefs that "were widely held, honed to a fine point and were most important to those who held them." Looking back at the years from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s, Shachtman identified a number of shared American beliefs for the post World War II period. They are listed here (Shachtman 22-30).

The first widely held American belief was in the "safety, sanctity and legitimacy" of its national leaders. Americans believed that their society was stable and that it was capable of changing leadership through the ballot box rather than through violence. They also assumed that their leaders were of good character, their motives were pure, and they were working for the steady improvement of society (Shachtman 22).

⁴ In 1968, the United States had 3,500,000 men under arms; the Soviet Union had 3,220,000, and mainland China had 2,761,000. This is compared to much lower numbers for The United Kingdom of 450,000. See "National Defense Expenditures, 1967 and 1968" and "Armed Forces Personnel, 1968 and 1969," in *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970: 814. In 1960, national defense expenditures represented 49.8 % of the total federal outlay. It is interesting to note that the % of total federal outlays actually went down to 45.0 % during 1968, the peak year of the Vietnam conflict in terms of casualties. See "Federal Budget Outlays for National Defense and Veterans Benefits and Services: 1959 to 1971," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970: 246.

The second belief was that of the gradual nature of social change. America had problems, but they would be resolved. Along with this belief came a requirement that all citizens willingly accept their lot in life. This requirement held even if their lot in life was second-class citizenship due to poverty, race, class, or gender (Shachtman 22).

The third belief was in the health and superiority of the American economy. By the 1960s, Americans had “an almost unlimited sense of economic prosperity.” The nation had witnessed two decades of economic stability and growth. Americans had been freed from the fear of economic depression and felt entitled to consume ever-greater levels of material goods and services (Shachtman 23).

Americans also assumed that their natural resources were virtually limitless. Energy was perceived to be cheap and plentiful. Pollution of the environment was “a minor price to pay” for an advanced standard of living. American economic superiority required no limits on its consumer culture (Shachtman 25).

Americans believed that they were and would continue to be militarily superior to all other nations. The United States had succeeded in turning Germany and Japan into allies, had dominated NATO, and had “won” in Korea. Americans believed that their country had never lost a war. The basis of American foreign policy was in “defending the world against communist encroachment,” a task for which the nation needed to “remain eternally vigilant” (24). This belief was the basis of what became known as The Cold War. In addition, Americans believed that only they and the Soviets really mattered. It was assumed that China was under the control of the Soviet Union and that the smaller, third world and emerging nations could not affect the overall strategic balance of power.

According to Shachtman, Americans believed that their technology, ingenuity, and money could solve all problems. Coupled with this was a profound belief in progress. The United States was destined to conquer new frontiers and meet new challenges. This progress was measured in growth. If a company did not increase sales each year, it was said to be stagnating (26).

It was assumed that America's youth would wait their turn on the ladder of upward mobility. The national economy was thought to be ever growing. Because of this growth, it was thought that young people should be willing to postpone gratification. The good life was measured in the acquisition of creature comforts. It was assumed that young people would conform to social norms in order to attain their eventual share of the good life (Shachtman 27).

At the same time, the nuclear family was thought to be the bedrock of society. Traditional gender roles were the norm for breadwinner, homemaker, and student. Alternative family structures, sexual promiscuity, sexual experimentation, and graphic sexual depictions were considered affronts to the sanctity of the nuclear family (Shachtman 28).

According to Shachtman, a final postwar belief was that American society was the "best possible realization of our potential, the model for the rest of the world and for the future" (29). Americans believed that as a people they were constantly improving. It was believed that America was a land of opportunity where even the son of a poor immigrant family had the potential to become the leader of the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth.

Some of the beliefs shared by Americans in the post World War II era were contradictory in nature. Individuals were encouraged to delay gratification at the same time that they were bombarded with advertised images portraying the joys of mass consumption. Americans believed theirs to be a rapidly improving land of opportunity, but this belief was not universally applied. Some segments of society were encouraged to accept improvement with the inherently contradictory “deliberate speed” rather than actual speed. The contradictory nature of some of America’s shared beliefs would eventually lead to uncertainty within individuals and ferment within society.

The 1960s: Ferment in America

The aftermath of World War II brought relative peace and prosperity to America. Peace and prosperity however, also brought conformity. Many American leaders were centrist in political philosophy. They firmly believed in the American system and the need for stability. Men of this generation had lived through the economic trauma of the Great Depression and had survived the carnage of World War II. Surviving such upheaval made them less likely to tackle massive change.

A new political cohort, the first born in the Twentieth Century, would soon challenge the conformity of the postwar years. A charismatic Senator from Massachusetts would be elected president in 1960. President John F. Kennedy seemed to embody all that was right about the American way of life. His family had risen from immigrant status to great wealth. In his life, Kennedy became a war hero, married a glamorous wife, and attained the highest office in the land.⁵

⁵ For a biography of Kennedy’s early life, military career, political career and presidency, see Dallek; for Kennedy’s charisma and generational impact, see Farber 31.

A new generation of Americans was also to challenge the conformity of the post war years. This “baby boom” generation was different from past generations. They had been exposed to the middle class aspirations of their parents. They had been marketed to as a separate demographic group. They had been encouraged by their parents to think for themselves, to be self reliant, competitive, and at the same time, empathetic toward those less fortunate (Cavallo 4).

The baby boomers were certain that they would avoid the conformity of the post war years. Members of this group would comprise the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Some challenged cultural norms, some opted out of the system entirely, and others sought to address the evils of society. They joined the Peace Corps and became freedom riders for civil rights. Not everyone in the baby boom generation would become members of the counterculture. Many of this generation thought that conservative ideologies were required to improve society. Members of the baby boomer generation of both persuasions sought new leaders who had new ideas and offered new possibilities. For many of this generation, Kennedy seemed to represent these new ideas.

Once in office, Kennedy surrounded himself with the best and brightest of intellectuals and policy experts. Great plans were proposed. America would land a man on the moon by the end of the decade; poverty would be reduced; and Peace Corps members would help to promote the benefits of American technology throughout the world. The American way of life seemed like it would continue to improve and the political philosophy of liberal consensus would be maintained.

In the early 1960s, the American way of life did continue to improve. The economy was sound and the nation was at peace. The president was perceived to be a strong leader

as he stood up to the Communists, first in Berlin and then during the Cuban missile crisis. Once again, war was averted as the nation stood toe-to-toe with the Soviets. On the domestic front, Kennedy began to address the problem of racism through his support of Dr. Martin Luther King. Hopes for America were high in a period of history that became known as “Camelot” after a popular Broadway musical play of the same name. *Camelot* told the story of an idealized, ancient noble kingdom.

The era of Camelot ended on November 22, 1963 with the assassination of Kennedy. The young, idealized American leader was struck dead. Media coverage of this event was broadcast by all three-television networks without commercial interruption from Friday afternoon when the murder took place until the following mid-Monday when the president was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. According to Shachtman, the event’s massive media coverage resulted in “the greatest simultaneous event in the history of the world” that had occurred up until that time (46). During those four days, everyday life stopped in America as millions of viewers watched the sequence of events ending with Kennedy’s funeral. The national trauma deepened with every televised ritual.

Political assassination and assault has recurred throughout United States history. From 1835 to 1968 there were 81 such occurrences including four presidential assassinations.⁶ Americans had witnessed the death of past presidents, but the assassination of Kennedy was different. President Abraham Lincoln’s death was the culmination of a war that had cost over 600,000 lives. The assassinations of Presidents James A. Garfield and William McKinley were not as traumatic for the nation due to

⁶ For assassination figures, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Political Assassinations and Assaults: 1835 to 1968,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1971* (92nd edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971: 814.

their service during a period of a politically diminished presidency. In contrast to Garfield and McKinley, Kennedy was still a relatively young and vital political figure at the time of his death. His murder “seemed to deprive the country and the world of a better future” (Dalek 694).

In contrast to earlier presidents, the public had a more intimate relationship with Kennedy because of extensive media exposure. The national trauma that resulted from this relationship was intense and long lasting. The American public’s reactions to the assassination passed through a series of stages: from initial shock, to an endless review of the events in an attempt to better understand them, to a final stage when the disaster and the reactions it evoked were permanently incorporated into national consciousness. (Shachtman 47).

The assassination of Kennedy was the first chink in the armor of the nation’s faith in the superiority of the American way of life. If a society could produce an assassin capable of snuffing out the life of such a beloved figure, could there be other flaws in our society as well? Did the nation possess the resolve to find solutions to these flaws?

The legacy and the challenges faced by Kennedy passed on to his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson was a man of immense personal persuasive powers. He had been a very effective leader within the United States Senate and had dutifully served as Kennedy’s Vice President. When Johnson assumed office, he inherited many problems. In 1963, 19.5 % of American families lived in poverty. Although poverty affected American people from Appalachia to Anaheim, this problem

was much more severe among African American families where over 63 % were poverty-stricken.⁷

Johnson attempted to address America's domestic concerns through a body of social legislation that came to be labeled as the Great Society. These programs were designed to combat a myriad of social concerns including not only poverty, but inadequate health care, racial discrimination, and environmental issues as well. Johnson was able to usher much of this legislation through congress because of the high esteem that the public still held for their fallen president and because of Johnson's own mastery at guiding legislation through congress.⁸

President Johnson promised a variety of programs designed to appeal to many different constituencies. His Great Society programs however, relied for their success upon continued prosperity. Unfortunately, Johnson chose to fight a war on poverty while conducting an escalating war in Vietnam. His decision to pursue both stretched both American economic reserves and national resolve.⁹

American involvement in Southeast Asia began immediately after World War II. The United States provided economic support to the French in their efforts to retain a colonial presence in Vietnam. In spite of billions of dollars of financial assistance, the French were defeated in 1954. This did not curtail American interests in Vietnam.

⁷ For poverty figures, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Families and Unrelated Individuals Below the Poverty Level – By Selected Characteristics of Head: 1959 to 1969," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1971* (92nd edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971: 323.

⁸ A remarkable amount of landmark legislation was passed during the first three years of the Johnson Administration including, The Voting Rights Act, The Immigration Act, The Clean Air Act, The Fair Labor Standards Act, The Model Cities Act, and The Public Broadcasting Act. Amounts of such legislation would decrease with growing involvement in Vietnam. See Bernstein 530.

⁹ Johnson kept the true cost of the Vietnam War hidden from the public and waited two years before asking congress to increase taxes to pay for it thus precipitating an inflationary trend that would not abate until 1982. See Bernstein 358 -378.

Involvement continued through the later administrations of both Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. America poured vast resources into the country. The United States Defense Department worked to create and train a viable South Vietnamese army. The Central Intelligence Agency aided in the creation of a police force to control dissidents and executive branch agencies worked to stabilize the national currency.¹⁰

It was thought at the time that uncontained Communist aggression in Southeast Asia would certainly lead to a domino effect wherein each country in the region would fall to the enemy. No American president wanted to be the first to lose a country to the Communists. As a result, a surrogate manifestation of the Cold War was fought in the streets and jungles of Southeast Asia. At first, a limited number of American advisors were sent to aid the army of South Vietnam. When advisors alone proved insufficient, American involvement escalated. A reported attack on United States vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin led to The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that gave Johnson a blank check to increase American military involvement. Soon regular Army personnel were deployed and bombing missions were instituted in the skies above North Vietnam. American military commitment continued to increase. This escalation was most pronounced under President Johnson. By 1968, over 500,000 service members were deployed in Vietnam. American battle deaths increased as well—from 147 in 1964 to 5008 in 1966 to 14,592 in 1968.¹¹

¹⁰ The American public was largely unaware of these activities. See, Farber 125-128.

¹¹ In 1964, 23,000 United States troops were stationed in Vietnam. By 1968, troop strength had risen to 536,100. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Vietnam Conflict—U.S. Military Forces in Vietnam and Casualties Incurred: 1961 to 1970," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1970* (91st edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970: 258.

America's prolonged involvement in Vietnam and its inability to articulate its war goals to the public began to erode confidence in the foreign policy component of America's philosophy of consensus. America did not seem to be making progress in the war. Official military body counts of enemy dead seemed to promise victory, but the Viet Cong continued to fight. A credibility gap began to develop between what the administration said was true and what the American people believed. Eventually, large segments of the American people came to believe that the war could not be won. This realization further served to undermine belief in American military supremacy and faith in the character of our national leaders.

Confidence in the American way of life was undermined as well by growing unrest in the nation's cities. America's involvement in Vietnam siphoned off funds that could have been used to fund domestic programs. Those in poverty were most likely to feel the brunt of economic uncertainty. They were also more likely to be involved in fighting for America in Vietnam. In addition, the passage of civil rights legislation had not put an end to discrimination. Unmet expectations for social and economic change led to frustration within African American communities.

On August 11, 1965, riots broke out in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. The confrontation began with a traffic incident involving an African American motorist and a white police officer. Those in the neighborhood felt that the police had engaged in brutality toward the motorist. They began throwing rocks and bottles at the police. By the next day, their anger had escalated into a riot that would last six days and nights resulting in thirty-four deaths, 4000 arrests, and extensive property damage. This was not to be the last urban riot. In 1967, riots engulfed 167 American cities. In that year, forty-three

people were killed in Detroit and almost three-quarters of the city was set ablaze. After the riots, Johnson's approval ratings dropped to thirty-seven % (Farber 111-116).

President Johnson had problems on other fronts. A national protest movement coalesced in opposition to the Vietnam War. This movement encouraged political action in an effort to halt the conflict. Student groups organized "teach-ins" and "sit-ins" against the war. Mainstream religious groups began to oppose involvement as well. National protests grew in size. In April of 1967, a quarter million people in San Francisco and New York City rallied against the war. These protests, however, failed to alter the Johnson administration's prosecution of the war. By late 1967, a minority of antiwar protesters became convinced that United States policies in Vietnam were symptomatic of a greater underlying fallibility within the American system that could not be exorcized without radical action (Farber 159-164).

Millions of young men sought to avoid the draft. Those who came from affluence or had the benefit of higher education found ways to obtain draft deferments or enlistment in the National Guard. Those from poor and working class families were drafted to fight. The war in Vietnam became the most divisive issue in America. Many Americans still supported the war. Not only was an antiwar movement established but a backlash developed as well. A cultural divide between conservatives who were in favor of the war and liberals who were opposed to it began in the mid 1960s. This division would widen and deepen as the war continued. It would also expand to include other divisive social issues in the following decades.¹²

¹² In 1965, student deferments accounted for 12.3 % of Selective Service registrants. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Classification of Selective Service Registrants: 1965 to 1970," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1971* (92nd edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office 1971: 257. For support of the war and cultural divide, see Farber 149.

National Trauma and Social Disruption

America experienced several traumatic events during the 1960s. According to sociologist Arthur Neal, national traumas fall into two different categories. One type occurs when an abrupt or dramatic event disrupts the social order. Historical examples of this type of event are the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the assassination of President Kennedy. The second type of trauma can occur when a national crisis is chronic and long lasting. Examples of this kind of trauma were the Vietnam War, the struggle for civil rights, and violence in the streets during the 1960s (6-7).

Individuals must work their way through the intense experience of national trauma. The experience of a crisis will cause people to react in ways unique to each individual. The least complicated personal response is a simple, moralistic judgment of right and wrong that places events into preexisting political or religious ideologies. Others in society use a crisis as a reason to justify a new social crusade designed to right the ills of society or to restore traditional values. Some individuals are simply overwhelmed by national trauma and become fatalistic over events that they feel they cannot control. Others seek rational answers to underlying problems through investigations and national debate (Neal 17-18).

National traumas can have a debilitating or a liberating effect on a society. People can engage either in rational debate or in divisive confrontation. The manner in which Americans reacted to the traumatic events of the 1960s was unique to each individual. These events induced both debate and confrontation. The country continued to experience national trauma into the next decade and America's response to these traumas would be an important factor in its political future for many years to come.

American Consensus in Films: 1940s – 1960s

The development of the American motion picture industry in the middle of the twentieth century reflected a similar trajectory to the nation at large. American films progressed from a period of self-confidence to one of turbulence. This progression included changes in both industry economics and film content.

American motion pictures have always been star driven vehicles. It is interesting to look back to see which actors have achieved the greatest popularity. It is even more interesting to examine the view of financial stakeholders. Motion picture exhibitors and independent theater owners have been polled for the last seventy years as to which film star they thought to be most bankable. American films were much different in the years immediately after World War II. In 1946, Bing Crosby took top honors. Other notable actors including Bob Hope, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and James Stewart followed Crosby's victory in the next decade. In the early 1960s, Doris Day assumed the top position. She was followed in the 1960 poll by Rock Hudson, Cary Grant, Elizabeth Taylor, and Debbie Reynolds.¹³

American self-confidence was reflected in the selection of its cultural icons. These well-established movie stars were glamorous, charismatic, and uniquely American in their film personas. In their road pictures, Hope and Crosby confidently wisecracked their way out of dangerous situations while traveling the world in search of adventure. In their westerns, Cooper, Wayne, and Stewart explored the vastness of the American frontier while righting wrongs and dispensing justice. In their comedies, Day and Hudson shared

¹³ Cary Grant was the only non-American on the 1960 list. See "Q.P. Money-Making Stars of 1933-2001," Eileen S. Quigley, ed. 2004 *International Motion Picture Almanac*. New York: Quigley Publications: 19-20.

the bliss of domestic family life after meeting and finding true love. Motion picture stars tend to have well defined film personas and to favor certain genres. Popular genres of the early 1960s would often reflect widely shared American attitudes, beliefs, and values.

According to a list of all-time box office champions, published in 1969 by the motion picture trade publication *Variety*, *The Sound of Music* (1965) was the most successful film produced up until that date. Another musical, *Mary Poppins* (1964) was number seven.¹⁴ In each film, a family finds itself in crisis until a maternal figure enters the scene to reestablish order. She encounters resistance at first, but eventually wins the family over. The inclusion of cheerful songs and their far-off settings—the charming Swiss Alps and the picturesque 1910s London enhance the fairy tale nature of both productions.

Historical romances were a popular genre during the early 1960s. Their distance from present times reinforced a sense of nostalgia for an idealized world. Films in this genre included tales of Roman conquest in *Cleopatra* (1963) and the Russian Revolution in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965). Legendary biblical epics were retold in *The Ten Commandments* (1957), *Ben Hur* (1959), and *Spartacus* (1960). In these films, old world ideologies, values, and beliefs are shown to be morally bankrupt. The Roman lust for empire and the Bolshevik drive for a socialist world destroyed both lovers and democracy. In addition, corrupt old world empires collapse when confronted by enlightened men.

Legends of another sort were the subject of the World War II film genre. Some of the most successful films of this genre tell the story of groups of service members who

¹⁴ For theatrical receipts, see “All-Time Box Office Champs (Over \$4,000,000, U.S.-Canada Rentals),” *Variety* 8 January 1969: 14.

are charged with a difficult mission. Examples include *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *The Longest Day* (1962), and *The Great Escape* (1963). In each film, American service members succeed in defeating Axis powers through effective leadership, teamwork, and self-sacrifice. Another war film of the early 1960s was *PT 109*.

Presidential Biographies and Political Films

In July of 1963, a film version of Robert Donovan's best selling book *PT 109* was released. This film depicted the heroic wartime adventures of the then current United States President, John F. Kennedy. The film's action took place when Kennedy was a naval officer serving in the Solomon Islands. The motion picture was based on actual events that occurred when the young Lieutenant Kennedy was given command of a small PT boat. He and his twelve-man crew took the boat into battle only to have it sunk by a Japanese destroyer. Despite injuring his back, Kennedy rescued the boat's chief engineer who had been seriously burned. He then swam back to rescue two more of his injured crewmember who he dragged to safety. Kennedy and his crew would spend fourteen hours in the water before reaching land. All but two of his men survived the ordeal. For his efforts, Kennedy received the Purple Heart (Dallek 95-96).

The film's depiction of Kennedy is very reverential. Not only does he perform courageously under fire, but the filmic Kennedy also displays exemplary character traits. Early in the film, an enlisted man recognizes Kennedy and questions him as to why he did not pull strings via his father to avoid combat. The lieutenant replies with a stiff upper lip that he would seek no special treatment because he is "willing to fight for what he believes in." Later in the film, Kennedy goes on to refurbish a derelict PT boat and lead his crew to safety after their boat sinks.

The film's historical events were reasonably accurate and the likeness of its lead actor was very similar to Kennedy. This made it easy to attribute traits that would reflect American optimism upon Kennedy. The film *PT 109* plays upon the familiar legend of King Arthur where a young knight-errant proves himself worthy through trial. Thus sanctified, he rises to greatness. Throughout *PT 109*, Kennedy projects the persona of a potential leader including such characteristics as grace under fire, bravery in a crisis and compassion toward his subjects. These traits reinforced the audience's belief in the safety, sanctity, and legitimacy of the real life president.

Another biographical film of the postwar era served to reinforce the legitimacy of political leaders. *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960) told the story of future president, Franklin D. Roosevelt's inspirational struggle against polio. The young Roosevelt's trial in this film is that of illness, which he overcomes in order to merit future greatness. Films of this era reinforced confidence in a logical world that rewarded meritorious behavior. John Ford's *The Last Hurrah* (1958) presents a big city mayor who willingly plays the morally questionable game of politics with skill and enthusiasm. Despite the mayor's ethical relativism, however, he will not compromise when it comes to the issue of obtaining low-cost housing for his constituents, even if it means his electoral defeat.

American preoccupation with the Cold War influenced a number of political dramas of the postwar era. *Advise and Consent* (1962), based on a Broadway play and a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, is a procedural story about the inner workings of government. Action begins when an ailing president nominates a distinguished professor (Henry Fonda) to be his new Secretary of State. In his Senate confirmation committee hearings, the appointee encounters allegations of former membership in Communist-front

organizations. Although the allegations are true, the appointee is able to present evidence that undermines the mental stability of his accuser. Individuals in the film are flawed, but are not completely without merit. The appointee is a capable professor, the blackmailed Senator is a happily married family man, and the southern Senator eventually comes around to reason. A compromise is reached as the American government proves to be stable enough to withstand impropriety and inspirational enough to encourage bipartisan diplomacy.

Cold War paranoia was the subject of several political films of the early 1960s. In John Frankenheimer's film *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), a brainwashed Korean prisoner of war (Lawrence Harvey) returns to America after being programmed by his Communist captors into becoming an assassin. The triggering agent for the assassination plot is the veteran's own mother (Angela Lansbury). She intends for her son to shoot the presidential nominee so that her second husband can take his place. The assassination plot fails when a fellow prisoner of war (Frank Sinatra) frees the unfortunate veteran from his brainwashing, thus preventing a national tragedy. The veteran then kills his stepfather, his mother, and himself.

In *Seven Days in May* (1964), also directed by Frankenheimer, it is not Communists who try to subvert the American government, but right wing military leaders. A rogue Air Force general (Burt Lancaster) plots to stage a military coup. Once again, the nation avoids chaos when a few good men resist evil. The president is notified of the plot just in time and the general is forced to resign. The President of the United States saves the day yet again in Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964). When a technological failure causes an errant United States Air Force bomber to drop a nuclear warhead on

Moscow, the world faces annihilation. The noble American President (Henry Fonda) then decides that the only way to avert a nuclear holocaust is to destroy New York City as well, thus sacrificing millions of citizens as well as his own family.

Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964), a nightmare comedy directed by Stanley Kubrick, told the same story as *Fail Safe*, but from an absurdist point of view. Here, a nuclear extremist (Peter Sellers) carries the day, American political leadership is viewed as a joke, and the world is destroyed by the actions of yet another rogue American General (Sterling Hayden). This film was ahead of its time in its absolute rejection of Cold War ideology and would be more at home in the decade to come in its ironic stance. Significantly, an ex-patriot American director working in England, not in Hollywood, directed *Dr. Strangelove*.

The themes of these motion pictures reflected American Cold War beliefs of the 1950s and early 1960s including the need to contain Soviet aggression, prevent nuclear proliferation, and maintain control over advanced weapon technology. These films certainly called into question American beliefs in the postwar era. Political films of all eras have done this. At the same time, these films all tell a story of superior American bravery and ingenuity.

In both *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*, American pilots succeed in completing their missions despite extreme odds. In *Fail Safe* a pilot conserves fuel by altering his target and in *Dr. Strangelove* a pilot figures out a way to release a nuclear bomb that is stuck in his airplane's fuselage. These films, with the exception of *Dr. Strangelove*, suggest that were it not for the occasional psychotic general, out of touch senator, or brainwashed

assassin, enough rational leaders still exist who can get on with the task of running America.

An unusually large number of politically themed motion pictures were produced during the Kennedy administration. This trend abruptly ended with President Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963. By November 30 of that year it was announced that *PT109* had been withdrawn from distribution, the advertising campaign for *Seven Days in May* would be altered, a proposed film version of Gore Vidal's Pulitzer Prize winning play *The Best Man* would remove references to Cuba, and the London premier of *Dr. Strangelove* would be postponed (Archer A17).

The 1960s: Ferment in the Film Industry

Turmoil in the streets of America in the mid 1960s was mirrored by upheaval in the corporate boardrooms of Hollywood. American movie moguls, however, were fighting different battles. The turbulent nature of the film industry was summed up by one executive who noted in 1965 "at the same time that the ceiling blew off, the floor dropped out" (Bart A14). In the previous year, four Hollywood pictures had wildly exceeded expectations for grosses including, *My Fair Lady* (1964), *Goldfinger* (1964), *Mary Poppins* (1964), and *The Sound of Music* (1965). At the same time, producers found that their unsuccessful films were doing far worse than ever. The films that did not do well in their initial runs could no longer recoup their production costs through runs in smaller towns, or as second features. As a result, movie making became even more of a speculative business (Bart A14).

The state of the American film industry had been in general decline since the 1940s. This was in direct contrast to the boom years experienced by most other American industries. In 1946, total admissions to United States motion picture theaters topped \$1.6

billion. By 1962, ticket sales had fallen to their lowest point of \$903 million. In the same period, average weekly motion picture attendance dropped from 90 million to 43 million.¹⁵

A number of reasons contributed to Hollywood's decline. Up until 1948, the studios enjoyed an almost vertical monopoly. They owned production facilities and had large rosters of stars and artisans under contract. In addition, the five largest studios controlled chains of theaters in which they could guarantee exhibition of their final product. In 1948, an antitrust case was settled by the United States Supreme Court in favor of the United States Justice Department. The case, known as *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et al.*, forced the five largest studios to divest themselves of a number of their theaters (Balio 3).

The growth of television as a competitor for spectator dollars was also a culprit in Hollywood's decline. The television industry exploded after World War II. In 1947, there were twelve television stations in America. By 1965 there were 569 stations providing news and entertainment directly to the living rooms of almost all American homes (Sterling and Haight 53).

The medium of television was both a bane and a boon to the film industry. Television robbed films of spectators, but lined its coffers with money. Television networks had a constant insatiable need for original programming sufficient to fill their scheduled hours all day long and seven days a week. At first, television viewers were amused with the novelty of the new medium. When the novelty wore off, viewers

¹⁵ The 1946 figure represented 19.8 % of all American recreational expenditures. Recreational spending on motion pictures declined in 1962 to 4.07 %. See "Theater Grosses, 1931-1970: U.S. Box Office Receipts in Relation to Personal Consumption Expenditures," Richard Gertner, ed., 1972 *International Motion Picture Almanac*. New York: Quigley Publications: 42A.

demanded higher production values similar to what they could see on the big screen.

Demand for new entertainment created a symbiotic relationship between television and Hollywood.

Television executives turned to Hollywood studios to provide important sources of programming. According to *Variety*, 20th Century Fox garnered almost 40 % of its 1966 rental income from television, an increase of 6 % from the prior two years. This rental income was derived from both made-for-television movies and from theatrical films. The number of televised motion pictures rapidly increased. At the same time, film companies were becoming more dependent on them for their economic survival in the high-risk world of film production. A measure of this risk was that television rentals, combined with only one theatrical release, *The Sound of Music*, accounted for 76 % of all of 20th Century Fox rentals for the entire year of 1966 (“20th-Fox Breakdown Shows ‘Sound’ 36% of Theatricals”).

As valuable as television rentals were as a source of income, film libraries were even more lucrative. The 1966 airing of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) on network television was a huge rating hit. After this successful broadcast, the American Broadcasting Company spent close to \$100 million to purchase a catalog of old Hollywood films for prices of up to \$2 million each (Bart A1).

The libraries of old movies controlled by the Hollywood studios increased in value, but the stock prices of the motion picture companies continued to sell at price to earnings ratios well below comparable companies in other industries. This made them prime take-over candidates. Corporate raiders would soon act as Paramount Pictures was taken over by Gulf and Western in 1966; United Artists merged with Transamerica Corporation in

1967; Kinney National Services acquired Warner Brothers in 1969; and MGM was taken over by investor Kirk Kerkorian in 1969. A new era of corporate conglomeration had begun (Bart A1).

A generation of “tough minded young executives from outside industry” was brought in to replace motion picture leadership. The great film pioneers of the early twentieth century were retiring and being replaced. In 1966 Charles G. Bluhdorn, the forty-year-old chairperson of Gulf and Western, assumed control of Paramount. He then turned over control of studio production to Robert Evans, a thirty-eight-year-old businessperson and former actor. This new corporate studio ownership brought an infusion of much needed venture capital, and instituted other changes as well. The new studio owners began to sell off studio property, shoot films abroad, or on location, and to put an end to the studio contract system (Bart A1).

The American motion picture industry experienced a period of financial upheaval at the same time as it was facing artistic challenges. Audiences were changing and the industry had to adapt to their evolving tastes. The key to attracting new film audiences was thought to be through originality of content and style. More often than not, this originality was found in independent productions or in European films. World War II had devastated the motion picture industries of several European countries. By the 1960s, a number of nations had recovered. The distinctive films of Italy, France, and Sweden became quite popular with American art house viewers and societies of film enthusiasts. Innovative foreign films including *Alfie* (1966), *Georgy Girl* (1966), and *Blow Up* (1966) box office successes that year prompting trade publication *Variety* to ask, “Why can’t we make the same kind of picture here?” (Gold 3).

Veteran film publicist Arthur Mayer attributed the lack of innovation in American films to both the caution and the age of industry leadership. Mayer pointed out that in 1967 the “king of Hollywood,” Cary Grant, was sixty-two, Bob Hope was sixty-one, and both Henry Fonda and John Wayne were sixty-years-old. He also lamented that some of America’s best young directors had to go to Europe to have an opportunity to succeed. Mayer noted that several “superb film schools” were teaching a new generation of filmmakers in Paris, Rome, and Moscow. Mayer proposed that the film industry take it upon itself to address this imbalance by contributing funding to America’s film schools. According to Mayer, embracing new talent was the only way to retain the “world wide prestige” that American films had acquired in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s (Mayer 5).

A period of transition in the American film industry began in the late 1960s. Changes in production, distribution, competition, and capitalization precipitated a recasting in the corporate boardrooms of Hollywood. This would soon result in changes regarding who would be permitted to make motion pictures, and who would be permitted to determine their content.

CHAPTER 3

REVOLUTION: *WILD IN THE STREETS* (1968), *MEDIUM COOL* (1969)

Let the old world make believe it's blind and deaf and dumb

But nothing can change the shape of things to come

-Les Baxter, Barry Mann & Cynthia Weil, *Wild in the Streets*

In 1968 America was listening to new voices. These voices maintained that the shape of things to come was anything but square. It was fashionable for young people to reject the status quo. Some joined protest groups in hopes of improving society. Others advocated revolution. Some opted out of the system altogether to form utopian, communal societies. Others merely chose to follow fashion. They grew their hair a little longer, listened to rock music or experimented with drugs while remaining a part of consumer society.

Those most in tune with fashion acquired cultural currency. They were considered hip, cool, aware, and in on the joke about a square society. Antiheroes supplanted heroes in the worlds of music, sports, and art. Actors who cultivated images as cinematic rebels – Paul Newman, Steve McQueen, Clint Eastwood, Lee Marvin, Elliot Gould, and Dustin Hoffman – soon replaced Doris Day and Rock Hudson as the most bankable film stars (Quigley 19-20).

Serving a younger demographic market became very important in the entertainment industry. Those under the age of thirty comprised fewer than 50 % of the total population but accounted for over 76 % of the movie-going public. This new audience, weaned on

television viewing, was not interested in the lavish productions that employed thousands of extras or in seeing established movie stars. They wanted to identify with the characters they saw on the screen and sought out films that had something unique to say to them.¹

Carefully crafted films that were “small in scope but intense in drama” found an audience with young people. The personal vision of a particular director or producer became valued. An increasing number of small, youth oriented films were produced including *Alice’s Restaurant* (1969) with a budget of \$1.7 million, and *Goodbye Columbus* (1969) with a budget of \$1.9 million, this at a time when a budget of under \$3 million was considered cheap. Small, profitable films were the new industry fashion, but not all Hollywood studios could find the formula required for their creation. Studios sought out filmmakers from outside of the Hollywood establishment who were capable of deciphering what was hip. Established producers, who did not know “the difference between rock music and the music from *The King and I*,” were out of favor (Penn A1).

Hollywood was late to latch onto the new creative bandwagon. Films are expensive to make, so risks are not often taken. In 1967, however, two landmark films were released that “sent tremors through the industry” (Biskind 15). *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), directed by Arthur Penn, and *The Graduate* (1967), directed by Mike Nichols were influenced by European artistic style and film content. They broke with the old conventions of narrative structure, included sex scenes, and graphic violence that would not have been permissible under the old Hollywood Production Code, and they critiqued

¹ In 1969, 77 % of filmgoers were between 12 and 29 years old. This number would remain consistent throughout the 1970s. See Sterling and Haight 353.

American society from a satirical perspective. The success of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* opened the floodgates for other new filmmakers to follow suit (Biskind 15).

Directors of this era enjoyed a level of power, prestige, and wealth that had not existed in Hollywood before. The first wave of these outsiders was comprised of men who had started their careers in television or the theater including, Arthur Penn, Alan Pakula, Michael Ritchie, Hal Ashby and Robert Altman. The second wave was made up of post World War II baby boomers including Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Brian DePalma. These filmmakers would have a profound effect on American film for decades to come. Their success was based on artistic merit, as well as on their ability to identify and channel the voice of America (Biskind 15).

Key Political Events of 1968

In 1968, established political leaders were being rejected and new leaders were being embraced. The Johnson administration was accused of harboring a credibility gap between its public statements and the actual state of national affairs. Johnson frequently appeared on television to inform the American people about progress in Vietnam. The president's positive version of events, however, did not always correspond with what the viewers could see for themselves. The television networks dispatched camera operators to Vietnam who captured the chaotic violence of war. These images were dispatched to network news divisions back home and within days they were broadcast into the living rooms of America. The powerful images of stalemate in Vietnam caused viewers to doubt the Johnson administration's war plans.

Johnson's credibility was further compromised by the Tet Offensive of January 1968. The ability of the North Vietnamese to invade and briefly hold some of the cities of the South was a decisive event in the conflict. The Tet Offensive was even more

important in the battle for hearts and minds on the American home front. The North Vietnamese incurred massive casualties, but their tenacity gave every indication that they would not soon give up the fight (Witcover 72-75).

America's progress in Vietnam led to disenchantment with Johnson. A grass roots organization of young people worked to promote the candidacy of Minnesota Senator, Eugene McCarthy. Shock waves resounded when he narrowly lost to Johnson in the New Hampshire primary by a margin of 49.4 % to 42.2 %. This poor showing was one of the motivating factors in Johnson's decision not to seek reelection and provided an opening for other candidates to seek the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. The party's spring and summer primary races were thrown wide open as different factions fought for control (Witcover 100).

The spring of 1968 was a time of tragic violence. Dr. Martin Luther King traveled to Memphis in April to rally the city's striking sanitation workers. On the night of April 3, he addressed a capacity crowd at Mason Temple speaking about racial hatred and violence in America. Dr. King also spoke of rumors of death threats that he had received. On the next day these premonitions were made tragically real as an assassin's bullet struck him dead.

Once again, America witnessed the violent death of a national leader (Witcover 152). The murder of Dr. King was followed in June by yet another traumatic event, the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy. Kennedy was a candidate in 1968 for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. After winning the California primary, he left a celebratory rally, held in the ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles only to be fatally shot in the hotel's kitchen pantry corridor (Witcover 253).

The spring of 1968 was also a time of youthful revolt. Student protests occurred on American campuses all across the country. In April, Columbia University's proposed construction of a gymnasium that would have taken land away from a Harlem neighborhood park in New York City. This proposal sparked student and neighborhood protests. The students, including members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), took over five buildings and staged a demonstration at the offices of university president Grayson Kirk (Witcover 188).

The sixty-four year old Kirk criticized the students' lack of respect for authority and suggested their motives were nihilistic rather than constructive. SDS local chapter leader Mark Rudd then issued an open letter to Kirk. The profanity-laced letter was designed to underscore Rudd's belief that the president of the university was out of touch with the younger generation and unable to understand the pressing need for social change (Witcover 188).

Fourteen or Fight

The film *Wild in the Streets* (1968) is a parody of the sort of intergenerational conflict that was actually happening on American university campuses. The film's protagonist Max Frost (Christopher Jones) is an only child, born into a middle class family. His mother (Shelly Winters) is a high-strung, anally compulsive person who insists on covering the living room furniture in plastic. Max's father is so hen-pecked that he can only gain his son's respect by tearing the plastic from the sofa. Max's mother informs him that sex is "dirty" and slaps him around for his supposedly rebellious attitude. When Max turns nineteen, he creates a bomb to blow up the family Chrysler, then leaves home to seek his fortune.

Within a short time, the twenty-two-year-old Max becomes a millionaire rock star. He affects the appearance of 1950s film star James Dean and the attitude of an SDS leader. Max wears paisley shirts, says things like “blow their minds,” and sports a colonial era ponytail. He is surrounded by a collection of perpetually bored, hippie hangers-on, which include a brilliant fifteen-year-old Yale law school graduate who handles his business dealings, a Japanese typewriter heiress, and a Black Power Party member (Richard Pryor) who is also his drummer.

Max’s popularity with young people comes to the attention of a liberal politician from California, Johnnie Fergus (Hal Holbrook) who reporters compare to President Kennedy and the filmmakers depict as a phony hipster. Fergus seeks to manipulate Max’s celebrity in order to win election as senator. Max negotiates a pledge that Fergus will lower the state’s voting age to fifteen in exchange for Max’s endorsement. Max also agrees to appear at a televised concert in support of Fergus, but surprises the senator by singing a song entitled *Fourteen or Fight* that demands lowering the voting age even further.

Thanks to Max’s support, Senator Fergus wins election and, in return, lowers the voting age in California. When Max and his gang realize their potential power, they decide to run one of their own in a special election for the seat of a deceased Senator. The twenty-five-year-old candidate, Sally Leroy, wins. She then appears on the floor of the United States Senate in a leather mini dress, and a colonial tri-corner hat while obviously stoned. Sally proposes legislation lowering the eligible age for senators, congressional representatives, and presidents to 14 thus producing wild cheers from young people in the senate gallery and consternation from the much older member of the seated legislative

body. Congress resists the proposed legislation and young people take to the streets in protest. Twelve young people die in the ensuing riot prompting Max to appear on television to sing a song of warning entitled *The Shape of Things to Come*.

Max and his band of hippies decide to put LSD into the drinking water in order to incapacitate the politicians and fool them into passing an amendment to lower the voting age. The drugged legislators happily vote for the amendment. Max, who is now legally old enough to be eligible, decides to run for president of the United States. He carries every state but Hawaii. Once in office, Max assumes absolute power. He decides that a mandatory retirement age of thirty will be established and that black-suited police squads will round up everyone over thirty-five and take them to mandatory rehabilitation camps. Old people are bussed into the camps and forced to drink liquid LSD. Once they partake of the drink, the old folks exhibit an exaggerated sense of bliss as they stumble around in bathrobes emblazoned with peace symbols on their sleeves. In a disturbingly graphic moment, Senator Fergus hangs himself from a tree.

After neutralizing all those over thirty, Max decides to disband the armed forces. He states that America's great wealth will allow it to ship free grain to all nations of the world, thus making war unnecessary and allowing the United States to become the most hedonistic society on earth. The film ends on an ironic note when Max goes sightseeing in the country and stumbles upon a small crawdad attached to a pier. Max picks it up to examine it, is bitten, and then stomps it dead. It is then revealed that the crawdad was the pet of a young child who enters the scene and warns ominously that "we're gonna put everybody over ten out of business."

Film Style

The film is purposely unreal. The scene of the Senators laughing hysterically after being dosed with LSD is tinted red and the composition of shots is canted. Performances especially that of Shelly Winters, are way over the top. Costumes are exaggerated as well. When Max becomes president, his mother is seen wearing a flowing robe and smoking a hash pipe. His father is an object of derision, robbed of his toupee, and forced to use a wheelchair. The characters in the film have little depth. Young people are good because they are young and old people are all phony, especially the Kennedyesque Senator Fergus who pretends to befriend Max but eventually attempts to assassinate him. The message is you can never trust politicians who, according to Max, all play “sneaky panther games.”

The film reiterates the theme of age versus youth. Max tells his band of hippies that he does not want to live too much longer because “thirty’s death man.” Max also states, “The only thing that blows your mind when you’re thirty is getting guys to kill other guys, only in another city or another country where you don’t see it or know anything about it.” For such an exploitative film, this is a surprisingly subtle reference to the war in Vietnam and reflects an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the war present even in popular culture. The film suggests that the established political order has botched things up. Max tells congress that the villains in history are not the Communists, John Birchers, Jews, labor leaders, bankers, Russians or Chinese. The people who cause all of the trouble are “those who are stiff, baby, not with love, but with age.”

As unreal as *Wild in the Streets* seems to be, it was based on a germ of historical reality. As early as the 1940s United States senators had proposed reducing the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. In 1942, Michigan Senator Vandenberg proposed a

constitutional amendment to that effect. Vandenberg maintained that if young men were “old enough to fight for their government they ought to be entitled to vote.”²

Legislation aimed at lowering the voting age was proposed in every administration up to and including that of Johnson. In June of 1968, Johnson once again proposed a constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to eighteen years of age. According to Johnson, the legislation would be a signal to young people that “they are respected, that they are trusted, that their commitment to America is honored and that the day is soon to come when they are to be participants, not spectators, in the adventure of self-government” (Jones A1).

A Gallup Poll conducted in 1968 found that 64 % of Americans were in favor of lowering the voting age (Jones A1). Those in favor of the amendment felt that young people were better educated than in the past and would be more sophisticated in their political choices. The notion that willingness to fight for country should equate to suffrage also was brought up as was a hope that granting the vote would “channel student protests into more acceptable directions” (Apple A1).

The release of *Wild in the Streets* in May of 1968 was perfectly timed to take advantage of a push for suffrage as well as current news events. Students literally were going “wild in the streets” at Columbia University and other institutions of higher education. Young people were no longer easily channeled into acceptable directions. Intergenerational conflict was at the forefront of national consciousness. *Wild in the Streets* took the concept of a “generation gap” that existed between the adversarial parties

² The draft age for American men had been reduced to speed victory in World War II. See Lawrence A1.

at actual institutions like Columbia University and reduced it to the absurd. Ominously, the film suggests that such conflict can never be resolved. On the surface, the film is only a parody, but its scenes of violence and anger are disturbingly close to actual events. Protesters die and senators hang as the nation spins out of control.

American International Pictures

James Nicholson and Samuel Arkoff of American International Pictures (AIP) produced *Wild in the Streets*. Since its founding in 1954, AIP had never lost money. The company specialized in cheaply made exploitation films designed to appeal to a young audience. Favorite genres included beach movies starring Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello, gothic horror films based on the works of Edgar Allan Poe, and outlaw biker films with actors like Peter Fonda.

Famed “B” movie director Roger Corman received an early opportunity to direct at AIP. While there, Corman produced a string of successful low cost films. He worked on a budget and at an economical pace that greatly pleased Arkoff. Corman made *The Beast with 1,000,000 Eyes* (1955) in eight days for \$35 thousand. He shot *I was a Teen-Age Werewolf* (1957) for \$123 thousand, and brought back \$2 million in profit. *Wild in The Streets* also adhered to this production model (Harmetz Sec 6: 12).

Arkoff made no apologies for the unsophisticated nature of his films. Even films presented with extreme dignity had to be sold to the public. “I look upon my movies as being merchandise. The fact that many of my acquaintances wouldn’t buy Woolworth’s merchandise doesn’t keep it from being perfectly good merchandise” (Harmetz Sec 6:12).

Arkoff felt that the reason why his company consistently made a profit while the major film studios struggled was the result of his unwillingness to insult his audience and his sense of timing. Arkoff constantly sought dramatic stories that captured public

attention and was willing to take chances on a hunch. “We made ‘*Wild Angels*’ (1966) because three different people threw on my desk the Life magazine story that had the Hell’s Angels on the cover” (Harmetz Sec 6: 32).

In addition to topicality, AIP was willing to take chances on new talent. Many young directors, actors, and writers were given their start by Arkoff and Corman. Directors of high future renown, including Martin Scorsese and Ron Howard, produced their first films at AIP. As long as they were willing to count pennies and work fast, they were hired. If a picture went over budget or exceeded its shooting schedule, Arkoff would appear on the set and threaten to tear five pages from the script. Generally, that persuaded the director to work faster. If it did not, Arkoff would actually rip up the script. AIP also saved money by avoiding shooting inside studios and never paying for anything it could obtain free. Arkoff prized a filmmaker’s creativity in the art of saving money and disparaged one hit wonders who took on the trappings of royalty. Arkoff felt that in Hollywood “90 % of the people consider themselves geniuses. In actuality, 10 % are brightly creative, and the other 90 % do a competent, workmanlike job” (Harmetz Sec 6: 34).

A workmanlike job was just what AIP received from the creative team behind *Wild in the Streets*. Both its screenwriter, Robert Thom and its director, Barry Shear, had forged careers in network television. Thom, along with cowriter Reginald Rose, had won a television Emmy in 1963 for Outstanding Writing Achievement in Drama for an episode of *The Defenders*. Shear had an extensive career as a television director, working on such network staples of the 1960s as *Ironside*, *It Takes a Thief*, *The Girl From*

U.N.C.L.E., and five episodes of *Tarzan* from 1967 to 1968. *Wild in the Streets* was Shear's first theatrical release.

Thom's script affected a tone of camp and pseudo hipness. AIP sought to tap the youth market that had grown up watching television. Both Thom and Shear were familiar with how to put together a production that would appeal to this new audience and the resulting film accomplished their goal. The use of irony and self-awareness were popular in several successful television programs of the era including *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.*, *Get Smart*, and *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*. In a manner similar to popular television programs, *Wild in the Streets* encouraged its audience to see how absurd everything in the modern world could be. This irony extended to the American political process. In the film, established political leaders are out of touch with the interests of their constituencies and, supposedly, committed young political leaders become shallow and vindictive.³

Not everyone shared in the joke. Some film critics took the film seriously. According to *Christian Science Monitor* film critic John Allen, *Wild in the Streets* was "a coarse exhibition of almost everything that can go wrong with a viable film idea" (6). The reviewer objected to the film's equation of a child's death with the death of a crowd, the misrepresentation of the intent of concerned young people, and a lack of emotional perspective. At the other extreme, Renata Adler of *The New York Times* thought the film to be one of the best American films of the year and compared it in quality and political perceptiveness to critically acclaimed French political drama *The Battle of Algiers* (1965)

³ In November of 1968, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* was the highest rated regularly scheduled network television program. Other highly rated, self-referential comedies of the era included *Bewitched* and *Get Smart*. See "Network TV's Top Twenty (Nielson Ratings, Nov. 11 -17)," *Variety*, 27 November 1968: 33.

(D1). Joseph Morgenstern of *Newsweek* was closer to the true motivations of AIP and the filmmakers when he labeled the film as “made for no other motive than profit” (101).

Nonetheless, the film was a financial success and preceded by one year the release of the even more successful sleeper hit *Easy Rider* (1969). *Wild In The Streets* was similar in theme and budget to *Easy Rider* and helped build a potential audience for the later film. Both productions were part of a cycle of youthful rebellion films that reached its zenith with *Easy Rider* and continued into the next decade.

Meet the New Boss; Same as the Old Boss

On one level, the central theme of *Wild in the Streets* is that you can't trust anyone over thirty. Throughout the film, establishment figures are lampooned as stodgy and obsolete. This parody of authority figures would have appealed to the target audience of AIP. Thom, however, included an opposing theme in the film. When confronted with Max's demands, Senator Albright complains, “youth is not only wasted on the young it is a disease.” Something has gone horribly wrong. The film also provides a cautionary story of what happens to young people when they are exposed to popular culture. Sex, drugs, music, and television rob them of their ability to reason and turn them into aliens who, in effect, go wild in the streets. This alien transformation was already a typical plot device of AIP horror films. In this instance, *I Was a Teen-Age Werewolf* was recycled as *I Was a Teenage Revolutionary*.

Not so subtle parallels to fascism occur throughout the film. Young people follow Max's musical directives without hesitation, even to the point of martyrdom. Violence is condoned when a member of Max's gang suggests assassination of legislators as an expedient way to promote passage of Max's political agenda. When Max and his group gain control of the government, they prove to be even worse than those that they have

replaced. Once Max wins election, he assumes absolute power. He is quite willing to consign old people to concentration camps. The filmmakers chose to show him smirking as he fields a reporter's question about old people hiding in attics to avoid capture. The policemen who capture the elderly are clad in identical black uniforms that resemble those worn by Nazi storm troupers. The end of the film is not subtle either. Max crushes the child's pet crawdad under his feet as a symbol of how easily freedom can be crushed by new political bosses.

Thom was 39 years old when *Wild in the Streets* was released. Twice in the film, the age of 37 is referred to as being excessively old. He would have been close to this age when writing the original story. Thom seems to have been trying to please AIP by scripting a youth rebellion picture while at the same time satirizing the excessive nature of a youth culture of which he was quickly aging out.

Music and Politics

Music played an important part in this film, reflecting the growing cultural influence of such successful musical groups as The Beatles. Max achieves the American dream not through civic commitment, but through his musical talents. His band of followers is not comprised of politicians, but by his musical group. A large part of the commercial appeal of the film consisted of its soundtrack. Concert footage is included throughout the film and songs frequently advance story exposition. Christopher Jones was a competent singer of pop songs and looked like any of a number of musical front

men of the era. Audiences could relate the staging of Max's rock performances to similar ones they had seen on televised variety programs including *The Ed Sullivan Show*.⁴

The lyrics of Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil also serve to express Max's political platform. Max appears at a well-attended, enthusiastic political rally and exhorts his constituency to action through song, "we've got the numbers now, we want the vote now, youth power that's where it's at now." When protesters are killed by police in the film, the screen goes dark, and then Max appears to perform *The Shape of Things to Come*. This song instigates a revolution among young television viewers that results in Max's final triumph. Once he becomes president, however, Max stops performing. The only thing that gets Max off is destroying the system.

Senator Fergus is a representative of the system who suffers from a credibility gap similar to that of President Johnson. In the film, Fergus misrepresents himself as supportive of the youth movement when, in fact, he is not. The senator's public speeches promote enfranchisement of young people, but in private conversations, he admits that he is trying to manipulate them for political gain saying, "we can't write these kids off, I need them." Unfortunately for Senator Fergus, he cannot control young people, nor can he control their leader. When events move beyond his control, Fergus becomes unhinged. A drunken fit causes him to tear posters off his children's bedroom walls. The senator's loss of control marks him as an unfit leader.

Max, on the other hand, remains cool, calm, and collected. He is a charismatic rebel from outside the political mainstream who is capable of out-smarting the political

⁴ The soundtrack of *Wild in the Streets* was the 14th bestselling album in the country and had been on Variety's bestsellers list for 16 weeks as of 27 November 1968. See "Variety Album Bestseller (a National Survey of Key Outlets)," *Variety* 27 November 1968: 55.

establishment. He takes over the government not through armed conflict, but by lacing the water supply with LSD. Max is media savvy. He knows how to banter with the press in order to explain away the negative connotations connected with consigning old folks to concentration camps. Max also is aware of how to use his celebrity to manipulate an audience. He uses the death of twelve protesters as a reason to stage the key political song of the film, *The Shape of Things to Come*. How he convinced the networks to grant him the free time to broadcast this media event is not clear; perhaps the network executives were secret rock fans.

Max's constituency understands him only through popular culture. Televised musical performances are his means of communicating with his constituency. In the film, nothing truly matters that is not broadcast. The origin of Max's political legitimacy lies in his celebrity. People follow him because he is famous and he uses fame to attain power.

In the age of celebrity, the importance of political parties has decreased. In the film, new political leaders emerge fully formed and have no need for party loyalty. When Max becomes eligible to run for president, he has a choice as to which party he will be associated. Max and his band sit in the senate chamber to discuss which course to take. Max is encouraged by his group to run for president as a member of the Republican Party for purely strategic rather than ideological reasons. It seems that no real difference exists between either of the political parties – winning is everything. Max then addresses a political convention while huge black and white pictures of former Republican presidents Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower can be seen behind him. Ironically, the conservatives are now hip and the liberals are square.

Political change is rapid in the film and solutions to social problems are simplistic. It took a quarter century to lower the voting age in America from twenty-one to eighteen. In *Wild In The Streets*, the voting age is lowered to fourteen in a matter of weeks. Social issues are no more intractable than the waxy yellow build-up that plagued kitchens in television commercials of the era. Even national security issues are easily surmountable. President Max Frost assures the public that giving away American agricultural surplus to potential foes will guarantee world peace.

Despite the easy assurance of success, young people in *Wild in the Streets* are willing to work for political change. They are optimistic and enthusiastic in their commitment to Max's agenda. Their revolution does indeed succeed. Unfortunately, Max's agenda is no different than that of the leaders he seeks to replace. His only goals are to punish his parents and gain the presidency. Once in power, Max and his followers become as old and obsolete as the previous leaders.

No one in this film reaches a happy conclusion. Max's parents are carted away to a concentration camp, Senator Fergus hangs himself, and Max realizes the burden of power. The film suggests that revolution results in regret. Disenfranchised young people commit themselves to achieving political change, but their victory turns hollow. They too become metaphorically old. It is better to remain a passive consumer of pop culture than to go wild in the streets.

The Whole World is Watching

Medium Cool (1969), written and directed by Academy Award winning cinematographer Haskell Wexler, walks the line between reality and fiction. Wexler's film is set in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic national convention. The film includes scenes of professional actors interacting with non-actors, improvisational dialogue and

documentary scenes of actual events. Wexler used this experimental structure in order to comment on the distancing effect of modern mass media and to tell a story about personal commitment. For him, the choice to embrace political activism in the 1960s was every bit as important as the choice to defend democracy from Axis powers was in the 1940s. The commitment fantasy contained in *Casablanca* was depicted as equivalent to that presented in *Medium Cool*.

The film's protagonist is a self-centered, local television camera operator named John Cassellis (Robert Forster). Cassellis views the world through the lens of his camera. He is as detached and cool as the medium in which he works. When Cassellis and his soundman Gus (Peter Bonerz) encounter an automobile accident on the highway, they make sure to capture usable footage of the carnage before they bother to contact an ambulance to help the victim. Cassellis' initial reaction to seeing a televised documentary on assassinations is to comment on the camerawork saying, "Jesus, I love to shoot film."

Cassellis is emotionally removed from his girlfriend Ruth. After a romantic encounter, she asks him whether he is worried about the fate of beached turtles in an Italian movie she saw. She wonders if he thinks that the camera operators who shot the footage stopped to turn the turtles back around so that they could return to the sea. Cassellis expresses indifference to the animal's fate saying, "How the hell should I know, those were Italian cameramen." In this scene, Cassellis is framed next to a poster of French New Wave film star Jean Paul Belmondo. Cassellis mirrors Belmondo's self-satisfied attitude and his action of smoking a cigarette. This establishes a connection

between the two existential characters and illustrates the influence of the French New Wave on Wexler's work.⁵

Ever the existential professional, Cassellis is disaffected by potential violence. He receives an assignment to cover emergency civil defense training being conducted by the Illinois National Guard in anticipation of possible rioting at the upcoming Democratic National Convention. Instead of considering the potential violence, his first priority is to obtain action footage of the training session including shots of reinforced jeeps and of guardsmen pretending to use tear gas on other guardsmen dressed to look like protesters.

The Illinois National Guard training scene is an example of Wexler's unique production design. Wexler was a noted documentary filmmaker. For this film, he attempted to achieve the opposite of a docu-drama. Instead of imposing a factual veneer upon a fictional work, he imposed his fictional characters upon real events. This technique freed Wexler from the requirements of journalistic objectivity that he would have encountered in a purely documentary form. He could choose to include a shot of an extremely stiff general attempting to explain the Illinois National Guard's mission. Also included in this sequence is footage of a guardsman at the training session pretending to be Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. The guardsman playing Daley attempts to reason with the fake protesters by saying in a joking manner, "We've given you everything we thought you needed. I've let you use our swimming pools every Fourth of July."

The most interesting thing about this scene is that the real Illinois National Guardsmen had an understanding of how the government might be perceived to be

⁵ Wexler framed posters in the background of many shots as a counterpoint to primary action. This scene ends with a nude romp in front of a photograph of a South Vietnamese general executing a member of the Viet Cong. Later in the film, a black militant advocates the violent use of handguns while framed in front of a photograph of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Dr. Martin Luther King.

disingenuous by letting people swim only one day per year. It is also interesting that the real life guardsmen are “acting” at their training session. They perform the roles of both civil authorities and protestors, yet are unaware of the ironic juxtaposition. They know what the opposition is for, but they do not care.

Personal and Political Commitment

Wexler intended *Medium Cool* to make a statement about responsibility. He compared the questions asked in his film to those asked at the time of the Nuremberg trials and commented on the ambiguous nature of evil. According to Wexler:

The biggest problem in our country today is that the bad guys don't look like bad guys. In movies, the bad guy comes into a room and he always needs a shave. And the music tells us he's a bad guy. But in real life, the bad guys are the guys who plan, who control the end of the world. Bacteriological warfare, chemical warfare, missiles that protect missiles. These men speak grammatical English, they have Ph.D.'s and they are undoubtedly nice to their wives and kids. If they think at all about what they are doing there are rationalizations available to them. They're doing it for peace. They're doing it to defend their country. They're doing it to protect mankind. If there is one word that characterizes our society, it is hypocrisy. (Flatley D19)

A cocktail party scene, attended by members of the news media, expresses Wexler's theme of rationalized evil. When questioned about his professional choices to broadcast violent images, a colleague of Cassellis points out that viewers do not want to see boring shots of people talking about peace. In response to the colleague, another member of the cocktail party points out that newscasters can afford to focus their stories on the loud and violent aspects of society because of their relative safety: “All good people deplore problems at a distance. Like Thomas Jefferson, he loved the common man, but at a distance.” This film condemns the choice of cool distance, both in civic life and in personal affairs.

Cassellis begins to find a sense of civic commitment when he receives an assignment to cover the story of a black cab driver who finds an envelope with \$10,000 in his taxi. The police question the cabby closely as to where the money came from. When the cabby says that he doesn't know the origin of the envelope, a detective, played by an actual city of Chicago policeman, turns aggressive, asking him if he was "gonna get funny now?" The portrayal of an innocent working man being harassed by an overly aggressive cop is a standard plot device in countless Hollywood films, as is what happens next.⁶

Cassellis is a journalistic pro who can smell a good story. He takes the cabby's story to his assignment editor, but the editor is unwilling to pursue the details of the \$10,000 envelope. He decries a lack of resources due to coverage of the upcoming political convention. The editor tells Cassellis to forget the story, but the intrepid cameraman will not let it go. He and his soundman track the cabby down to the neighborhood where he lives. Once in the cabby's apartment, they encounter a group of black militants who accuse them of spying for the police. Cassellis and his soundman deny the charges, but are lectured about news media exploitation and leave without any usable footage.

When Cassellis returns to his station, he finds out that some of his past footage shot of draft card burners has in fact been given to the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Cassellis becomes enraged at the duplicity of his superiors who would rob

⁶ For a discussion as to which characters in the film are actors working from a script, actors working via improvisation, non-actors working from improvisation, or non-actors unaware that they are taking part in a film, see Haskell Wexler, "Special Features: Commentary by Director, Writer and Director of Photography, Haskell Wexler, Editorial Consultant, Paul Golding and actress Marianna Hill," Commentary. *Medium Cool*. DVD. Paramount, 2001.

him of his street credibility. Station management summarily fires Cassellis, who now appreciates the suspicions harbored by the black militants. He will not be fooled again.

Cassellis begins to find a sense of personal commitment when he meets Eileen (Verna Bloom), a single mother from Appalachia, and her street-wise, young son named Harold. Cassellis teaches Harold to box and initiates a romance with Eileen. Wexler contrasts the idyllic life that Eileen and Harold had back in Appalachia with the mean streets of Chicago. The Appalachian scenes contain picturesque flashbacks of Harold's father teaching him to shoot a gun, walks through flowering fields, baptisms in rivers and pious religious services. This is in keeping with traditional faith in bedrock American values derived from simple rural roots. The mean streets of Chicago, on the other hand, reveal tenement courtyards and impoverished street urchins emblematic of the complexities of modern times.

Eileen is a good mother to Harold and is all the family he has left. Her husband, like bedrock American values, is only seen in flashbacks. His absence is variously explained as due to estrangement, military service, or death. Eileen had been a teacher back in West Virginia, however, the state of Illinois does not recognize her teaching credentials from back home. Her husband is gone so she must support her family by working in a factory making televisions for the Motorola Corporation, another reference to television production.

Eileen is different from the other women in Cassellis' life. His last girlfriend, Ruth was a sex object while Eileen offers the stability of an instant family. Cassellis takes Eileen to a Frank Zappa concert. The scene is played in fast motion and strobe lights

flash on and off as everyone dances with abandon. Zappa's lyrics parody trendy, noncommittal members of the counterculture:

What's there to live for? Who needs the Peace Corps?
 I'm completely stoned, I'm a hippy and I'm trippy, I'm a gypsy on my own
 I'll stay a week and get the crabs and take the bus back home
 I'm really just a phony, but forgive me 'cause I'm stoned
 Every town must have a place where phony hippies meet

It is interesting that Wexler includes Zappa's scurrilous indictment of disingenuous political activists. This is not a politically naïve film. After the concert, Cassellis makes out with Eileen. Harold, still missing his father, runs away after seeing the couple. Eileen searches for Harold all night and into the next day. She finds herself searching for her son in the middle of a major confrontation between protesters and police in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention.

The 1968 Chicago convention was extremely acrimonious. Differing slates of delegates fought over credentials. Delegates from New York and California interrupted speeches to chant, "Stop the war." Speakers chastised Chicago Mayor Daley from the podium. Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey received the party's nomination after withstanding challenges from South Dakota Senator George McGovern and Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy. Outside the convention hall, a crowd of 15 thousand protesters mobilized in Grant Park and then attempted to march to the convention hall. The Chicago police halted their progress. At 8:30 p.m., before a nation-wide audience of prime time television viewers, the police and protesters clashed. By the end of the melee, 100 persons had been injured.⁷

⁷ In an action designed to unnerve convention organizers and to divert police resources protest leaders disseminated fictitious rumors that they were planning to inject Chicago's drinking water with LSD, a tactic similar to that employed in the film *Wild in the Streets*. See Witcover 321.

The actress, Verna Bloom, bravely walks in close proximity to both sides during the conflict. She is playing a fictional character, but everything else in this sequence was real, or at least as real as footage can be that was shot by Wexler and later edited for dramatic narrative impact. Chants of “pigs eat shit” and “pigs are whores” are included on the soundtrack. Police are seen forcibly removing camera equipment from the scene. People are dragged into paddy wagons. Blood streams down protesters faces. Tear gas explodes as Eileen frantically searches for her son.

The key moment of personal commitment in the film occurs when Eileen telephones Cassellis while he is inside the convention hall working as a freelance cameraman. She tells him that Harold is missing and asks for his help. Without a moment’s hesitation, Cassellis leaves his job. He puts down the camera with which he coolly observed life and chooses to act. He joins Eileen in her search for Harold who ironically, has already left the melee and returned home.

The film ends with an arbitrary death scene. Cassellis picks up Eileen in his car to help her search for Harold. Unfortunately, their car runs off the road in a horrible accident. The film’s sound track includes reports of violence at the convention. In a shot similar to the first scene in the film, a beat up old car full of rubber-neckers slowly drives by the carnage. A young man in the back seat snaps a photograph of the auto accident, but the driver does not stop to help. The last shot in the film is of Wexler pointing his camera at the audience while actual attendees of the protest repeat, “The whole world’s watching. The whole world’s watching. The whole world’s watching.”

Production History

Wexler, born in Chicago, had always wanted to be a filmmaker. “My family traveled a lot, and I channeled my antisocial behavior into taking family movies. It was a

socially acceptable way to be detached.” Wexler traded detachment for commitment at the University of California where he was “kicked out my first year for being a radical.” He then spent four and a half years in the Merchant Marine before returning to his native Chicago where he began working on documentaries and educational films. After many years perfecting his craft, he became a highly sought after Hollywood cinematographer and won an academy award for best cinematography in 1967 for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) (Hunter A19).

In *Medium Cool*, the character of Cassellis serves as a surrogate for Wexler. Both are accomplished cameramen from Chicago. Both have a rebellious streak and worked as cameramen in Vietnam. Wexler wrote, directed, and photographed this very personal film. It is a tribute to the art and professionalism of cinematographers. Almost every scene in the film was shot with a hand held camera and without the benefit of modern camera stabilizing technology. The extensive use of hand held camera used throughout the film promotes a documentary-like sense of realism.

For Wexler the film became all too real when he received a dose of tear gas while shooting the Grant Park sequence of his film. An Illinois National Guardsman fired a canister at him. At first Wexler thought that it was only talcum powder, but soon blinded, he began to roll on the ground. A bit of water, administered by some of the protesters, brought him back around. The surreal nature of actual events struck Wexler who noted “the disbelief was that it actually had happened. In the midst of the rioting, in Grant Park, some guys in their late 20’s who I guess always played baseball there, went right on with their game with all that going on around them” (Beigel 7).

Wexler wrote the script for *Medium Cool* in the winter of 1967, well in advance of the convention. His ability to forecast was due in part to an understanding of the political dynamics of the city as well as his personal relationships with key members of the community. Wexler's original script did include scenes of protest and confrontation at the convention. Still it was extremely fortuitous for the production, if not for the city of Chicago, that violence did occur. He was able to stage graphic action sequences at minimal expense (Beigel 7).

Wexler, a novice director, had to scramble in order to get his picture made. He donated his own equipment to the production and shared in the film's financing as well as profits with Paramount Pictures. Wexler spent \$ 800,000 of his own funds on the production and made a deal to receive \$ 600,000 from Paramount in exchange for the completed work. He was also to receive 50 % of the net profits. Wexler was motivated to work fast and cheap, and in exchange, he secured relatively free rein over the film's content.⁸

When Wexler first pitched his idea to Paramount, the story was titled *The Concrete Wilderness*. The film originally was to be more about the experiences of a young child from West Virginia who had an interest in racing pigeons. The film was also to be about Harold's adaptation to living in the urban, Uptown neighborhood of Chicago. Harold's story was retained by Wexler, along with newer political content. The mayor of Chicago was more concerned with the film's content than Paramount. According to Wexler, "We

⁸ Paramount was more concerned about Wexler's ability to manage money rather than content. The studio sent an observer, disguised as a dialogue coach, to Chicago to watch over the film's budget. Wexler discovered the ruse, told the spy not to get in his way, and wound up using him as an actor in one of the film's scenes. See Beigel 7.

got calls almost every other day from Daley's office wanting reassurance that we wouldn't show the city in a bad light. We didn't block any traffic so we didn't have to get a permit or a license to film." Wexler delivered his film to Paramount on time and on budget. Unfortunately, the film received an X rating at the time of its release for its inclusion of frontal nudity and profanity. In spite of this, the film still turned a profit (Beigel 7).

Critical responses to *Medium Cool* applauded the film's technical skill and topical relevance but found fault with Wexler's directorial ability. *Washington Post* film critic Gary Arnold thought the film's blend of documentary and fiction captured "the disjointed, volatile character of American society." On the other hand, he also thought *Medium Cool* to be "not so much a finished, coherent work of art as it is a brilliant set of rushes." Arnold felt that the film tried to cover too many subjects, then could not resolve all of its many story lines (B1).

Penelope Gilliatt, of *The New Yorker*, thought the film fit well within current taste in its mixture of illusion and disillusion, but felt it contained the same "moral fallacy as Antonioni's *Blow Up*, which attacked the shallowness of a fashion photographer and of London swingers in a film that itself saw them only shallowly"(143).

Newsweek critic Joseph Morgenstern thought the film had moments of brilliance, but found fault with what he felt were "uneven performances and the banalities and uncertainties of the script." Morgenstern thought that Cassellis's character transformation was unconvincing, and the film's opening and closing scenes of automobile wrecks were an awkward attempt at parallelism. Morgenstern also charged Wexler with being didactic when the film lectured its viewers. Despite Wexler's difficulty in handling fiction

however, Morgenstern felt that *Medium Cool* was “a brave, significant attempt to break out an American feature film into the real world” (66).

Mediated Realities

The film’s title, *Medium Cool*, is a play on words derived from the work of noted 1960s media theorist Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, a hot medium supplies great amounts of information so that consumers are not required to invest a great deal of involvement in a particular production. A cool medium, on the other hand, supplies minimal amounts of information requiring consumers to become more invested in a media production. In the presence of a cool medium, the consumer must attempt to fill in the information that is lacking in the message. This coolness promotes introspection and passivity rather than action. In addition, the content of the medium is not so important to the consumers as much as the fact of interacting with the medium itself. The medium can appear to be more real to the viewer than its content. Radio, newspapers, and motion pictures are hot media, while television is a cool medium (McLuhan).

Medium Cool uses the hot medium of film to tell the story of a cameraman who works in the cool medium of television. It also examines how people interact with different media realities. At the time of its release, audiences could not be sure which scenes were real, partially real, or fictional. Wexler included footage of Reverend Jesse Jackson addressing followers at a national rally held at the makeshift Resurrection City site in Washington D.C. This actual news event could be verified as having taken place. Other events in the film, such as the romance between Eileen and Cassellis, fit movie audience expectations of a fictional plot. Still others scenes in the film could not obviously be judged either way. Gus can be seen at the protests along with other working soundmen. Who is a real soundman, who is an actor, and who is the soundman charged

with obtaining sound for Wexler's film? The confrontations between protestors and police were real, but they just as easily could have been staged and would have been if Wexler was not permitted to shoot in Chicago. Motion picture audiences had to decide for themselves what level of reality was being presented in this film.

Wexler noted that people often had difficulty discerning real behavior from what the media conditioned them to expect. During shooting, he observed that average citizens were quite willing to allow the presence of television crews to alter their actions. He saw that rioters, police, and National Guardsmen in Chicago would often pause in their tracks when they saw a TV van. They would make certain that the cameraman was ready to shoot before resuming their confrontations and ritualized chanting (Beigel 22).

The character of Cassellis addressed the media's ritualized response to violence. In the film, Cassellis and Eileen watch a televised documentary on the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King. The television screen is not visible in the frame, but its glow illuminates them from a dramatic, low angle. Eileen's emotional response to the program causes her to state, "I don't know what to think, it seems like no man's life's worth anything anymore."

The more cynical Cassellis finds fault with the program. He complains that the media has a script now, by the numbers. "Flags at half-mast, trips cancelled, ballgames called off, schools closed, memorial meetings, marches, moments of silence. The widow cries and then she says brave words, the moment of silence, the funeral procession." Cassellis feels that the real motivation behind the production was fear of black violence that might result from the assassination of Dr. King and a wish to abrogate blame so that "no one's really on the hook, you see?"

Marginalized Socio-Economic Groups

Wexler's familiarity with Chicago's political dynamics provided him with unique access to participants in his film including a group of black activists. After the police harass the cab driver, he returns to his apartment only to be criticized by his friends. They insinuate that he is not sufficiently conscious of his race. The cabby's friends tell him that if he was "acting as a black man" rather than "as a Negro" he would have kept the money and bought guns with it.

When Cassellis and his soundman Gus come to the apartment to follow up on the cabby's story, they meet with resistance. The militants accuse them of media exploitation and maintain that they cannot possibly tell the complete story or place it in its historical context in just fifteen-minutes. It is interesting that fifteen minutes was considered short for a news story in 1969. At the end of the scene, one angry man (Felton Perry) tells Cassellis what he thinks of the media. The militant states that what little media coverage there has been of blacks has ridiculed, exploited, and rendered them invisible. The resentment felt at being treated as a non-person leads him to warn of violent consequences. It is surprising that a mainstream American film managed to capture this level of anger toward the establishment.

The scene in the cabby's apartment employed a mixture of actors and non-actors. The cab driver and the last militant were actors; the other performers were a collection of activists, along with artists and sculptors, who were pretending to be more militant than they were in real life. Wexler supplied the performers with a script, however, they were free to improvise on specific wordings, add lines and decline any dialogue they felt uncomfortable speaking. This is true up to the long close-up at the scene's end, which was performed by an actual actor according to a script (Wexler).

As the final militant speaks, he is framed in the center of a close up and directly addresses the camera. This privileged framing indicates that Wexler intended to make a point about what he perceived to be the media's indifference to the lives of African Americans. The film also suggests that the media has also ignored the lives of poor whites. Wexler juxtaposes an interview conducted at a fancy hotel swimming pool with a social worker's interview conducted with Harold at his tenement apartment. In the poolside scene, Cassellis films a wealthy society matron as she speaks about her plans to vacation in Ontario for the summer.

The next scene shows Harold, alone in the middle of the day, trying to explain to a social worker where his father is. Unlike the society matron, Harold's world is not pleasant and his family cannot afford to vacation anywhere. Eileen and Harold are symbolic of an entire class of poor white people that Wexler feels have been rendered invisible. Although Wexler is neither African American nor from Appalachia, his sympathies lie with marginalized socio-economic groups. He reserves his antipathy for those in power.

Messages in the Medium

In *Medium Cool*, establishment figures are objects of derision. The Illinois National Guardsmen train for protesters while carrying toy guns and wearing longhaired wigs. Frightened suburban housewives practice firing guns at a shooting range. When Gus points a shotgun mike at the shooting range manager (Peter Boyle), the manager cracks an obvious joke asking, "is that thing loaded?"

Cassellis's boss cares about budgetary limitations more than he does about getting to the truth. He refuses Cassellis' request to follow up on the cabby's story and fires Cassellis for insubordination. Cassellis quickly obtains a new job as a cameraman

assigned to cover the Democratic convention. He conducts preproduction reconnaissance at the convention hall and remarks that the building's proximity to the Chicago stockyards causes it to smell of dead animals— a foreshadowing of the climactic “slaughter” of protesters in the park. Inside the convention hall, political leaders ignore the street violence going on outside. They cast their votes by state. Banners wave, speeches are made, and a pretty campaign worker, in a silly, cone shaped hat, pins a political campaign button on Cassellis's jacket. The Roosevelt era Democratic Party theme song, *Happy Days are Here Again*, is included on the sound track as an audio bridging device between shots inside the hall and the action outside.

An extended montage follows. Police beat people to the ironic counterpoint of the up-beat musical standard. The editing sequence depicts private citizens moving in one direction and uniformed guardsmen and police moving in opposition to them. Depersonalized close ups of boots are followed by shots of wounded protestors being placed in ambulances. In contrast to the moving shots of anonymous policemen, the camera stops to show personalized, medium close-ups of individual protestors. All is in chaos as the police march on.

The film breaks new ground in its depiction of political violence. Mainstream films had seldom depicted police and military personnel fighting against their fellow citizens. Authorities were trusted to serve and protect average citizens from attacks, but in this film, men in uniform turn against the people. It seems as if the American system has broken down, and the establishment is responsible for its demise. American leaders are depicted as not only illegitimate, but down right dangerous.

In the film, the nation's media are equally dangerous, coconspirators in the destruction of democracy. Newscasters substitute ritual for context and every story is the same as the last and the next. Individual cameramen, personified by Cassellis, are depicted as professional seekers of truth who must negotiate between the animosity of those they cover, police interference, and the impatience of their editors. Cassellis's editor is a harmless functionary. Those higher up at the station are another story. The bosses are unseen and dangerous. When Cassellis is given his severance letter, he runs through the station's hallways demanding to know who was responsible for his termination. No one takes responsibility for the action. In a film about a cameraman, being visible is important. That which is hidden from society has the potential for grave danger. According to this film, the public good can only be maintained if a metaphorical camera is trained on both the weak and the powerful.

One of the few establishment figures that receive respect in the film is Senator Robert Kennedy. Cassellis conducts an interview scene outside of a campaign office. Actual Kennedy campaign workers are asked why they support the senator. A young woman likes Kennedy because "He's got long hair." A young man says, "He is against the war." The woman jokingly dismisses the man saying, "He's an idealist; he's for anybody who doesn't have a chance." This line echoes Senator Smith from Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, "Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for." Wexler's film maintains that sense of 1960s idealism.

Later in the film, Wexler presents the assassination of Senator Kennedy in a unique manner. A continuous 360-degree panning shot shows the interior of a large commercial kitchen. The kitchen looks like the kitchen inside of the Ambassador Hotel in Los

Angeles where Kennedy died. Kennedy is never seen in the sequence, but his last speech is heard on the sound track. The camera slowly scans the entire minutia of the kitchen including workers, dirty dishes, etc. The pan continues until the camera arrives back at its starting point. Kennedy can be heard above a cheering crowd as he finishes his speech saying “. . . and now on to Chicago.” The shot concludes when the pantry door explodes open, throngs of people rush in, and we realize that the senator has been shot.⁹

Wexler’s film suggests that revolution comes at great cost, as it did for Robert Kennedy, but is it worth the sacrifice. Americans have failed to realize their full political and personal potential. Leaders have been slain, protestors beaten; Cassellis and Eileen have died in a fiery automobile crash. National government alone, however, cannot be trusted to solve the complex problems of society. As stated by various characters in the film, committed individuals must choose to affect change – “phony hippies” need not apply. Good people should no longer “view problems at a distance” because “the whole world is watching.” It is time for a change.

The personal transformation that Cassellis undergoes in *Medium Cool* occurs when he chooses to leave his work at the convention hall to join Eileen in searching for her son. His choice to join a new style of blended, nuclear family symbolizes the individual commitment needed to build a better family of man. Wexler’s inexperience as a director, however, caused him to miss an opportunity to emphasize this key dramatic moment. One moment Cassellis is seen shooting footage. He then gets a message and leaves the hall.

⁹ The kitchen scene was filmed at a date after the assassination of Kennedy. A Chicago kitchen stood in for the actual kitchen in the Ambassador Hotel. See Wexler.

Wexler also fails to take advantage of the extended riot scenes that end the film. In simple movie terms, the cops are the bad guys in the blue hats and the protesters are the good guys without hats. It is easy to discern who the filmmakers wish the audience to root for, but it is hard to discern the heroes' political agenda. The film does include a brief shot of a sign urging that American troops be brought home from Vietnam and the chant "hell no we won't go" can be heard on the sound track, but the audience is left to fill in the extra information needed to understand why this confrontation is happening. Unlike earlier, politically charged scenes, few protestors in the park are black or obviously, from Appalachia and other than a photograph on Cassellis' desk, the issue of Vietnam is not emphasized in the film.

The audience for this film most likely would skew politically left. This is not a film for centrists or right-wingers. The film's target audience would be aware of the political agenda championed by the protestors. They would have been aware of the concept of marginalized socio-economic groups. Even if they were not politically active, they would at least know who Frank Zappa was. According to McLuhan, the tactic of forcing the audience to supply information to the film's material would be more at place in a cool medium like television that promotes passivity. Viewing society's problems at a distance, however, was not the filmmaker's intent.

Wexler created *Medium Cool* in the hot medium of film. He wanted his audience to react. The very last shot in the film is of Wexler himself filming the car crash of Cassellis and Eileen. He then pans his movie camera directly toward the audience as an unseen newscaster reports on the on-going violence in Chicago. "We're being thrown up against the wall. People are being hit by clubs and those are real nightsticks." According to

Wexler, the director Jean Luc Goddard, who frequently employed filmic devices designed to make the audience aware that it was watching a motion picture, influenced this shot. This strategy had political ramifications. It was thought that forcing people to realize they were being manipulated would allow audiences to break through their passive consumption of media. This shot was intended to challenge the viewer to act (Wexler commentary DVD).

Both *Wild in the Streets* and *Medium Cool* portray revolution in action. Both films advocate the political involvement of those outside the mainstream. Both films champion young people as the best hope for a better world. Both films promote a distrust of established leadership and a need for change. *Wild in the Streets*, however, suggests that revolution can get out of hand, while *Medium Cool* suggests that change should start at the individual level. The basic premise of *Wild in the Streets* is that if we put new people in charge, they will turn into Fascists, while the basic premise of *Medium Cool* is that if we do not put new people in charge, we will be stuck with Fascists. One film revels in the coolness of celebrity-driven media while the other condemns it. One film asks, “Who’s afraid to die,” but ends in joyless victory; the other states “How the hell should I know?” but ends with a call to arms. *Medium Cool* successfully reinforced its audience’s belief in the potential for good that could be derived from the 1960s era of political commitment. That optimism would be challenged in the decade to come.

CHAPTER 4
REFORM: *THE CANDIDATE* (1972), *WALKING TALL* (1973)

There's got to be a better way.

--Bill McKay, *The Candidate*

Revolutions do not require compromise. Politics, by its nature, forces conciliation. In order to win election, a candidate must appeal to the wants and needs of the voting public. Once in office, coalitions must be built, favors must be exchanged, and power must be shared. While attempting to survive in this environment, it can become easy to lose sight of the reason why one wanted to serve the public in the first place. The film *The Candidate* (1972) asks how much compromise a person can engage in before they themselves become compromised.

Bill McKay (Robert Redford) grew up in the world of politics. He is the son of former California Governor John J. McKay (Melvin Douglas), but rejects his father's world of political power and influence. McKay personifies 1960s era generational independence. Now a lawyer, he works to reform the political system through advocacy of environmental and community affairs issues. Instead of operating out of a corporate office, McKay chooses to work out of a neighborhood legal aid center. A stylized logo of the United Farm Workers Union appears in a close-up of the front window of the center. This shot is utilized by the filmmakers to indicate McKay's alliance with the farm workers and is symbolic of his initial integrity. This integrity will be tested throughout the film as McKay embarks upon a political odyssey.

McKay's well publicized success in litigating environmental issues draws the attention of veteran political campaign manager, Marvin Lucas (Peter Boyle). Lucas flies to California in order to recruit McKay to run for the senate against the very popular Republican incumbent, Crocker Jarmon (Don Porter). Bill McKay turns Lucas down, but Lucas counters that someone who has "something he believes in" would indeed have a chance against Jarmon. McKay's friend Jaime warns him not to trust Lucas. The legal center scene concludes with Jaime getting into Lucas's face and angrily stating "this stuff you call politics . . . Politics is bullshit."

Lucas offers McKay a ride home where they meet McKay's attractive wife Nancy (Karen Carlson). Nancy is confident that if McKay decides to run he will win because "He's got the looks and he's got the power." McKay is still undecided whether to run for the senate so Lucas seeks to calm McKay's fears. He gives McKay a matchbook cover on which he has written the words "you lose." Lucas explains to McKay that since there is no possible way for McKay to win, he can never be tempted to sell out.

McKay attends a political rally for incumbent Senator Crocker Jarmon. Jarmon is a stereotypical, political hack. The smooth talking, silver haired "Crock" glad-hands the public and fulfills the old political cliché of kissing a baby. On the issues, he skews to the right, but strives not to offend saying, "The solution to welfare is not more welfare." On the environment, he maintains, "We'll find a way to love Mother Nature and preserve her . . . without going to extremes." McKay approaches Jarmon and pointedly asks if the Senator remembers him. Jarmon has no idea who McKay is, but the experienced campaigner covers it well. Jarmon assumes that the athletic looking McKay was a former

baseball pitcher and warmly greets him as an old acquaintance. At this point, McKay decides to run. He sees how cliché ridden Jarmon has become.¹

The Campaign

Bill announces for candidacy at the neighborhood legal aid office. He is refreshingly candid on the issues. When asked by reporters what he thinks about welfare reform, McKay says, “We subsidize planes, we subsidize trains, why not subsidize people?” He tells the media that he is for bussing and refuses to move next to his office workers for a staged group photograph, thus eliciting applause from his staff and reinforcing his political independence.

Next, it is on to meet the media manager. Howard Klein (Allen Garfield) is a successful producer of political campaign ads. Klein crassly states that he has agreed to work for McKay because, “You’ve got balls, otherwise I wouldn’t take you on.” Klein is not ideologically motivated in his assessment; he just needs a candidate to back with “kishkas.” The film implies a growing suspicion of media manipulation of the political process.

The film provides a noteworthy tutorial in the production of modern campaign media that is educational to both the audience and future office seekers. Klein shows Jarmon’s old television ads to McKay. Jarmon draws Klein’s admiration at his ability to appear sincere while looking directly at a camera. According to Klein, this is not an easy task. Most people move their eyes around too much and look shifty. Klein also admires Jarmon’s ability to engage in spontaneous interactions with the public that can be easily

¹ According to screenwriter Jeremy Lerner, California education official Max Rafferty and Governor Ronald Reagan inspired the character of Crocker Jarmon. “Listening to Reagan, I got a lot of ideas for Crocker Jarmon – Reagan is a master of right-wing rhetoric.” See Sweeney A2.

edited into “man in the street” political advertisements. Still, Klein feels confident in his new patron, promising that “people are gonna take one look at our stuff and see a guy with guts. They’re gonna take a look at the Crock and think he can’t get it up anymore.”

As the campaign progresses, McKay acquires an entourage of professional campaign organizers who train him for political success and begin to reorganize his image. McKay attends an introductory dinner for candidates in the upcoming election. Before the event, Nancy notices that he has shaved his sideburns and cut his hair. McKay has begun to compromise.

At the candidate’s dinner, bright lights glare into the face of McKay in a harsh manner. The filmmakers make frequent use of unbalanced lighting, overlapping dialogue, shaky camera shots, and swish pans. This technique trades on audience familiarity with televised political news coverage in order to build an illusion of reality. The film’s production techniques also mirror McKay’s immersion into an ever more disorienting campaign experience.

After the candidates’ dinner, the film cuts to a close-up of a television monitor. It appears that McKay is being interviewed on the issues of the day. The shot then pulls back to reveal the monitor is not broadcasting a real program, but a practice session for the candidate. McKay sits on one side of a hotel room facing his handlers and a camera operator on the other. Unlike his first interview, conducted on his turf at the legal center, he is beginning to lose spontaneity. He states that he is for abortion, but this draws concern from his campaign staff. Lucas advises McKay that, if asked, he should finesse the subject by saying “We’re studying it.” When the candidate and staff search for a safe

way to address the hot button issue of Vietnam, a staffer suggests that the candidate turn the issue into a joke about parking problems in Santa Monica.

McKay's campaign hits the road. An entourage including campaign workers and a camera crew follow the candidate from stop to stop. The film often captures the absurd nature of the campaign process. In contrast to past political films, *The Candidate* ventures out of the soundstage and into the streets. McKay's staff suggests that having him play basketball with children from the community would provide a good photo opportunity. When the candidate is steered into an inner-city playground, the local kids run in fear of all the men in suits.

Despite the occasional missed photo opportunity, McKay's campaign efforts bear fruit and he wins the democratic primary. His contentment, however, is short lived. Lucas takes him into a bathroom, sits him on the toilet, and points out that receiving 47 % of the primary votes will translate into only 32 % of the votes in the general election. Lucas tells McKay that he will be "wiped out, humiliated." McKay wants to quit the campaign, but it is too late to extricate himself from the process. Like it or not, Lucas tells him, he is the nominee. McKay responds, "You make that sound like a death sentence."

In spite of his misgivings, McKay forges onward. An environmental crisis provides an ironic opportunity to score points. "We've got a fire in Malibu," a staffer says, "it's perfect." The fire is a disaster for the people of Malibu, but it provides McKay with an opportunity to trump his opponent's reputation for being a good provider for his constituency. McKay arrives at the crisis area first and addresses the media with his proposals for improved water management regulations and disaster insurance coverage.

Much to McKay's chagrin, Jarmon proceeds to upstage him. The senator disembarks from a helicopter. He draws the media pack away from McKay and informs them that that he has talked to the president who has designated Malibu as a national disaster area. In addition, he announces that he will push through his senate committee an increase in federal disaster insurance and water management regulations. Jarmon's power translates into action. Jarmon then boards his helicopter and ascends to the sky, only to disappear as quickly as he had come. McKay remains on the scene to sputter agreement with all that Jarmon has senatorially intoned.

Fathers and Sons

The candidate's handlers determine that Jarmon's superior gravitas can best be countered by the political endorsement of McKay's father. Throughout the campaign, McKay has stubbornly resisted suggestions that he appeal for the help of his famous father. At this point in the campaign, however, McKay relents. He visits his father's house and encounters his father's current companion, Ms. Ford, who is not his mother. McKay's father is busy watching a football game in his den, the walls of which are mounted with guns and the heads of dead animals. McKay engages his father in awkward conversation, and then father and son decide to go hunting. The senior McKay is much more enthusiastic than his son at the prospect of the kill. He draws a bead on a rabbit and blasts it to death. A reaction shot follows of the junior McKay sighing in disapproval at the carnage.

The film depicts a complex psychological relationship between McKay and his father. McKay does everything he can to be unlike his father. He advocates for the powerless instead of the powerful; he is an environmentalist instead of a hunter; and he wants to call his own shots rather than follow orders. McKay seeks to kill the career of

“the Crock,” a political elder just like his father, who fails to recognize him in public. In the course of the film however, McKay will come to court his father’s political endorsement. He will ultimately earn his father’s respect by winning a televised debate against Jarmon. Only then will he receive his father’s endorsement and an acknowledgement of paternity with the words “where’s that son of mine?”

At the same time that McKay attempts to reject his father, the film suggests that he will eventually turn into his father. Father and son both enjoy the use of power. Bill McKay is not above forcing people to grovel. He purposely arrives late to a hotel room meeting with a union leader who he detests for opposing the Farm Workers Union. When the union leader says to McKay, “we have a lot in common,” McKay replies, “We don’t have shit in common.” McKay’s father attempts to smooth over the situation and the result is nervous laughter on the part of everyone, except McKay. Bill McKay has learned his lessons well. He knows that, once elected, the union leader will need him more than he needs the union leader.

The two McKays are similar in other ways. Both have an eye for the ladies. Bill McKay was late to the meeting with the union head because of a dalliance with a woman. Earlier in the film, McKay was uncomfortable in conversation with his father’s second wife, but he also comes to take a relativistic view of marital vows.

The Debate

McKay’s tireless campaigning results in a 14-point improvement in his polling numbers forcing Jarmon to agree to a televised debate. Before the debate, McKay and his brain trust meet in the cockpit of an airplane to discuss strategy. He receives a position paper on crime prevention to reference in the upcoming debate. Lucas instructs McKay to answer all questions with prearranged answers such as “crime isn’t an issue, it’s a

symptom.” In adopting this tactic, McKay begins to master political rhetoric. Jarmon’s “The solution to welfare is not more welfare,” is similar in syntax to McKay’s “Crime isn’t an issue: it’s a symptom.”

That night, during the debate, a reporter asks McKay about the issue of bussing. In contrast to his statement earlier in the film, he equivocates now saying “the main problem is getting good education for everybody.” When asked about abortion, McKay follows his script and asserts that it requires more study. McKay’s friend Jamie shakes his head in disgust. In the film, Jaime functions as McKay’s conscious and cues the audience how to react to the inside world of politics. After the debate, a saddened Jamie meets with his old friend McKay one last time to shake his hand in farewell. He is disappointed at what politics has done to his friend.

The Home Stretch

McKay scored points in the debate by sticking to his five-point crime plan and by forcing Jarmon to over react. In contrast to Jarmon, McKay’s cool style came across better on television allowing him to narrow the gap in the polls. The campaign speeds onward from union rallies to garden parties to television appearances and ticker tape parades. The absurdly frenetic nature of political campaigning gets to be too much for McKay. While riding in the back of a limousine from one event to another he begins to imitate the singsong cadence of campaign-speak saying “Ladies and gents, the time has passed. The time has passed. Got to be a better way, I say to you, can’t any longer. Oh no! Can’t any longer, play off the black against the old, young against the poor. This country cannot house its houseless, feed its foodless. . .”

On Election Day, campaign workers get out the vote. Some round up obviously inebriated street people, while others surreptitiously replace Jarmon campaign door

hangers with McKay advertisements. McKay's campaign proves successful and he wins the election. There is much celebrating on the part of loyal supporters. Nancy is delighted with the victory and begins to plan a move to an exclusive Washington neighborhood.

Despite his victory, McKay is not as thrilled as his wife. He is confused at the ramifications of what has happened. Out of nowhere, he has won, but what to do next?

He sits on a bed next to his father. A tight two shot reveals his father's yellowed teeth and graying hair as he gleefully intones the words "son, you're a politician." There is a cut to an extreme close up of McKay's face framed between his forehead and his chin. He is positioned in the left hand portion of the screen, but looks back awkwardly to the right, toward his father, causing the composition to become unbalanced. The sequence concludes with the original two shot as McKay senior laughs "heh, heh, heh."

McKay has achieved his personal and political goal, but he wonders if the ends justify the means. It is easy to be an outsider who criticizes the system. Once in office, however, will he retain enough integrity to call his own shots? Will he reform the system, or will he go over to the dark side like his father? The film concludes with a scene depicting McKay and Lucas in a hotel room. They have escaped the mad rush of well-wishers, campaign workers, and media representatives. Lucas asks, "What's on your mind, Senator?" McKay replies, "Marvin, what do we do now?" Lucas has no chance to reply. People rush into the room and the newly elected Senator is ushered away by an adoring throng. The door to the room closes and the end credits roll. We are left to ponder what future course the candidate will pursue.

A Touch of Evil

The structure of this film is that of a journey from integrity to compromise. A campaign is a "run" for office and that is what McKay does. He rushes to meet

appointment deadlines, strides through photo-ops, and even runs away from the chaotic demands of his own campaign workers. Throughout the film, modes of transportation drive the action forward. Lucas takes a plane to his initial meeting with McKay. McKay rides in a car to the fire in Malibu, only to be outdone by Jarmon who arrives by helicopter. Lucas and McKay discuss the upcoming debate in an airplane cockpit. They travel in a limousine while contemplating campaign strategy, and another limousine ride takes place during a ticker tape parade. In all of these scenes, the campaign professionals take McKay for a ride. He is not in control of the vehicles in which he travels, nor is he in control of the campaign itself.

In the film, McKay's friend Jamie is his conscience and Lucas is his Mephistopheles. At the outset of the film, McKay is idealistic. He professes no interest in politics and is not even registered to vote. It is interesting to note that not being registered to vote is depicted as a positive attribute of the film's main character. In contrast to the handsome McKay, characters from the world of politics are less than attractive. Lucas is portrayed as a bearded, bespectacled, political operative. Klein is coarse in language and short of stature. The amoral Lucas claims only to be motivated by an opportunity to acquire "an air card, phone card, and one thousand bucks a week." If that is all he wants out of the campaign, however, why does he not work for a more established politician?

Lucas has unusual insight into what makes McKay tick and uses it to tempt the candidate. In their very first meeting, McKay is engaged in conversation with a fellow community activist, but Lucas captures his attention by addressing him with the single word "Senator." The film suggests that McKay is an innocent lawyer led astray by the manipulation of Lucas. At first, Lucas assures him that the campaign will be a lark. Initial

successes, however, introduce new motivations. Thoughts of humiliating defeat, the urging of his status conscious wife, and the chance to best his father all cause McKay to reconsider the relative value of his personal integrity.

McKay, however, is not quite as innocent as it seems. He professes to disdain politics, but is quite capable of utilizing the power of government to achieve goals. In McKay's first scene, he negotiates for the return of an automobile to the legal center, but objects to paying excessive storage charges. When his friend Jamie says that the garage owner "won't budge" on the fee, McKay calls upon his training as a lawyer and directs Jamie to threaten the garage owner saying, "Ask him if he knows what a license renewal hearing is." The character Jamie, so disdainful of political "bullshit," has no problem following McKay's directive. He agrees to strong arm the garage owner.

As a lawyer, McKay knows that threats of a civil hearing will get the group's car back at a reasonable price. Not only does McKay out-manuever the garage owner, he also wins other battles. McKay's presence in the race induces Jarmon to steal the issue of watershed maintenance. Jarmon's maneuver embarrasses McKay, but Jarmon now backs McKay's plan. Later in the film, McKay forces the union head to show fealty to him, even after insulting the man. Despite these actions, however, McKay does not have sufficient insight to realize that he is just as interested in the control and use of power as other politicians.

A recurring theme in *The Candidate* is the connection between sex and power. Lucas and Klein seek a candidate to back with "Kishkas" to run against Jarmon. Klein characterizes the older candidate as a man who he will render impotent by defeating him.

When Nancy teases McKay for cutting his hair, McKay deflects her by initiating a romantic encounter that makes the couple late for the candidate's dinner.

As McKay becomes more powerful, he has more options that are sexual. Campaign volunteers gush in McKay's presence. A poster in his headquarters emblazoned with the slogan "Bill McKay: the better way" is altered by magic marker to read, "A toss in the hay with Bill McKay." Even celebrities form crushes on the charismatic candidate. The film includes a scene with the actress Natalie Wood, playing herself, flirting with McKay after a campaign event. The ardor of his campaign workers suitably embarrasses McKay, but Ms. Wood charms him into discussing recipes involving yogurt.

Eventually, McKay exercises his sexual options by engaging in a relationship with an attractive brown-haired woman. McKay forces political suitors to wait for a meeting with him while he engages in a sexual tryst with the woman elsewhere in the hotel. He enjoys making his political suitors wait. In politics, as well as sex, McKay always seeks the upper hand. The film suggests that there is no sanctity to the political process. Before his televised debate, McKay observes that politics are merely "a better way to screw them all."

Campaign Experiences of the Filmmakers

By 1972, the film industry was in the midst of a period of financial recovery. From 1969 to 1971, the industry had experienced a recession caused by the over production of feature film inventory. According to Variety reporter, A. D. Murphy Hollywood created this over production without "any sensible appreciation of the likely return" on its investment (3). A period of record-high interest rates on borrowed money further exacerbated the problem. Motion picture corporations responded to the recession by cutting costs and reducing inventory.

The recession experienced by the motion picture industry during the early 1970s resulted in new market strategies. As studios sought to manipulate supply by producing fewer films, independent producers were able to capitalize. Increasingly, during the 1970s, films were initiated not by major studios, but by independent producers, directors, stars, or writers “with a track record of hits” (Cook 19).

In 1972, director Michael Ritchie and leading actor Robert Redford co produced *The Candidate*. They envisioned the film as part of a series on the American obsession with winning. The first film in the series, *Downhill Racer* (1969), cast Redford as an egotistical Olympic skier. *The Candidate* examined the inside world of media politics and Ritchie’s third film in the trilogy, *Smile* (1975), made without Redford, was a parody of the competitive world of beauty pageants.

Ritchie, Redford, and writer Jeremy Lerner all had various degrees of experience with political campaigning. In preparation for the film, Redford followed the 1970 race for governor in New York. As a result of his experience he concluded that politics was “just a game, the public always getting ripped off, all those infantile minds in the Pentagon and in office taking it out on the country because they never made the squad when they were kids” (Lear Sec 6: 31).

Film and television director Ritchie was a media producer for the campaign of California Senator John Tunney. Ritchie drew upon his experiences with Tunney for the staging of a women’s luncheon scene in *The Candidate* as well as an understanding of political campaign ads. For the sake of authenticity, Ritchie hired an actual production company from California that had created ads for Maine Senator Ed Muskie. He noted

that employees of the firm enjoyed producing the McKay ads for the film, referring to them as “your standard Kennedy energy spot” (Sweeney A2).

In the film, the McKay commercials comment on the tactics of actual media managers. When McKay complains that Klein has omitted scenes shot at an inner city health care clinic, the media producer plays back the raw footage revealing “a grim scene.” McKay looks “uptight” and the audio track contains excessive ambient sounds that drown out his voice. Even worse, a mother at the clinic slaps her baby for crying, causing McKay to wince. The issue of health care failed to make the final cut of the ad because of these stylistic shortcomings. The film makes the point that selling a candidate is very much like selling deodorant; both require that the viewer not be upset by unpleasant sounds or images.

The film’s screenwriter, Larner, was even more active in politics. In 1968, he worked as a speechwriter for the primary campaign of Senator Eugene McCarthy. Larner was deeply committed to the cause, but ultimately disappointed with the experience. In his 1969 memoir of the campaign, Larner criticized McCarthy’s “instinct to avoid confrontation,” “fear of looking bad,” intolerance toward criticism, unwillingness to appear ambitious, and his “deep seated bitterness” which caused him to attack even his closest allies.²

Larner also found fault with some of McCarthy’s sycophantic followers who thought of themselves as above the crass world of political campaigning. Larner, on the other hand, valued involvement. On one occasion, he fooled Senator Robert Kennedy ‘s

² Note the similarity in names, McKay--McCarthy, Lucas--Lucifer--Larner. For Larner’s perceptions of McCarthy, see Larner 31-33.

supporters into thinking he was one of them by donning a Kennedy campaign button. Lerner then misdirected them to the wrong hotel entrance allowing McCarthy to pass undetected through a different entrance.

On a second occasion, Lerner induced three students from the McCarthy camp to stand in front of Kennedy's car in hopes of delaying him and forcing a televised confrontation between the two candidates. As Kennedy maneuvered away from the potentially embarrassing confrontation, Lerner scored a victory by calling him "coward, chicken" in front of the gathered media. After the event, Lerner felt exhilarated, but later came to regret his actions, feeling that he had "acted from instinct--just like any other hack--to embarrass the opposition (100-101).

Lerner's ambivalence toward the political process, and his involvement in it, is evident throughout the film, perhaps no more so than in McKay's, and by extension Lerner's, address to the candidates' dinner:

I guess it is funny. In fact, when you think about it, the whole idea of two guys making decisions for 20 million people. . . that's pretty funny, but still you can't laugh too much when you think of what's at stake. The fact is, in the next few elections we'll decide what it's like to live in this country, whether people will have more power to shape their own lives or whether we're going to lose that power. I know that anyone can stand up and say that much, it's the details that's hard, just how you get people involved. Our lives are more and more determined by forces that overwhelm the individual. (long pause) I don't know. Maybe, maybe these questions can't be raised in a political campaign (looks up). Maybe people aren't ready to listen, but I'm going to try and I hope that you'll support that effort and at least give me the benefit of the doubt. Thank you.

Lerner won an Academy Award for his script. Not only does it provide insights into the inner working of the campaign process, it taps into a wish for better political leaders, people who do not fear looking bad, but take chances in order to improve people's lives. The relationship between Lerner and McCarthy parallels that between Bill McKay and his father. McCarthy proved not to be all that Lerner wished he would be. From Lerner's

point of view, McCarthy's egotistical approach to politics cost him the election and compromised his campaign's chance at ending the war in Vietnam. As indicated by McKay's dinner speech, Lerner wished that politics were a nobler endeavor than what he experienced on the campaign trail, but feared that governance would always overwhelm the individual citizen.

Critical Reaction

Despite Lerner's experience in the political process, New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug found the film inauthentic. She allowed that the film did have "stabs of insight and lots of funny surface bits culled from campaign trivia," (D1) but she wondered at the ease of McKay's primary victory and where the money for his campaign came from. Abzug thought the film's depiction of campaigning was too simplistic. "Sure he makes one phone call, but what about the budget crises and rounds of fund raisers" (D2).

When Jarmon out-maneuvers McKay at the Malibu fire, Abzug felt that a real politician would immediately start a debate with his opponent, rather than standing passively in the background. She criticized the harsh depiction of union leaders and lack of intelligent females working in the McKay campaign. The Congresswoman also felt that McKay's complaints about his lack of privacy were naïve and asked, "Why is he so surprised when he finds the reporter and photographer in his house and his wife dressed up like Jackie in a riding habit? Did he think he was going to have a private life?" (D2).

Abzug reserved her most pointed criticism for the ending of *The Candidate*. According to her experience, most politicians were unlike those depicted in the film "if the hero couldn't figure out what to do once he got elected to the Senate, he didn't have much to begin with." Abzug noted that there have always been "gutless" politicians, who

would do anything to win election and concluded that *The Candidate* was not saying anything new. In addition, Abzug worried that young viewers would “find their worst fears confirmed by this simplistic film, and see politics as a determinist process that forces its participants from compromises into doubletalk and sell-outs” (D2).

Director Ritchie responded to Congresswoman Abzug. In a letter to the *New York Times*, he defended Redford, Lerner, and himself from charges of “tearing down the democratic process” and “feeding the pessimism of youth.” He acknowledged that Abzug might not know anyone in Congress like McKay but questioned Abzug’s interpretation of the film. Ritchie stated that the film’s protagonist was not modeled on an established political figure like Kennedy, but rather a political outsider like consumer affairs activist, Ralph Nader (D7).

According to Ritchie, “when the public gets fed up with ambitious politicians, it yearns for the freshness and purity of someone without apparent political ambition. Bill McKay is such a candidate.” Ritchie then stated the film’s central premises. “If Ralph Nader ran for political office, he probably wouldn’t be Ralph Nader when he got elected. If Ralph Nader might be vulnerable, what about George McGovern or even Bella herself” (D7).

Vincent Canby reviewed the film as “one of the few good, truly funny American political comedies ever made,” but at the same time labeled it as simplistic and biased. Crocker Jarmon “looks as trustworthy as Warren G Harding” and the film “looks like it has been put together by people who have given up hope.” Canby perceptively noted that the film promoted an anti-ambition attitude. “If a candidate wants to win, he must be suspect. Ambition in itself is bad. Like athlete’s foot, it’s not a sin, but it is unseemly.”

Canby felt that this Catch-22 mind-set would stifle political progress by inhibiting the participation of quality individuals who might come to believe that “the best man should lose or he isn’t the best man” (A25).

Penelope Giliatt of *The New Yorker* panned the film. She found Lerner’s script to be devoid of meaning, Ritchie’s compositions to be as crass as the script, and the casting of a handsome film star like Redford, so close in appearance to one of the dead Kennedys, to be “one of the most vulgar pieces of casting” that she could remember. She also condemned the way Redford wore no necktie as a “mechanized sign” of his character’s integrity and the film’s clichéd “idolization of good-looking saintly dissidence in liberal politics” (64-65).

Wall Street Journal film reviewer Joy Gould Boyum saw the film as a morality tale. In contrast to the traditional films of director Frank Capra, corruption was no longer peripheral to American political life, but had become “a constant and victorious evil.” Gould favorably compared the film’s insider view of media driven politics to that of *The Selling of the President: 1968*, a best-selling book by Joe McGinniss. She pointed out that the lesson of the film was similar to the book. In the television era, political candidates require new presentational skills because opinions and platforms are no longer as important as image. According to Boyum, the American people learned this lesson before in the writing of McGinniss and McLuhan, as well as in their own personal experience, but the film drove home modern media reality by allowing viewers to observe the exact process involved in creating political advertising (A4).

To Thy Own Self Be True

This film asks if the political ends justify the political means and answers in the negative. According to *The Candidate*, the campaign process is not a noble quest.

Contenders for office must be willing to swallow stale sandwiches and cough up stale rhetoric. They must place their safety, privacy, and family relationships in jeopardy. Worse, they risk compromising their integrity by the act of joining the system. When an outsider like McKay enters the political process, he finds it run by amoral professionals. They do not work for the steady improvement of society, but treat politics like a game. Lucas and Klein worked for other candidates before McKay and at the end of the film, they plan to move on to the next contest. They leave McKay alone to figure out what to do next.

The film focuses on the individual rather than on mass movements. Political leaders, as long as they remain pure, are the only ones that have the power to right the wrongs of society. When they fail, so does the body politic. The mass electorate is not always worthy of its leaders. In the film, McKay visits an inner-city neighborhood to discuss health care, only to be stopped by a man with a dog who insists that the candidate comment on his pet. At a later campaign stop, a citizen asks McKay to hold his hot dog then suddenly punches him. The voters are also portrayed as unworthy of their leaders because they are even more susceptible to manipulation than the candidates are. No one notices the transparency of McKay's increasingly vacuous speeches. When McKay does say what he really thinks, as in the televised debate, the candidate wonders if anyone truly understands what he means to say.

This film suggests that political reform is next to impossible. The onerous task of achieving power wears McKay down to the point that he is susceptible to manipulation. American values of constant societal progress go unrealized under the political system depicted here. Senator-elect McKay knows that there's got to be a better way to improve

the process, but the filmmakers offer no solutions to his dilemma. Presumably, McKay would have been better off resisting the lure of politics. He could have remained at the neighborhood legal aid center, but then the incumbent Jarmon would have continued in office and change would be even less likely to occur. If the filmmaker's goal was to make its audience aware of the American obsession with winning and the compromises required to attain political power; they accomplished their mission. Ultimately, *The Candidate* would become highly influential in the level of cynicism contained in almost all future political films and within the American society. Gone is the call to commitment contained in films such as *Medium Cool*.

Law and Order in America

The film *Walking Tall* (1973) presented an alternative, more conservative, view on political change in America. According to political scientist Kevin Phillips, majority control of the United States government has been cyclical in nature. Political parties have held power in alternating cycles lasting between 32 and 36 years. From the period 1932 to 1968, the Democratic Party was in ascendancy. This held true until the election of Richard M. Nixon, who achieved the presidency in 1968 by relying on a campaign strategy designed to dismantle the traditional Democratic coalition of labor, liberals, blacks, and southerners. Nixon aspired to the creation of a new conservative majority. In order to achieve his goal, he targeted Democratic voters by intimating that he would slow the pace of desegregation by appealing to their fears of crime and moral decay.³

³ In the 1968 Presidential election, Nixon was particularly successful in southern border states, including Tennessee. See Schulman 35-38. For an extensive historical analysis of American regional voting patterns, see Phillips.

The issue of crime resonated with voters who saw the relative domestic security of the 1950s and 1960s begin to collapse. By the late 1960s, the national crime rate had skyrocketed. In 1960, there were five murders per 100 thousand inhabitants; in 1968 there were seven; and in 1972, there were nine. In the same period, forcible rapes doubled and robberies tripled. Police officers, increasingly, came under attack. The number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty rose from 48 in 1960, to 123 in 1967, to 178 in 1971.⁴

Increases in criminal activities eroded America's confidence in the effectiveness of its criminal justice system. Citizens grew frustrated at the inability of the local police to stem the tide of lawlessness. As a result, many crimes went unreported by victims. In addition, many Americans came to believe that courts were too lenient in sentencing lawbreakers and that government programs designed by sociologists to attack the root causes of crime were ineffective (Frum 12-19).

Federal outlays for crime reduction programs increased during Nixon's first administration. The federal budget for criminal law enforcement increased from \$485 million in 1970 to \$859 million in 1972, and outlays for all federal crime reduction programs more than doubled during the same period; however, crime remained a very important problem. In a Gallup Poll conducted in December of 1972, 51 % of respondents stated that there was "more crime in this area" than a year ago and 74 % responded that the courts "were not harsh enough" in dealing with criminals. Despite

⁴ For crime rates and police officer mortality statistics, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Law Enforcement, Federal Courts, and Prisons, Crimes and Crime Rates, by Type: 1960 to 1972," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1973* (94th edition) Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1973: 146; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Law Enforcement, Federal Courts, and Prisons, Police Officers Killed, by Geographic Divisions: 1960 to 1971," *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1973* (94th edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973: 150.

servicing as the chief executive during a period of heightened public concern with crime, Nixon remained the law-and-order candidate by casting his rivals as excessively liberal.⁵

In the presidential election of 1972, Nixon avoided traditional party labels and ran as the champion of a silent majority of forgotten Americans. In order to capitalize on voter resentment, Nixon attacked liberals as being soft on crime, elitist in attitude, and draconian in their proposals for social engineering. The positioning of Nixon as a conservative, law-and-order, populist enabled him to achieve a landslide victory over his rival, Democratic Senator George McGovern (Schulman 38 – 41).

Walk Tall or Don't Walk At All

Walking Tall is a law-and-order film that tells the story of forgotten Americans. Buford Pusser (Joe Don Baker) portrays a club-wielding, southern sheriff who eradicates vice from his community at great personal cost. The motion picture is a fictionalized version of actual events that transpired during the 1960s in McNairy County, Tennessee. According to the film, McNairy County was rife with corruption and illegality. The county sheriff was on the take, gambling flourished, prostitution was readily available, and moonshine whisky caused blindness in its unsuspecting consumers.⁶

The county, however, had not always been corrupt. Long ago, before Buford “the Wild Bull” Pusser left to pursue a career in professional wrestling, McNairy was a fine

⁵For federal anticrime budget figures, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Federal Outlays for Crime Reduction, by Program: 1970 to 1973,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1973* (94th edition) Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973: 155. For polling results, see “January 14, Crime, Interviewing Date: 8 -11 December 1972, Survey # 861 – K,” *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 - 1977*. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 82 -85.

⁶ The actual Buford Pusser was elected sheriff of McNairy County Tennessee in 1964. He initiated a crackdown on gambling, prostitution, and moonshining that resulted in seven attempts on his life, the murder of his wife, and 14 plastic surgery operations on his face. Pusser served three terms as sheriff until he failed to win reelection in 1970. See “Buford Pusser, Sheriff Depicted in ‘Walking Tall’ Film, Is Dead,” *The New York Times* 22 August 1974: A36.

example of God-fearing, virtuous, small-town America. Unfortunately, the community lost its moral compass. A shadow government of vice-lords had taken control of the county and its citizens had become inured to criminality. In the context of the times, it is easy to see McNairy County as a symbolic microcosm of America. The film reflects public fear of crime and frustration at political inaction.

When Buford returns home to retire from his wrestling career, he confronts this changed world. Members of the crime syndicate expect Buford to behave like the rest of the submissive townspeople; however, he cannot overlook the wrongdoing he sees. Buford decides to fight, first with fists, then with a wooden club, then at the ballot box all the while enduring violent encounters that would shake a lesser man's resolve. Faced with such intractable corruption, one wonders if the efforts of one man can make a difference. This film asks how many beatings a man can take before he will give up.

Coming Home

When we first encounter Buford, he is driving his wife, two young children, and the family dog back to his boyhood home in Tennessee. Sentimental music accompanies long shots of bucolic country settings. The family station wagon pulls up in front of a big white shingled house and Buford's parents enter the scene. They are thrilled to see him and glad that he has quit the violent world of wrestling. When asked why he retired, Buford speaks of his disgust with "organized dishonesty" that is central to the theme of the film. He condemns wrestling because it systematically controlled the individual. He says, "You win when they let you win. You climb the ladder when they let you. You breathe when they feel like giving you air. I got fed up with other people running my life." Buford will reiterate his disgust with organized dishonesty later in the film when he encounters judicial, political, and law enforcement duplicity.

The powerfully built Buford states that he no longer wants to fight. This pleases his wife, Pauline (Elizabeth Hartman), who is the voice of nonviolence throughout the film. Pauline is a loving wife and caring mother. Buford evidently cares for Pauline as well. The family enjoys a warm relationship that is emblematic of the simple country lifestyle the family hopes to recapture in the hill country of Tennessee. Buford's father (Noah Beery, Jr.) tells him that a neighboring logging homestead is for sale. Buford agrees to buy the homestead and his happy family moves in to a little white house that comes complete with a picket fence and a fishing pond for the kids. He has realized the American dream.

In contrast to McKay in *The Candidate*, Buford looks up to his father and values his lifestyle. Buford enjoys working the land and sawing timber along side of the elder Pusser. He too, like McKay, ventured out into another profession, only to return to the family business. Buford, however, is proud of his heritage. Scenes of gift giving on Christmas and family picnics by the fishing pond celebrate kinship in the film. Buford's retirement goal is to return to an honest, family centered life exemplified by his father. Both men value their wives, children, and homestead. Ironically, Buford will spend most of his time in the film fulfilling his duties as sheriff rather than with his family.

Nice Versus Vice

Buford files the deed for his new homestead at the county courthouse. When exiting the building, Buford's mother tentatively warns him that the town has undergone some changes, but cautions her son to ignore them because "they have nothing to do with us." The noisy entrance of Buford's old friend Lutie McVey interrupts them. A stereotypical good old boy, Lutie screeches his pickup truck to a halt and invites Buford

for a drink at the Lucky Spot, a new roadhouse whose reputation is that of “a shopping center for sin.”

That night, the two men enter the roadhouse where they encounter loose women and hard liquor. When Buford and Lutie are cheated out of their money at the craps table, Buford demands his money back from the management. The film turns gratuitously violent as Lutie is kicked in the face in a close-up. Part of the audience appeal of the film is the depiction of cathartic violence in response to public frustration. Buford executes wrestling moves to punish the crooks, but finally is subdued. Buford then has his shirt torn off by the crooks and a knife repeatedly slices his chest. The film will repeatedly employ such Christ-like imagery repeatedly, such as the tearing of Buford’s garments and the piercing of his chest. The fight scene transitions to a rain-splattered roadside where the bloodied Buford struggles for life until a passing truck driver notices his badly wounded body. This incident provides the motive for Buford’s actions throughout the remainder of the film. From this point on, he will engage in an ever-escalating battle with those who control vice in the county. The battle of this lone man symbolically personalizes the struggle for redemption of the entire county.

Buford is a traditional film hero, but not an antihero. For him, there is only right and wrong. Although he has traveled widely and participated in the sometimes-deceptive world of professional wrestling, we are led to believe that Buford is unaware of the true nature of roadhouse gambling. This lack of awareness is similar to the naiveté of Bill McKay in *The Candidate* who, although he grew up in a political family, is taken aback at the true nature of political campaigning.

Buford exits the hospital and returns home to recover from his wounds. County Sheriff Al Thurman (Gene Evans) visits him and intimates that the roadhouse incident was Buford's fault due to his excessive inebriation, but he promises to "look into it." Buford warns the sheriff against ignoring crime as he has done in the past because, "people in the county gave you that badge and they can damn well take it away from you" on Election Day. The blustery sheriff explodes in anger and speeds away from the Pusser homestead.

Buford and Obra

Obra Eaker (Felton Perry) is a long time friend of Buford. When Obra comes to the Pusser family logging business to ask for employment, Buford's father expresses disdain for the young black man. Buford's father dislikes Obra because he has acquired the "new social disease of black power." The younger Pusser responds to his father's statement with incredulous laughter, eliciting an anti-authoritarian statement similar to Buford's own worldview. Buford's father states, "I believe in equality just as much as anybody, but I don't want it forced on me, see."

Buford convinces his father to hire Obra. At lunch, Obra inquires about Buford's run-ins with the law: "How does it feel to be part of the oppressed minority?" Buford asks if Obra has any suggestions, to which Obra cautions him not to "beat your head against the wall because it'll probably fall on you." In this sequence, a commonality is shared, at least in the minds of the filmmakers, between the two men because of the political obstacles they have both encountered. For both poor blacks and poor whites, an unseen political system exploits them by only letting them "breathe when they feel like giving you air." According to the film, races might have their differences, but everyone has an equal opportunity to unite in resentment of the system.

Despite Obra's advice, Buford returns to the Lucky Spot with a huge stick he has honed from a tree at his logging operation. He beats everybody up with the club and takes only the money that pays for his and Lutie's gambling loses, his stolen car, and his doctor bills. The police arrest Buford and put him on trial where Buford acts as his own legal counsel. Despite the objections of the prosecutor and the county judge, he wins the case by tearing off his shirt while on the stand thus revealing the knife scars on his chest. Buford then directs his testimony to the jury, saying "You let them do this and get away with it and you give them eternal license to do the same damn thing to all of you." A jury of his peers finds him not guilty.

After his encounter with the unresponsive criminal justice system, Buford decides to run for sheriff of the county. The country vice lords try to frame him for the murder of Sheriff Thurman, but Deputy Grady refuses to perjure himself at the trial. Buford easily wins victory at the ballot box and, as the new sheriff in town, initiates a program of reform. He has only two rules for his new deputies. First, everyone is to obey the law equally; second, any deputy that takes a bribe will get "his head chopped off" personally by Buford. Needless to say, the deputies' job performance greatly improves.

A Touch of Evil

Buford's reform efforts soon bear fruit. Moonshiners, gambling house operators, pimps, and madams all begin to feel the pinch of decreasing illicit commodity transactions. Buford's reform efforts also are noticed at the state capitol as well. Mr. Witter, a man of indeterminate political position, pays a visit to Buford. They go for a ride and stop on a slightly elevated section of a secluded country road. The two men exit the vehicle and stand facing each other while framed by the rolling valley below them. Buford carries his hand hewn wooden club.

Witter informs Buford that vice in McNairy County is more than just a local operation. He urges Buford to take care of his own interests first, and suggests that Buford come with him to the state capital, Nashville, in order to “meet some of the fellows” who could be “very generous.” He places his hand on Buford’s shoulder, but Buford declines the offer. His response elicits a warning that from Witter that “Ideals and realities are very far apart. One day you’re gonad see that son, and if you don’t, someone’s gonna point that out to you.” Clearly,” Buford answers, “you already have, thank you” and the scene on the hilltop ends.

The hilltop meeting between Witter and Buford once again suggests a biblical allegory to the story of Satan tempting Jesus on a desert hilltop. Witter, like Satan, is in town to tempt Buford. Buford, however, does not even consider the politician’s offer. According to the film, participation in big city politics, as personified by Witter, requires that the individual sell his soul, whereas small town politics offers the hope of redemption. The allegory recurs in the film, as Buford is scourged, beaten, shot twice and left for dead, only to recover, much as the county will recover its moral direction by the end of the movie.

Buford endures trials of Biblical proportion but does not turn the other cheek. With every violent attack upon his person or family, he escalates his war on the county crime syndicate. In response to Buford’s crusade, the crime syndicate hires a gunman to attack Buford’s house on Christmas Eve resulting in the shooting death of the family dog. Later, the syndicate ambushes Buford and his wife while they are driving in their car. A shotgun blast blows away the back of Pauline’s head in graphic detail. After stopping the car, bullets riddle Buford as he holds the dying body of his wife.

Because of his injuries, Buford must wear a partial cast over his severely damaged face. After the funeral of his wife, Buford extracts final revenge upon the syndicate. He drives his car through a syndicate owned roadhouse wall killing the last remaining crime boss. Sympathetic to Buford's loss and empowered by his actions, the townspeople rally behind him. They storm into the roadhouse, drag out all of the gambling devices contained inside and set them on fire. The town, now purified, will return to normal.

Reaction to the Film

Walking Tall received little critical attention and sparse attendance during its first run in 1973. David Sterritt, *The Christian Science Monitor* film critic, found the film's social arguments "simplistic," its violence "excessive," its humor "slapdash," and its duration overly long (A11). Sterritt also questioned the accuracy of historical events contained in the film due to the hiring of Sheriff Pusser as technical advisor for the production. Pusser countered allegations of inaccuracy in a 1973 *Newsweek* interview where he maintained that the film was "about 80 % real" (Zimmerman 100).

The modestly budgeted film, produced by Bing Crosby Productions (BCP), a subsidiary of the Cox Broadcasting Corporation, struggled to earn back its initial \$1.5 million investment. Attendance was light in all major markets. *Walking Tall* failed to appear on the *Variety* weekly list of 50 top grossing films from its initial February release until October of 1973.⁷

While the film fared badly in large cities, it was more successful in small towns like Ogden, Utah; Peoria, Illinois; and Huntsville, Alabama. The film's distributor,

⁷ The film earned \$49,300 to finish in 29th position for the week and remained on the list through the remainder of the year. See "50 Top-Grossing Films (Week Ending Oct. 10)," *Variety* 17 October 1973: 10.

Cinerama, devised a new advertising campaign designed to coincide with a re-release of *Walking Tall*. The new marketing campaign de-emphasized the violent nature of the production, appealing instead to small town, family values. The love story between Buford and Pauline became the primary focus of ads that showed the embracing couple and included the tag line “when was the last time you stood up and applauded a film?” (Zimmerman 99).

People did, indeed, stand up and applaud the film. *Walking Tall* became one of the biggest sleeper-film hits of the year, a year that included such other action-oriented film phenomena as *Enter The Dragon* (1973) and *Billy Jack* (1973). All three of these productions share strong, individualistic protagonists forced, by circumstances beyond their control, to confront evil. All three protagonists fight to protect their family and community. All three productions were very successful. Eventually, *Walking Tall* would go on to earn over \$ 35 million dollars. The film enjoyed successful second runs in all geographic regions of America, including large cities and small towns and spurred a series of sequels (Higham Sec 2: 13).

The unexpected box office success of *Walking Tall's* second run, caused national critics finally to take notice. They were not wholly positive in their assessments. *Washington Post* critic Gary Arnold called the film “a self-congratulatory, law-and-order melodrama.” Arnold found the film to be crudely made and lurid. In addition, he thought the filmmaker’s themes to be ambivalent. According to Arnold, the price of Buford’s obstinate heroism seems too high because “it is not at all certain that the hero’s sacrifices have resulted in the triumph of justice.” The realization that heroic acts might go

unrewarded caused Arnold to suggest that, instead of standing up and cheering, audiences should feel “sorrow and exhaustion” (B1).

Arnold noted that the film focuses only on Buford’s vice war, to the exclusion of his other duties as sheriff. In the film, Buford dispenses justice only when he holds a personal stake in the offense. Arnold found this to be a sociological weakness of the film, but a source of its melodramatic strength. In contrast to similar films like *Billy Jack*, he felt that *Walking Tall* presented a more realistic premise and was more emotionally involving because its hero was an ordinary, vulnerable individual: “a straight arrow with a traditional sense of justice, a family to support and a living to earn.” Although critical of much in the film, Arnold felt that the images of violence contained in *Walking Tall* were well directed and succeeded in “expanding the emotional scope” of the film by “encompassing a number of memories from the public violence of the past decade” (B12).

While most critics focused on the film’s modern story, *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael compared *Walking Tall* to the classic western genre. According to Kael, similar elements of both included nostalgia for the simplicity and purity of the past, a faultless hero-protector that wins because he is physically stronger than the villains, pastoral iconography that symbolizes the unspoiled country, villains as spoilers of the American dream, and townspeople that accommodate evil because they are defenseless to halt it (100).

Kael maintained that the classic western was dead and had been replaced by the modern “street western.” Its action now moved from the “mythological purity” of the old open range into the corrupt corridors of modern cities and towns. According to Kael,

Walking Tall was similar to the classic western because of its un-self-conscious celebration of simple virtues and its avocation of Biblical justice. On the other hand, *Walking Tall* was more crude than the classic western because it works almost exclusively on the “blood and guts level of emotionally charged violence” (101).

According to Kael, the appeal of the street western is in its reassurance that solutions to problems can be fast, direct, and violent. *Dirty Harry* (1971), like *Walking Tall*, was a prime example of the modern street western. Although Kael thought *Walking Tall* not to be as snide as *Dirty Harry*, she objected to both films “fundamentalist political” philosophy that a hero could become “a one man lynch mob,” yet remain incapable of harming innocent people in his “God-like” pursuit of vengeful justice (106).

Kael noted the film’s poor cinematography, but felt that the crudeness added a sense of innocent honesty to the production. Kael did not find honesty in the film’s depiction of historical events. According to Kael, the actual Buford Pusser was beaten up in a dispute over gambling money that he, not a friend, lost. Three years later, the casino was robbed, but Buford was acquitted because he had an alibi, not because of a passionate appeal to justice. Four years later, when Pusser ran for sheriff, the incumbent did die in an auto accident, but Pusser was not involved nor did he attempt to save the man. The first deputy hired by Pusser was his father, not Obra Eaker. In addition, the large number of arrests Pusser made did not result in the demise of the criminal syndicate in McNairy County (103).

Even some of the residents in McNairy County came to question Pusser’s status as hero. They believed that he was not quite free of involvement in illegal activity and that he brought violence upon himself. They also felt that Pusser unduly capitalized on his

notoriety. For his part, Pusser maintained that he was not interested in personal celebrity, nor was he a fanatic in his pursuit of justice (Zimmerman 100).

Print the Legend

Media fascination with the story of *Walking Tall* dates back to 1969 when CBS news correspondent Roger Mudd reported on Buford Pusser's anticrime war in Tennessee. Motion picture producer Mort Briskin saw the ten-minute story and immediately contacted Pusser. In exchange for seven % of the box office and a promise that the film would not depict the South as "a place where everybody walks around uneducated and in overalls," Pusser agreed to permit Briskin and his partner, director Phil Karlson, to tell his story (Zimmerman 99).

Karlson was a veteran "B movie" director of modest success. He occasionally found the opportunity to create politically conscious films such as *The Phenix City Story* (1955), but more often was forced to accept lesser projects such as the story of a boy and his pet rat in *Ben* (1972). Karlson believed in the ethos of Pusser's story. He felt that Americans were sick of corrupt politicians and tired of the recent antiheroic trend of motion pictures that "glorified crooks, petty chisellers, and con men." He hoped that his picture would redeem American respect for its lawmen (Higham 13)

In answer to charges that his film encouraged vigilantism, Karlson hoped that people would see instead the violent consequences endured by Buford as an example of what actions not to take. According to Karlson, "what I'm saying in the picture is that if you want to get out and get the bad guys, don't do it on you own, find police to support you, get a whole community stirred up first and let them act along with you. Go talk to the city council." It should be pointed out, however, that in the film, Buford does not consult city council. He acts as a majority of one (Higham 13).

The real-life Buford Pusser failed in his reelection bid for sheriff in 1970, but became famous because of his depiction in *Walking Tall*. After the film's release in 1973, Pusser made lucrative guest appearances at car dealerships and appeared at golf tournaments in the company of athletes and astronauts. Bing Crosby Productions even tested him for the starring role in the first planned sequel to *Walking Tall*. While on his way back home from the successful Memphis audition, the 36-year-old former lawman drove his red sports car off Highway 64, near McNairy County, crashed into an embankment and died ("Buford Pusser, Sheriff Depicted in 'Walking Tall' Film, Is Dead").

Political Values

The film suggests that America, as symbolized by McNairy County, has lost its way. Outside forces have infected the nation with "organized dishonesty" and only the actions of an independent leader can redeem society. The world of *Walking Tall* is clearly divided between good and evil. The film, just as in *The Candidate*, strongly suggests that anyone who becomes part of the political system will inevitably become corrupt. Corruption extends to elected officials who are controlled by the crime syndicate as well as to the courts that cannot be trusted to render justice. The filmmaker's distaste for the perceived leniency of the judiciary is depicted in a scene where the newly elected Sheriff Pusser reassigns the country judge's chambers from an office in the county courthouse to the lavatory.

In the film, the American economy is every bit as illegitimate as its political system. McNairy County depends on liquor, prostitution, and gambling for its viability. Outside of the Pusser family's logging business, there is no other economic development in the county. The crime syndicate is able to exploit the dearth of economic options to

impose its will on the community. The lure of materialism proves to be the undoing of simple townspeople like Buford's friend Lutie. Self-sacrifice, on the other hand, provides redemption.

According to the film, political legitimacy derives from innate qualities of individualism, strength, sacrifice, and love of the land. Buford personifies all of these traits. He is a physically imposing individual who loves his family and fights for members of the community when they cannot fight for themselves. Buford's connection with nature is important in the film. He works the land and his weapon of choice is an unrefined, hand-hewn billy club with which he attacks the evildoers as well as the distilled spirits of illegal moonshiners.

Buford was absent from the county when it degenerated into its dishonest state and is unsullied by involvement in vice or by possession of political office. When he returns to town, Buford tells Sheriff Thurman that he used to admire him until the sheriff "done learned how to crawl." Buford will not crawl. When confronted with a political system in need of reform, Buford is certain of the course he should take. Unlike Bill McKay in *The Candidate*, he has a plan of action. Buford uses the power of office to legitimize his destruction of moonshine operations, confiscation of automobiles, beating of pimps, killing of crime bosses and retribution for personal injury.

The citizens accept Buford's vigilantism due to their frustrated desire for change. They are unable to act without his example. Buford is the one man who can stand up to the system, walk tall, and return the community to its natural state. In this film, the ends justify the means, but it is implied that people must wait for leadership before attempting

reform. If Bill McKay was the template for future cynicism in films, Buford Pusser was the template for future heroism.

Walking Tall, as critics have pointed out, was crudely made, advocates vigilantism, is emotionally violent, and contains inaccurate timelines. Even its paid technical advisor, Buford Pusser, admitted that the film was less than completely accurate. These facts do not detract from the impact of the film. The values contained in *Walking Tall* resonated with motion picture audiences. America, in the winter of 1973, was looking for a bastion of righteousness in a world buffeted by traumatic events.

CAPTER 5
COVER-UP: *CHINATOWN* (1974), *THE PARALLAX VIEW* (1974), AND
ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN (1976)

You may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me you don't

Noah Cross, *Chinatown*

The media event of 1973 was the televised U. S. Senate Watergate hearings. The June 17, 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate hotel resulted in an investigation of a pattern of on-going illegality and obstruction of justice that reached to the highest levels of the Nixon administration. In May of 1973, the Senate Watergate Committee, chaired by Senator Sam Ervin, began hearing testimony from those involved in the break-in. All three major networks televised the testimony. For the balance of the year, the conspiracy to cover-up involvement by the Nixon administration began to unravel. As ever more important political figures were compelled to testify before the Watergate Committee, the nation paid rapt attention to the unfolding national drama.¹

From the beginning of the Watergate affair, Nixon maintained that no one in the White House had been directly involved. Many Americans believed their president. In a Gallup Poll conducted from June 1-4, 1973, only 8 % of respondents who had heard or

¹ The Watergate hearings dominated the daytime National Nielson ratings. Three out of the eight highest rated daytime television programs for the week of 9-13 July 1973, were NBC's Watergate coverage at 10.7, placing it first, ABC's Watergate coverage at 9.6, placing it third, and CBS's Watergate coverage at 9.1, placing it in a tie for eighth. In addition, many viewers tuned into the Public Broadcasting Service for prime time replays of gavel-to-gavel coverage of the hearings. See Greeley 1.

read about Watergate felt that Nixon had “planned the Watergate ‘bugging’ from the beginning.” Forty-six % of respondents felt that the affair was “just politics – the kind of thing that both parties engage in.”²

Nixon’s denial of involvement came into doubt in the period of June 25 - 29 when White House Counsel John Dean offered dramatic testimony before the Watergate Committee. Dean stated that in April 1973, he and Nixon had discussed plans to raise one million dollars in hush money to silence the Watergate burglars. Dean also implicated other important members of the administration, including White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, chief advisor for domestic affairs, John Ehrlichman, and the Attorney General, John Mitchell. In the fall of 1973, presidential aid Alexander Butterfield revealed the existence of a secret White House taping system that could verify the level of involvement of the Nixon administration. Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox subpoenaed the tapes, but the president refused to turn them over, citing executive privilege. In October, Nixon ordered the firing of Cox. Then Attorney General Elliot Richardson refused to carry out the order and resigned, as did Associate Attorney General William Ruckelshaus, leaving Solicitor General Robert Bork to implement Nixon’s order (Schulman 46).

The battle for the White House tapes took a further strange turn when America learned that an eighteen-and-a-half minute segment of a potentially incriminating conversation between Haldeman and Nixon had been accidentally erased. Only five persons, including Nixon, his personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, and three other staff

² “June 17 Watergate, Interviewing Date: 1-4 June 1973, Survey # 872 – K,” in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977. v1*. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 128.

members had access to both the tape and the recording machine. Nixon's credibility stretched even thinner when a group of technical experts investigated the gap and found it to be the result of five separate manual erasures (Olson 27-32).

In February 1974, the House of Representatives voted 410 to 4 to begin a formal impeachment inquiry. Eventually, a federal grand jury would indict Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Mitchell and would name Nixon as an unindicted coconspirator. The Supreme Court ruled that Nixon had to turn over the subpoenaed tapes and the House Judiciary Committee passed three articles of impeachment against Nixon. Political and public confidence in Nixon rapidly declined. In a Gallup Poll conducted in July of 1974, 51 % of respondents thought that there was enough evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the president to warrant a trial before the Senate. Nixon, who still maintained his innocence, had to choose between confronting his accusers in the Senate, or resigning in disgrace. He chose to resign.³

The dramatic series of Watergate related events greatly decreased public trust in all forms of government. Nixon had been reelected because he seemed to share an American belief in respect for law and order. Nixon, however, had obstructed justice, lied about it, and was unwilling to "walk tall" in the face of adversity. The American people felt betrayed. In a Gallup Poll conducted in July of 1972, respondents considered "corruption in government" the eleventh most important problem facing the nation; by September of 1973, it was the third most important problem. In addition, 64 % of respondents in a

³ "July 28 President Nixon, Interviewing Date: 12-15 July 1974, Survey # 911 – K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977, v1*. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 294.

Gallup Poll conducted in June of 1973 indicated that they would not choose politics as a career for their son.⁴

Politics as Usual

The investigation of Watergate revealed secret plans and back-stage cover-ups that shook American confidence in its political process. At the height of this national political drama, the film *Chinatown* (1974) entered into production. This fictional work also contains secret plans, cover-ups, and the betrayal of public trust. Its very title entered into the language as a metaphor for corruption. The film, however, displaces the depiction of political illegality to a distant time and place.

Chinatown is about the control of water rights in 1930's era Los Angeles and the unseen forces that shape the city's destiny. At a public meeting, the mayor of Los Angeles proposes the construction of the Alto Vallejo Dam and Reservoir. According to the mayor, the project would create a 112-foot high dam and a 12 thousand acre water service that will irrigate crops, meet the fresh water needs of a rapidly growing metropolitan area, and be "a fair price to pay to keep the desert from our streets."

The Chief Engineer of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Hollis Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling), disagrees. He points out that core samples have revealed that the bedrock beneath the new dam site will be the same permeable shale that failed in the

⁴ For polling results, see "August 6: Most Important Problem: Interviewing Date: 14-17 July 1972 Survey # 855 - K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977*, v1. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 48; "September 27 Most Important Problem Interviewing Date 7-10 September 1973 Survey # 877 - K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977*, vi. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 186; and "July 12 Politics as a Career, Interviewing Date: 22-25 June 1973, Survey # 873 - K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977*, v1. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 136.

recent Vanderlift Dam catastrophe that resulted in 500 deaths. Based on the geological report, Mulwray emphatically states that he will not build the dam. A chorus of boos meets Mulwray's pronouncement. Farmers stomp their feet and accuse Mulwray of stealing water from the valley.

A woman identifying herself as Mrs. Mulwray hires private detective J. J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson) to catch Mr. Mulwray in a compromising position with his mistress. The metropolitan newspapers obtain copies of the photos and publish front-page coverage of the liaison. Gittes wants to discuss irregularities in the case with Mr. Mulwray and tracks him to the Oak Pass Reservoir. When he arrives at the reservoir, Gittes finds that Mulwray is dead. Ironically, the chief water engineer of Los Angeles has drowned in the middle of a drought. Gittes suspicions increase when the coroner reveals that a local tramp has also drowned in the supposedly bone-dry Los Angeles River on the same night as Mulwray's death.

Gittes follows the flow of events to discover an attempt at land speculation. He finds out that the proposed Alto Vallejo project will not bring water to the city of Los Angeles, but rather to the adjacent San Fernando Valley. Land speculators, headed by Mulwray's former business partner and father-in-law Noah Cross (John Huston), seek to discredit Mulwray because of his opposition to the project. They have bought huge tracts of barren land in the valley in hopes of reaping a fortune when a reliable source of irrigation is secured.

Gittes discovers that Noah Cross has killed his son-in-law, Mulwray. He also discovers that Noah Cross has had an incestuous relationship with his daughter, the real Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway), resulting in a child. The police, however, think that a

jealous Mrs. Mulwray is responsible for the murder of her husband. When they seek her arrest, Gittes tries to help Mrs. Mulwray and her daughter escape from LA. He instructs them to hide out at their butler's home in the Chinatown section of Los Angeles while he misdirects the police. Unfortunately, the police find out about the ruse and arrive in Chinatown in time to prevent their escape.

Despite the protests of Gittes that Noah Cross is responsible for land fraud and the murder of Mr. Mulwray, the police fail to arrest him. In a desperate attempt to protect her daughter from falling under the control of her father, Mrs. Mulwray shoots and wounds him. The police then kill Mrs. Mulwray. Gittes enters into a state of shock. Anger at police indifference causes him to mutter "as little as possible" prompting a former coworker from his days in the District Attorney's office, Lieutenant Escobar, to threaten him with incarceration. Two employees from Gittes' private investigation firm usher their boss away from the scene with the advice: "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown."

Chinatown as Metaphor

Chinatown is not only a neighborhood in Los Angeles it also represents a mental concept. The Chinatown of the mind exists as an unknowable, fatalistic world where individuals feel compelled to remain silent rather than confront evil. In the film, the entire political process is as unknowable and corrupt as the abstract Chinatown. Unlike *Walking Tall*, "organized dishonesty" has spread beyond the sheriff's office to society in general.

In *Chinatown*, politics becomes the tool of a shadow government that is totally in control of people's lives. Politicians promise to use positions of power to effect civic improvements with no real intent to do so. In addition, the public never truly knows who is in control of events and what deals transpire in the back rooms of government. The Alto Vallejo Dam will not bring much needed water to the city, and even worse, it might

catastrophically fail. The public will never find out the true benefactor of the water project or the unethical actions of their local politicians. Systematic attempts to stem corruption are doomed from the start.

The film indicts the actions of politicians and suggests that the public is better off not knowing what is going on: "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown." There is little that the farmers in the San Fernando Valley can do to stave off the land speculators. It would be easier for all concerned if they would agree to cooperate. Eventually, they too will sell out at a cheap price. In another scene, the public is likened to senile nursing home residents who are unaware that they own so much of the valley. The land speculators have surreptitiously bought the land for the seniors, planning to cash in when they die. In the same manner, the film suggests that the American electorate is unaware of its potential power and fails to exercise it because their leaders routinely withhold the truth from them.

Chinatown represents a world where no one can swim against the tide of corruption. Placing the story in the past increases the sense of the inevitability of present dishonesty. Film audiences were well aware of the popular image of Los Angeles. They were exposed to countless media representations of "swimming pools and movie stars." Many were also aware of its development from a sleepy western town into a huge metropolis. The film illustrates how much control governmental authorities can have over metropolitan development. Given this high level of control, corruption seems not only possible, but also inevitable. In this political climate, the legitimacy of a government lies not in its stated moral underpinnings, but in its ability to outlast change, a fact that Noah

Cross points out when he says, “Of course I’m respectable. Politicians, ugly buildings, and whores all get respectable if they last long enough.”

In the course of his work for the District Attorneys Office, Gittes pursued many cases in Chinatown. He may now be physically out of Chinatown, but metaphorically he cannot escape it. Gittes approaches life with wisecracking sarcasm that covers a hidden sense of futility. While working in Chinatown, he tried to help a woman he was involved with and ended up insuring her misfortune. Gittes reluctantly recounts this incident to Mrs. Mulwray, foreshadowing the film’s ending. Gittes left the mean streets of Chinatown, but his work still depends on sordid investigations of marital infidelity.

Gittes, however sleazy his profession, does have a code of ethics. He cannot be bought for love or money and he will pursue truth no matter the personal consequences. The character’s adherence to a personal code of ethics reflects the mythology of popular, hard-boiled detective characters including Raymond Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe and Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade. They too were antiheroes who remained untainted by corruption.

Gittes is the central consciousness of the film and a stand-in for the audience. We see the tarnished political process through his eyes. He displays little respect for the political system. At the public meeting about the Alto Vallejo Dam, he disdainfully reads the *Racing Forum* rather than pay attention to mundane events. Gittes also steals business cards from Mulwray’s deputy at the Department of Water and Power, Russ Yelburton (John Hillerman), and then later passes himself off as Yelburton. In addition, he easily out-smarts a petty bureaucrat at the County Clerks Office in order to steal a page of a

public document. Gittes' disrespect for those in government suggests that the audience should share his attitude.

After Mr. Mulwray's demise, Gittes suspects Yelburton of being part of the conspiracy. He revisits Yelburton at the Department of Water and Power to obtain more information and tells the newly promoted bureaucrat, "I don't want to nail you; I want to find out who put you up to it. Who knows, maybe we can put the whole thing off on a few big shots and you can stay the head of the department for the next twenty years." Gittes has contempt for stereotypical "yes men" who are willing only to do "as little as possible." He does not want to ruin these men; instead, he wants to capture the big fish, men like Noah Cross. Gittes is the one person who understands the power and potential threat to democracy represented by Noah Cross and his like.

Noah Cross, like the Biblical Noah, is a patriarchal figure. Before film action begins, he and Hollis Mulwray have "made this city." Together they brought life out of the desert by establishing a water system for the city of Los Angeles. Originally, both men shared ownership of the city's water department, but the civic-minded Mr. Mulwray convinced his partner to relinquish control of the valuable water resource. The sale of the water department to the city generated a fortune for both men. Noah Cross, however remained unsatisfied. He lusted after the one commodity that he could never totally control. When asked by Gittes what possible gain he could attain through his schemes, he says enthusiastically, "the future, Mr. Gittes, the future."

According to the film, Mulwray and Cross are two sides of the same coin. They have had a politically incestuous relationship regarding the ownership of the city water supply and have even slept with the same wife/daughter. The difference is that Mr.

Mulwray is portrayed as a benign despot while Noah Cross is portrayed as a monster. Noah Cross is willing to do anything to obtain his desired goals. When asked about his incestuous relations with his daughter, Noah Cross states that he does not blame himself because, “you see Mr. Gittes, most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place they’re capable of anything.” Power corrupts absolutely. The film’s ending is one of the most dispiriting in film history as the audience comes to realize that with the death of Mrs. Mulwray, Noah Cross will now gain custody of his daughter/granddaughter with the accompanying potential for another generation of sexual violation.

Chinatown is about violation of people, public trust, and nature. The woman who pretends to be Mrs. Mulwray winds up dead on her kitchen floor: the citizens of Los Angeles pay for water they will not drink; and the natural resources of California are commandeered to feed the needs of an artificial city in the San Fernando Valley. This film depicts leaders as obsessed, politicians as pawns, and citizens as clueless. Rape of the land equates to rape of the daughter equates to rape of the political system.

Parallels to Watergate

Chinatown is not the exact story of Watergate, but it does contain several allusions to it. Similar to real events, the film includes revelations of political dirty tricks and secret governmental wrongdoing. As in the televised Senate Watergate hearings, the layers of corruption are slowly peeled back to expose a “cancer” on the administration. In the film, this cancer has infected the procurement of water, the very lifeblood of the city, and the foundation of its continued existence.

Given the time period of production, it cannot be coincidental that water imagery plays so prominent a part in the film. Several scenes take place in or near bodies of water.

Mulwray is obsessed with dams, charts patterns of water run off, and even drowns in a tidal pool. Later in the film, Gittes finds a key piece of evidence, the smoking eyeglasses, if you will, in Mulwray's backyard pond. Both Mulwray and Cross made their fortunes by owning and then selling the water company. The film also depicts members of a trouble-shooting gang, similar in function to the Nixon administration's plumbers unit, who are employed by the city water company to carry out covert missions.⁵

Gittes encounters a thuggish looking member of this trouble-shooting gang, Claude Mulvihill (Roy Jenson), in a municipal building. He asks the Deputy Chief of the Department of Water and Power, Russ Yelburton (John Hillerman), what Mulvihill is doing there. Yelburton informs Gittes that the Department of Water and Power hired the former sheriff to protect the Los Angeles municipal water system from dynamite attacks.

Reference to the potential destruction of the Los Angeles water system introduces a bit of history into the film that relates the past to the present. From its opening in 1913, the Los Angeles Aqueduct had been a highly contentious issue with ranchers in the Central Valley of California. The 250-mile long system of ditches and pipelines cost hundreds of millions of dollars and a decade to construct. It diverted water from Owen's Lake in northern California and brought it to southern California. This new source of water enabled the semi-arid city of Los Angeles to expand greatly through the early decades of the 20th century.

The water project, funded by municipal tax dollars, was sold to up-state ranchers by the Chief of the Los Angeles Department of Water, William Mulholland, as a source of

⁵ Members of this group include the film's director, Roman Polanski, billed as "Man with Knife." For actions of the White House "Plumbers Unit," see Olson 19.

irrigation and cheap power. Unfortunately, for the ranchers, none of the promised irrigation water ever materialized. Similar to the plot of *Chinatown*, agents from the city of Los Angeles bought up land near Owen's Lake and let it turn to salt. In response to the perceived thievery of their water, the Central Valley ranchers engaged in a decades long guerilla war involving dynamiting portions of the aqueduct as well as seizing control of water gates along its course.⁶

A water gate is a mechanical device utilized to redirect water. In a desert environment, water is power. A water gate is also an apt metaphor for the political process. Politics is not only about who wins elections, but it is also about the allocation of goods and services and the power that accrues to those who exercise control over the flow of resources. In *Chinatown*, Noah Cross is the ultimate keeper of the water gate.

In his pursuit of power, Noah Cross carefully avoids exposure. He allows his underlings to implement actions. This allows Cross, like Nixon, to remain protected by plausible deniability. This is true until Gittes begins investigating him. For the most part, Gittes is alone in his crusade. Minor governmental officials are conditioned to do "as little as possible" to stem the tide of corruption. The film castigates these officials for their silence but offers no hope for society. The last scene of the film includes a shot of Chinese-Americans observing the dramatic conclusion. After the shootout, they silently mill around the area and then disperse toward their homes. They have witnessed similar incidents before in this neighborhood, and they know that they probably will again. The film draws a parallel between the residents of the fictional Chinatown and viewers of the

⁶ For conflict over water rights, see "Courts May Have to Settle Los Angeles Water Dispute," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 August 1927: A4; "Truce Reached in Water Feud in California," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 November 1924: A 4; and "Los Angeles Aqueduct is Dynamited Again," *The New York Times*, 20 June 1927: A21.

televised Watergate hearings. Both groups rubberneck at carnage from a safe distance, then turn elsewhere when the show is over.

The Creative Process

Robert Towne was a highly sought after young screenwriter who had contributed to a number of “New Hollywood” films including *The Last Detail* (1973) which starred Jack Nicholson. Towne, who was born in Los Angeles, wrote the script for *Chinatown* with Nicholson in mind. His original script contained all of the elements of a classic film noir. Towne provided the film’s sense of cynicism through his knowledge of local history and his conversations with a Los Angeles vice cop who gave him insight into the philosophy of doing “as little as possible.” The original script was rather long at 180 pages in length and had a more positive ending than the final film version, but all of the essential elements of the film were in place. Paramount wunderkind producer Robert Evans green-lighted the production and brought internationally acclaimed Polish director Roman Polanski on board to provide a fresh perspective on America (Towne).

Polanski was renowned for a series of visually stylish, yet violent, productions such as *Knife In Water* (1962), *Repulsion* (1965), and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968). This professional experience enabled Polanski to turn a detective story into a modern film classic. He inverted the scenic darkness of film noir, substituting for it the external, white-hot colors of southern California. The bright colors mask the internal darkness of the film’s characters, much as everyday political normalcy obscured the underlying darkness of Watergate.

Polanski carried a lot of emotional baggage with him; his mother had died in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, and his wife had been brutally murdered in the 1969 Tate-La Bianca killings in Los Angeles. Such extraordinarily horrific events had to

have affected his outlook. Polanski rewrote the film's ending, changing Towne's more positive resolution into a tragedy. Polanski stated that his take on America was influenced by events of the day. "That kind of corruption in the film happens continually in the United States," he said. "When I was shooting the film, I was amazed sometimes, listening to the news programs, by the parallels between what I was hearing and what I was shooting. Not that I am hostile to the American system. It may be the only one that works now, despite all that's wrong with America" (Zimmerman 74).

The film's intent to comment on current events was noted by reviewer John Simon who observed that the Gittes character, unlike the traditional film detective hero, was "not coolly sure of himself all the way down the line" and the villain was more modern as well because "his evil has sociopolitical coloration and even a certain pathos" (14). According to Simon, what really brought the film into the 1970's was "the loss of innocence that permeates its world; the boundaries between right and wrong have become hazy even in the good—or better people, and the two genuine innocents of the film are both, in one way or another, victimized. The entire world is headed for Chinatown" (14).

Penelope Gilliatt called the film a "thriller for grownups" that included clever humorous touches and was "steeped in knowledge of older Hollywood thriller-masters, but is full of young verve, bowing to no one" (70). David Sterritt applauded the film's ability to capture 1930s period atmosphere and its ability to "transcend specific times and locations" (A14).

On the other hand, film critic Vincent Canby faulted Polanski and Towne for setting the film in the 1930s instead of the modern era and found that viewing the film "continually made me wish I were back seeing *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Big Sleep*"

(A26). Stanley Kaufman was critical as well. He disliked the acting of John Huston, Polanski's inclusion of "revolting cruelty," the length of the script, the "fancy" title, and the overall "consciously paradigmatic" impression of the film (16).

Values

Chinatown is an example of the manipulation of a formulaic, "consciously paradigmatic" genre to convey deeper meaning. Just as Frank Capra utilized screwball comedies to create film essays on American civics in the 1930s, so too did Roman Polanski utilize the detective form to create a much different essay on American civics in the era of Watergate. It is interesting that both men were immigrants to America. With distance comes perspective. Despite an era of economic depression, Capra, along with favorite screenwriters Sidney Buchman and Robert Riskin, was uniquely able to identify the bedrock values that would enable America to withstand national crisis. Polanski, in collaboration with Towne, was able to identify the climate of secrecy that had torn America apart.

It is not surprising that the film depicts political corruption in America. Drama usually includes conflict between good and evil. It is surprising that the corruptive forces emerge totally victorious. Few Hollywood motion pictures risk alienating their audience by ending with the heroine's death and the villain's triumph. Most films conclude that crime does not pay, or at the least offer some measure of moral victory, but 1974 was a different time. Public expectations of film content had been altered by exposure to current events including the Watergate revelations and thematic innovations contained in recently successful films such as *The Godfather* (1972) that depicted the American Dream soured

by greed. In this era, filmmakers had the freedom to question beliefs and still remain financially successful.⁷

In the early 1970s, successful films like *The Godfather* were becoming increasingly more violent. *Chinatown* does contain scenes of physical violence including that of Gittes's nose being sliced open and a bloody shot of Mrs. Mulwray's eye socket, but the film is also significant in its emotional violence. Gittes slaps Mrs. Mulwray's face when she lies to him, a vengeful client of Gittes bruises the face of his unfaithful wife, Gittes questions Lieutenant Escobar's manhood and later grabs the crutch from a crippled ranch hand in order to beat him with it.

Perhaps the most emotionally violent aspect of all is the incestuous relationship that exists at the heart of the film. The emotionally violent aspects of the film might be traced, in part, to Polanski's personal history; this however, overlooks the contributions of Towne. He is responsible for the original concept of *Chinatown* and the existential tone of the film fits within other scripts that he has written, including *Tequila Sunrise* (1988), a story of crime and betrayal set in modern Los Angeles.

Chinatown represents an important development in the depiction of the political process because it is one of the first films of the era to address the issue of Watergate. Yet even here, events of the day are addressed indirectly and set in the past. In the case of *Chinatown*, water manipulation substitutes for electoral manipulation, and the past provides a safe place from which to address events that are still too difficult for direct public discourse. Fictional works often utilize bygone eras to promote a sense of

⁷ *Chinatown* was the 21st most popular film of 1974. See "Big Rental Films of 1974 (U.S.-Canada Market Only)," *Variety*, 8 January 1975: 24. Despite the increased cost of living caused by the Arab oil embargo of 1973, the American film industry experienced a particularly strong year in 1974. See Silverman 1.

nostalgia, as in the case of *The Sting* (1974), the most popular film of the same year as *Chinatown*, or to question American fascination with social status in another top grossing film of the year, *The Great Gatsby* (1974). In this case, the past conveys an inevitable sense of defeat.⁸

Part of the box office resurgence of *Walking Tall*, released in the same year as *Chinatown*, can also be attributed to its depiction of governmental corruption. It too displaces the depiction of corruption to the distant location of rural Tennessee. *Walking Tall*, however, has a more positive conclusion. Although Buford, like Gittes, loses the woman he loves, his community recovers its original integrity.

In *Chinatown*, Los Angeles never had any honor to lose. Its very existence originated with stolen water. This film presents an extremely cynical view of an America where all political aspirations are equally suspect. Gone are any notions of reform. In this film, the established power structure stifles change, technology subverts the environment, and corruption remains the status quo. Author Raymond Chandler said of his Los Angeles based protagonist, Phillip Marlowe, “Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid” (18). In his time, Marlowe was able to negotiate the mean streets on his own terms; Gittes fails to do so. The message the audience takes away from this film is that of anger and defeat reflecting the tarnished nature of 1970s era national events.

⁸ It is interesting to note that the most popular film of a year of Watergate revelations was a story of con artists and deception in Prohibition era Chicago. See *Variety*, 8 January 1975: 24.

The Fourth Estate

Investigative journalists, like detectives, make good film heroes. In motion pictures, if not in real life, both are free to follow a story wherever it takes them. Journalists and detectives always seem to be present when key film action occurs and always seem to uncover information in a highly suspenseful manner. Both tend to be outsiders to the established order and, as such, are free to expound on the actions of the establishment. In addition, journalists earn their living by delivering information to the public. This makes film journalists useful vehicles for delivering story exposition.

The subject of investigative journalism was central to the plot of two mid-1970s political films directed by Alan J. Pakula. In June of 1974, *The Parallax View* (1974) was released. This was followed two years later by *All The President's Men* (1976). The films are stylistically similar, but much different in resolution. *The Parallax View*, released the same month as *Chinatown* and two months before the resignation of Nixon, takes the idea of political cover-up to a new level of obsessive paranoia. In the film, a secretive Parallax Corporation recruits misfits and brainwashes them into becoming political assassins. The film does not indicate a particular political motivation for these murders. The Parallax Corporation is an equal opportunity assassination bureau whose covert operations target random leaders and exterminate all potential witnesses.⁹

The *Parallax View* expands on a theme put forward in a film of the previous year, *Executive Action* (1973), as well as a series of popular books of the era that offered supposed proof of a cover-up in the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy. Executive

⁹ *Chinatown* screenwriter Towne also contributed material to *The Parallax View*, but was uncredited due to a screenwriter's strike during the spring of 1973. See Biskind 107.

Action attributes motivation for the president's assassination to a secret right-wing conspiracy motivated by a desire to curtail the United States withdrawal from Vietnam. The Parallax View turns conspiracy into a big business driven by profit.¹⁰

The film begins with a scene set at Seattle's Space Needle. Senator Charles Carroll arrives at the base of the structure riding in a vintage fire truck to the accompaniment of a marching band. The senator, along with his wife, his entourage, and various reporters board an elevator that takes them to a crowded rally held high above on the Space Needle's observation deck. The senator delivers a speech celebrating Independence Day as personally meaningful to him because he sometimes has "been called too independent for my own good." At this point, a waiter suddenly guns down the senator and blood splatters the observation deck window. Pandemonium erupts as the gunman flees from the murder scene to the roof of the structure where he is cornered by pursuers then plunges to his death.

This scene was clearly designed to echo the 1968 assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy. The filmmaker's reference to that past national trauma also resonates with then current reports of the Watergate conspiracy. In the film, a second gunman actually shoots the senator. His presence is privileged to the audience, but not to the characters at the rally. An extensive cover-up hides the existence of the second gunman.

The film's second scene is a slow zoom in to a darkly lit panel of seven men. The men are part of a governmental inquiry meant to echo the Warren Commission, which

¹⁰ Skepticism that a single gunman was responsible for the Kennedy assassination was reflected in polling data of the era. In a Gallup Poll conducted in 1976, 81 % of respondents felt that others were involved and of these respondents, "American politicians" were judged responsible by 7 % of respondents, second only to "Cubans/Castro" at 15 %. See "December 26, The Kennedy and King Assassinations, Interviewing Date: 10-13 December 1976, Survey # 964-K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977*, v2. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 927.

investigated the assassination of President Kennedy. The film mocks the Warren Commission findings by employing a panel member who, speaking in monotones, informs his unseen audience that, after four months of investigations and nine weeks of hearings, the panel has concluded that a lone gunman “motivated by a misguided sense of patriotism and chronic desire for recognition” acted alone in the assassination.

The film jumps ahead three years to the present. Many of those present at the assassination are winding up dead. At first, iconoclastic journalist Joe Frady (Warren Beatty) believes the deaths to be coincidental. Frady, however, changes his mind when fellow journalist and friend (Paula Prentiss) dies in a suspicious manner. His investigation leads him to a small northwestern fishing village where the local sheriff accosts him and nearly drowns him in run-off water from a dam--more water imagery here. Frady escapes, steals the sheriff's car, and searches the sheriff's house where he finds recruitment information from The Parallax Corporation.

Frady decides to infiltrate the Parallax Corporation by faking his own death. At first, his gruff but understanding editor Bill Rintels (Hume Cronyn) resists the idea. Rintels, logically, wants to go to the police. Frady talks his editor out of doing so because he wants to secure evidence for a good story. Frady joins The Parallax Corporation and endures an intensive montage of photographic images designed to brainwash him.

It is interesting to see what images the filmmakers consider suitable for brainwashing Frady. The brainwashing session begins with pleasant images of family, nature, and country. These are interspersed with flashing words including, “me,” “God,” and “country.” Gradually, negative images appear in the sequence including lynching, Nazi violence, the word “enemy,” and Lee Harvey Oswald. Eventually, the pleasant

images mix with the negative images and words in such a manner that “me” follows violence and “country” follows Nazis.

Technically this is an interesting montage, but the sequence greatly simplifies what it must take to brainwash as strong-willed an individual as Frady. The film is inconsistent here because Frady is not affected, although all past recruits were. The film also takes for granted the ability of the Parallax Corporation to control events. Parallax conducts brainwashing in its corporate headquarters and escapes notoriety despite its public recruitment of sociopaths and the deaths of so many senators. In *Chinatown*, Noah Cross has gotten away with murder, but has not yet figured out how to bend minds. In *The Parallax View*, it is as if everyone in America has been brainwashed; this is the ultimate mediated reality, and that is the point of the film.

Frady learns of an attempt to assassinate yet another senator, and tries to prevent it. Conveniently, he winds up standing on the very catwalk where the real assassin stands preparing to shoot the next victim. Just as in the opening scene, marching music can be heard on the sound track as the senator rehearses his speech, drives through the massive hall on a golf cart, and is shot. Spectators see Frady in the catwalk and falsely identify him as the gunman. With government agents in pursuit, he runs for his life only to die just like the fall-guy assassin in the film’s Space Needle scene. The film’s final scene repeats the initial inquiry scene, except with a slow zoom out to an extreme long shot, as once again the clueless panel members find no evidence of conspiracy despite months of investigations and hearings. The film concludes, ironically, with the same patriotic marching music that played in the assassination sequences.

The central thesis of the movie is that it is not paranoia if it is true. The government has no credibility here; its officials exist merely to be shot or to cover-up assassinations. The Parallax Corporation, an unknowable source of power, controls all events. The film goes way over the bend here into unreality and total cynicism, merging big politics with large corporations into a faceless corporate political machine that is as dangerous as it is massive.

The narrative style of the film is over statement and its visual style is hyper-realism. The interiors of the Parallax Corporation display sleek diagonal lines that emphasize starkly contrasting patterns of black and white. The outside of the building resembles the glass-enclosed, corporate offices that sprang up in the suburbs of American cities during the 1970s. Pakula had crafted stylish thrillers in the past, including the detective story *Klute* (1971), and would again in the future. *All The President's Men* (1976) continued his use of icy-cold, florescent lit, corporate offices, extremely cluttered pressrooms, and contrasting images of light and darkness meant to symbolize good and evil.

Critical Response

The film was successful financially but rejected by critics. Stephen Farber of *The New York Times* termed the film “mindless and irresponsible,” but found it interesting that the American public, in the era of Watergate, embraced the film’s paranoia. Farber felt that the film’s suggestion that giant corporations had carried out political assassinations was reassuring to audiences. If deranged assassins acted alone, Farber posited, Americans might be forced to view life as “fundamentally senseless.” He also felt that the film would have worked better as a black comedy that satirized American capitalistic principles (Sec 2: 11).

Washington Post film critic Arnold disliked the film as well. In a humorous manner, he hoped that fellow *Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein would not be portrayed in the up-coming film version of their Watergate investigative efforts as “stylized buffoons” (B11). *Time Magazine* critic Richard Schickel thought the film “over paranoid” and the ending unsatisfactory, noting “if the hero can break the conspiracy unaided, there cannot be much of a conspiracy” (60). *New York Times* film critic Canby found the film to be “fuzzy” on logistics and demarcation of Parallax Corporation ideology (A47). *New Yorker* critic Gilliatt also found the film to be noncommittal: “the point of this sort of movie seems to be to arouse outrage without offending anyone” (82). Gilliatt disliked the novel by Loren Singer that the film was based on and wished that the screenwriters could have inserted a stronger political or theological viewpoint into the film (83).

The film is fuzzy in logic. In this sense, the film mirrors attitudes of the mid-1970s. Once again, politics is “organized dishonesty” that is controlled by unseen forces. It is more comforting for the electorate to blame society’s shortcomings on the actions of faceless corporations, empty suited bureaucrats or all the president’s men, rather than to question the system that put these individuals in power in the first place.

This was not the first paranoid film moment, but it was a leap forward in conspiracy theory. The notion that an assassination bureau could exist as a public corporation is unlikely, yet there it is on film. It is also interesting that those inside the government are depicted as completely incapable of understanding the assassination crisis. According to the film, everyone is a potential victim of brainwashing. The idea that anyone can be brainwashed has intensified over time. By extension, liberal and

conservative political factions began to see conspiracy everywhere, and to view each other as externally controlled. In the midst of these presumed conspiracies, filmmakers sought a new type of hero. At this time, any outsider, even a slightly paranoid, antisocial member of the fourth estate, was considered more trustworthy than elected political leaders.

The Journalist as Hero

The literary event of 1974 was the release of *All The President's Men* by *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. This runaway best-seller recounted Woodward and Bernstein's reportage on the early days of the Watergate investigation. At the time, few other journalists were interested in the story of the break in. According to media historian Louis Liebovich, after World War II, established Washington journalists increasingly relied upon press conferences or mixing with White House staffers at social events in order to obtain their leads. The Nixon administration employed a calculated strategy designed to reduce press access to information previously obtained through these sources.¹¹

Woodward and Bernstein benefited by not knowing the system. They were too inexperienced to know how the game was played. Instead of attending traditional press conferences and dinners with high-level officials, they pursued secretaries, clerical staffers, and assistants for information until they could piece together their reports. Other

¹¹ In an examination of fifteen major newspapers conducted between June 18 and December 31, 1972, Liebovich found that the majority of national newspaper articles, magazine articles, and opinion pieces traced their origin back to the *Washington Post* reportage of Woodward and Bernstein. Liebovich did note some original coverage by newspapers including *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. See Liebovich 66-68.

media did not pursue the story as vigorously because they did not want to “trail along eating dust” in the wake of the intrepid *Washington Post* reporters (Liebovich 71).

Woodward and Bernstein’s book appeared on bookshelves in the same month as *Chinatown* and *The Parallax View* arrived in movie theaters. *Chinatown* and *The Parallax View* represented the nadir of pessimism experienced in the aftermath of the Watergate period. The book and film version of *All The President’s Men* represented a more positive outlook. Both offered hope that the American political system was self-correcting. Wrongdoing occurred, but the attempted cover-up was discovered and punished. The film *All The President’s Men* (1976), released in a bicentennial year, represented the possibility of revitalization. The depiction of the journalist as hero offered reassurance at a time when America needed it most. The film still presents politics as a shady business, but asserts that the press can act as a counter-weight to the abuse of power. *All The President’s Men* is much different in tone from the earlier *Chinatown* or *The Parallax View*. In this film, dogged determination of its heroes, along with the courage of the *Washington Post* editors, seems to accomplish nothing short of saving the republic.

Falling in Love with The Post

The resulting film of *All The President’s Men* evolved through many layers. The first layer included the actual events surrounding the Watergate affair, the second was the newspaper accounts of Woodward and Bernstein, the third was the authors repackaging of the story in book form and finally the film version of the book. These were not discrete stages in production. The film’s producer and star, Robert Redford, became involved in the project as early as the second stage. Redford followed the Watergate story from an early period, seeing potential in it as a character study. He was “fascinated by the odd

couple quality” of the two reporters--one WASP and self-controlled, the other Jewish and volatile (“Watergate on Film” 54).

Redford began visiting the *Washington Post* offices to observe Woodward and Bernstein in action. When the reporters inaccurately reported on grand jury testimony, resulting in strong Nixon administration denials and condemnation of the paper, Redford found the incident revealing of character. Observing how the reporters reacted to adversity fascinated Redford. “I wanted to see them when they had bottomed out.” Redford “fell in love with the *Post*” as a subject when he witnessed the different life of a reporter, “I saw all the leads that Bob and Carl couldn’t go with; it was such fat, juicy stuff” (“Watergate on Film” 56).

Redford bought the movie rights to the book, even before completion, for \$450,000 and proceeded to hire screenwriter William Goldman, who also had written the successful Redford vehicle, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). *The Washington Post*, however, almost backed out of the deal. Staff members were displeased with their potential film images. Bernstein felt the original script to be a caricature of real reporters and Metro editor Harry Rosenfeld felt his role in the investigation to be deemphasized. *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee cautioned Redford to remember, “You go off and ride a horse or jump in the sack with some good looking woman in your next film – but I am forever an asshole” (“Watergate on Film” 56).

Redford was also disappointed in the script because he felt it lacked substance. At this point, Bernstein took a crack at rewriting it, but that too proved unsatisfactory. Bernstein could not resist the impulse to play up his image as a swinger. “Carl,” Redford said to him, “Errol Flynn is dead.” Redford turned back to Goldman for further rewrites.

Finally satisfied with the script, Redford brought in director Pakula, in part because of his ability to provide dramatic tension to a story. Pakula was responsible for the use of deep focus in all of the scenes shot at the recreation of the *Washington Post* city room that provide the film with detailed authenticity.

Redford and Pakula spent a lot of time in the *Washington Post* newsroom “soaking up atmosphere and information.” While producing the film, they would check detail accuracy by phoning the real *Washington Post* from “the fake *Washington Post*.” Some film details, however, were the result of improvisations. The filmmakers observed “budget meetings” where editors lobby for front-page space and incorporated them into the film (Sterritt A23).

The resulting film met with the approval of the book authors. According to Woodward, “the movie’s not just pretty damn true, it is true. I just think, if reporters see it, they’ll say ‘this is how we do it’” (“Watergate on Film” 63).

It could also be the case that this was Woodward’s idealized view of how reporters should be portrayed. Journalists make their living by mediating between real events and their readership. They have experience applying objective assessments to political spin, but lack personal experience with how filmmakers mediate reality. It is interesting that editor Bradlee regarded filmmakers with a level of distrust similar to the way politicians have come to distrust the media. Redford, like a good journalist, was looking for a juicy story and as producer/star he received unique access to the *Washington Post*. Who wouldn’t want to be portrayed by a movie star of Redford’s stature?

Upon the film’s completion, the filmmakers, along with Woodward, Bernstein, Bradlee, senior editors, and publisher Katharine Graham attended a private screening. At

its conclusion, no one uttered a word until Redford pleaded for a response, prompting everyone in attendance to give his or her approval (Bradlee 404).

Redford's enthusiasm for the story resulted in a mostly positive portrayal that recast journalists as superheroes and altered the perception of politics. A new reality existed where politics became the subject of investigation rather than debate. The political process became increasingly adversarial, as rivals believed that hidden conspiracy always lurked beneath surface legitimacy. The film served to educate young reporters on how to negotiate a new relationship between the press and the presidency. The cozy report of the past was replaced with distrust as later administrations endured the scrutiny of countless investigative journalists and special prosecutors that drew inspiration from the images contained in this film.

Follow The Money

All The President's Men is painstakingly thorough in providing exposition. This procedural drama derives credibility through the inclusion of numerous actual characters and events. At times, it becomes difficult to tell the metro editor from the national editor without a scorecard. If one wants to keep track of the investigation as it winds its way through the Nixon administration, one would be advised to read the book before watching the film. The book and movie are very similar in content. The film however, unlike the book, begins with a televised Nixon speech followed by a recreation of the Watergate break-in. As in the book, Woodward (Robert Redford) is assigned the story and attends the burglars' preliminary hearing. The reporter's suspicions are aroused when he asks an

attorney, “Mr. Markum, are you here in connection with the Watergate burglary” only to be answered, “I’m not here.”¹²

Woodward begins investigating a strange listing in one of the burglar’s address books that reads “H. H. at W. H.” Eventually he learns that the initials stand for Howard Hunt at the White House. From this point on, the film becomes a connect-the-dots exercise that leads from low-level burglars to the highest levels of the Nixon administration. Much is made of depicting the authentic work life of a reporter. Numerous scenes are included of phone conversations with sources and of information scribbled onto note pads. The reporters always rely on multiple, even if unnamed, sources.

The early emphasis on authentic details makes it easier for the audience to accept the somewhat irregular reliance on these secret sources. When politicians cover their actions it is wrong, but the film heroes escape audience mistrust because they are so earnest. Realism extends to scenic design. The shot perspective of almost every city room scene is from a low angle emphasizing the room’s florescent-lit ceiling. It is as if the filmmakers worry that the audience will fail to appreciate how much money went into recreating such an authentic set. In an era of mistrust, credibility is vital to the motion picture.

Film heroes Woodward and Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) fulfill a buddy-movie cliché by moving from initial rivalry to collaboration. After developing leads for a while, Woodward types a story and delivers it to a copy editor, prompting Bernstein to sneak

¹² A measure of the extensive amount of detail contained in the story is indicated by the use of only about 198 pages out of Woodward and Bernstein’s original 336-page book in the resulting 139-minute film. See Arnold K1.

over and read it. Bernstein decides to improve upon Woodward's prose, but Woodward catches him. Upon reading the revisions, however, Woodward acknowledges the superior clarity of the rewrite and a team is formed.

Woodward plays Felix Unger to Bernstein's Oscar Madison. The two reporters, nicknamed "Woodstein" by coworkers, are "hungry" young reporters, capable of staying up all night to follow leads. Their superior at the *Washington Post* Harry Rosenfeld, (Jack Warden), also fulfills a cliché as the gruff, but understanding, metro editor who supports the boys in their efforts. When Bernstein speculates that the break-in was an attempt to bug Democratic National Chairman Larry O'Brian's office, Rosenfeld intones, "I'm not interested in what you think is obvious, I'm interested in what you know." Still Rosenfeld trusts the boys and runs interference for them with *Washington Post* editor, Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards). Bradlee too, is concerned with proof and at one point chastises the reporters saying, "you haven't got" the story, and "get some harder information next time."

In an attempt to obtain harder information, Woodward contacts a well-placed informant (Hal Holbrook) who might be able to further their investigation. The informant, nicknamed "Deep Throat" after a successful pornographic film of the era, agrees to provide background information about Watergate, but refuses to go on record. They meet in an underground garage where the informant tells Woodward to "forget the myths that the media's created about the White House. The truth is they are not very bright guys." He advises the reporter to, "follow the money."

What Ever it Takes

Eventually, the two reporters learn of a secret slush fund used by the Nixon administration to finance political dirty tricks. Independent of each other, the two

discover evidence of a connection between campaign contributions and money channeled to the burglars. Woodward utilizes his phone skills to induce a regional campaign finance chairman of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) to admit complicity. “I know I shouldn’t be telling you this. I gave it to Mr. Stans,” says the head of finance for Nixon’s reelection committee. For his part, Bernstein cleverly bypasses an officious secretary to obtain access to official Miami Dade County records of campaign financial activity. The film emphasizes how clever the reporters are and contrasts them with easily outsmarted bureaucrats or members of the Nixon administration who appear rattled as they talk on the telephone with the reporters. Because of their efforts, Woodward and Bernstein secure a below the fold, front-page story, with the headline, “Bug Suspect Got Campaign Funds.”

Woodward and Bernstein’s stories cause concern for the editorial staff. Nixon administration spokespeople deny everything they report and, in the film if not in reality, no other paper reprints their efforts. Once again, Bradlee meets with the reporters to gauge their progress only to find that their “garage freak” is a prime source of information. The skeptical editor demands that they obtain some evidence of a connection between CREEP and the slush fund. The attempt to discover a link becomes the central plot of the film.

The reporters start with efforts to obtain a list of CREEP employees. In a scene that is interesting because it not in the book and never happened, the reporters coerce a female coworker, named Kay (Lindsay Crouse) to manipulate a former lover to provide the key list of CREEP staffers. In a series of shot-reverse-shots, Woodward and Bernstein appear larger within the frame and physically dominate the woman who defensively leans

backward in her office chair. The reporters begin the scene in a jovial manner with easy banter, but soon their intention becomes clear to Kay, who drops her head and grits her teeth:

Kay: You're asking me to use a guy I care about.

Bernstein: No, we're not asking you to use him, just help us. I mean, we'd do the same for you.

Kay: My only chance of getting that story is if I see him. I don't want to see him again.

Bernstein: Do you have to see him?

Kay: Sure, I have to see him.

Bernstein: Well, do you have to see him that way? Can't you call him on the telephone and say you want to have a drink with him. Just feel him out. You said the relationship was over. What do you have to lose?

At this point, Woodward breaks in and assures Kay that she does not have to revisit her former lover, if she would not feel right about it, and the scene ends. The filmmakers and, one would suppose, Woodward and Bernstein were aware of the negative depiction of journalists contained in this scene. This is a remarkably self-critical inclusion. The scene suggests that journalists are every bit as capable of entertaining moral relativity as all the president's men. Under the right circumstances, the ambitious young reporters might undertake the same underhanded tasks that Nixon lawyer and dirty trickster, Donald Segretti, admits to later in the film. On the other hand, a more cynical viewer of the film would note that Redford's character chivalrously informs Kay that she need not compromise herself in pursuit of a headline. This makes him the good guy in the eyes of the audience. According to the film, politicians will not think twice about pimping out their friends, but reporters will do so.

In a coda to this scene, Kay drops a folder on Woodward's typewriter. In it is the list of CREEP employees that allows the reporters to crack the investigation. They continue to follow the story from secretaries, to book keepers, to administration

members. When they want to learn the identities of the five people who controlled the slush fund, they trick a frightened woman into revealing their names. Many of this film's plot revelations rely on the willingness of low level, governmental functionaries to name names. Such activity was condemned during the era of the Red Scare; here the ends justify the means.

The reporters follow the list of employees to CREEP Treasurer, Hugh Sloan. When Woodward and Bernstein visit him, he reluctantly provides information, but feels unfairly singled out as the fall guy. Sloan is depicted as an honest family man caught in the wheels of government. He is more concerned about his pregnant wife, "Debbie is in the hospital and my in-laws are coming over." In spite of the reporter's intrusion, Sloan does provide information to the reporters that points them in the direction of White House involvement in the cover-up. For confirmation of this involvement, Woodward re-contacts his informant, Deep Throat.

Your Lives Are In Danger

The character Deep Throat provides an element of cloak and dagger action to an otherwise static film. The film works hard to establish authenticity, but it is difficult to generate excitement by showing endless one-sided telephone conversations. Once in a while, you have to get out of the office. When Woodward wants to meet Deep Throat, he places a red flag in a flowerpot on his balcony. Soon after, the two men rendezvous at an underground parking garage. Suspense builds as Deep Throat appears in heavy shadows. Light and dark are symbolic in the film. The *Washington Post* city room is bathed in flat white light that reveals everything in full detail while interviews with CREEP informants are conducted at night.

Periodically, the suspicious sound of screeching tires interrupts the conversations between Woodward and his informant. In one scene, Woodward glances toward a rapidly departing car, then turns back, only to find that Deep Throat has vanished. Deep Throat is a bit paranoid, frequently saying things like “you’ll have to find that out for yourself,” “don’t you understand what you’re onto,” and “your lives are in danger.” He also places the Watergate break in into a larger context, accusing the Nixon administration of destroying the reputation of potential Democratic Party presidential candidates in order to run against hand-picked rivals and subvert the Constitution. This scene works just like a conversation about motivation for political manipulation conducted between Gittes and Noah Cross in *Chinatown* -- the future Mr. Woodward, the future.

Whether or not the lives of the real Woodward and Bernstein were in danger is beside the point. In the film, they are heroes and are symbolic of all of the journalists who worked on Watergate. Everyone else is afraid. The *Washington Post’s* legal advisor is concerned about exposure, and government officials are worried about potential indictments. The reporters are willing to take risks and these risks pay off. Eventually they obtain information tying Haldeman to Watergate. At this key moment, the film turns dramatic as Bradlee assesses the seriousness of what his paper is about to print. “We’re about to accuse Haldeman, who happens to be the second most important man in this country, of conducting a conspiracy from inside the White House. It would be nice if we were right.”

Unfortunately, their source denies having testified to the grand jury about a connection between Haldeman and Watergate. The connection did exist, but the testimony did not. This revelation results in an opportunity for a dramatic close up of

Bradlee yelling “Woodstein!” at his cub reporters who now must retrace their story. Although they were wrong on this story, the crusty editor decides to cast his paper’s fate with the intrepid reporters: “Let’s stand by our boys.”

Bradlee sums up the meaning of the film with his statement that “nothing’s riding on this except the First Amendment of the Constitution and freedom of the press and maybe the future of the country.” In this film, the future of the country resides not with the politicians, but with those who investigate them. Woodward and Bernstein weather the storm over their erroneous report and reward Bradlee’s faith. By the end of the film, close up shots of typewritten stories reveal that the cover-up did in fact reach inside the White House and even to the president. In an ironic tone, these shots alternate with shots of a television set broadcasting Nixon’s inauguration ceremony where the president-elect swears to uphold the Constitution of the United States. There is no sense of failure at the end of this film as a typewritten account of Nixon’s resignation flashes across the screen.

Critical Response

It is understandable that fellow journalists responded so positively to a film that heroically portrayed one of their own. *Newsweek* critic Jack Kroll felt that the film “marked a critical chapter in the shifting relationship between what we know and how we know it” (85). He favorably compared it to political thriller *Z* (1969) by Greek filmmaker, Costa-Gavras in its ability to discern the “hidden meaning of an event in a culture” (85). Kroll felt that *Watergate* was a modern morality tale, and that *All The President’s Men* used the event to update journalistic myths contained in classic Hollywood films. *New Yorker* critic Gilliatt complimented the film’s authentic scenic detail, effective acting, and its celebration of journalistic muckraking (119). *Wall Street Journal* critic Joy Gould Boyum noted that audiences who already knew the outcome of events portrayed in the

film would find it “so ultimately moving, that we tend to experience its familiar materials almost as revelations” (A13). *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby labeled the film “the thinking man’s ‘*Jaws*,” presumably, a search for the killer conspiracy with Woodstein as the pursuers and Nixon as the shark (A42).

On the other hand, *National Review* critic Kauffman considered the film “trite.” He compared it to cliché newspaper films of the past that also seemed to include tough, but good-hearted editors and crusading reporters. He found the film tiresome in its determination to document journalistic procedures. Kauffman pointed out how “un-vivid” investigative reporting life really is. According to Kauffman, investigative reporters, like detectives, spend most of their time engaged in inherently boring legwork. The second revelation obtained by Kauffman was the “great good luck Woodward had in knowing Deep Throat.” According to Kauffman, without Deep Throat, there would not have been a story (16).

In a more recent assessment of the film, prominent historian William Leuchtenburg also found fault, maintaining that it was “accurate without being true.” According to Leuchtenburg, the inherent danger to reporters was overstated. In addition, the film intimates that Woodward and Bernstein accomplished everything by themselves, thus overlooking the efforts of governmental figures including Senator Sam Ervin, Congressmen Peter Rodino and Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. In the end, the film suggests that the press is more important than the subject it covers (Leuchtenburg 288).

The Role of The Press in the Political Process

The film certainly emphasizes the role of journalists in the Watergate investigation. American ideals are not collectivist ideals. Popular imagination demands individual heroism as symbolic of the best traits of the nation. Unlike characters in past journalistic

films, the reporters in *All The President's Men* are both rebels as well as official heroes. Like many films of the era, outsiders are America's hip new heroes. Established government figures are relegated to faceless voices stammering at the other end of a telephone conversation while the reporters are viewed as dashing men of action. To demonstrate their credibility as outsiders, the filmmakers make sure that the front wheel of a bicycle is visibly propped up against Bernstein's desk and Woodward drives an obscure foreign car. These reporters, like Frady in the *Parallax View*, are rebels with a cause.

Despite their outsider status, the reporters in *All The President's Men* are not much different from the earnest Clark Kents of the past. They earn success through legwork, fact checking, perseverance, and a bit of subterfuge. Woodward even claims to be a Republican. In their diligence, Woodward and Bernstein fill the role of traditional film heroes by assuring viewers that America remains the best possible society, a place where a system of checks and balances provides a safeguard against secrecy.

Ben Bradlee noted an influx of hungry young journalists to the profession who emulated this ambition. According to Bradlee, "follow the money" became "the new shibboleth of journalism." The cozy relationship that had existed between older journalists and the political elite was replaced by a new, more adversarial relationship. This adversarial relationship brought increased status to the profession. Bradlee noted a further cultural shift in the status of reporters who had finally "separated themselves from the rough-and-tumble, hard drinking journalists made famous in the 1920s in Hecht and MacArthur's *Front Page* (1931)." Finally, journalists had joined the ranks of the establishment (Bradlee 406-408).

In addition to emphasizing journalistic roles, the film also simplifies events. This is true, but including every important historical individual or development would result in a prohibitively long and boring motion picture. Certainly more films could have told other aspects of the Watergate story. It is interesting, however, that a vast number of such films were not rushed into production. Even Woodward and Bernstein's best selling follow up, *The Final Days*, did not result in a sequel.

Political films often lag behind historical events. *The Parallax View* was still referencing 1960s events to explore the mistrust of the 1970s. The lack of Watergate films in the later half of the 1970s can be explained by national fatigue with exposure to endless real and fictional conspiracies. The public's need for heroes might also explain a lack of such productions. Vietnam was a similarly traumatic national event that received more depictions than Watergate. Its war stories, however, often revolved around heroic young soldiers in life and death struggles. Watergate was a more complex, less action packed subject. One might expect filmmakers to return to Watergate films in the 1980s, but by that time, attitudes had changed. America experienced a resurgence of self-confidence and was reluctant to revisit films that were directly about Watergate.

Despite a lack of historically-based Watergate productions, the incident remained thematically influential. The skeptical attitudes contained in *Chinatown*, *The Parallax View*, and *All The President's Men* permeated most future political films. From this point on, conspiracies flourished, antiheroes investigated, and politicians ran for cover.

CHAPTER 6
REPLACEMENT: *NASHVILLE* (1975), *TAXI DRIVER* (1976)

We must be doing something right to last 200 years

--Haven Hamilton, *Nashville*

One Day a real rain will come and wash the scum from these streets

--Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. According to President Gerald Ford, our long national nightmare was over. As the nation approached its bicentennial, Americans could take pride in the endurance of their democratic institutions, if not always in the conduct of their leaders. At the same time, the post-Watergate era remained a time of disquiet haunted by political violence. On September 6, 1975, Lynette Alice Fromme, a 26-year-old follower of Charles Manson, pointed a gun at President Ford, but was stopped in her assassination attempt by a secret service agent who grabbed the gun and forced it to the ground.¹

In the political realm, urban financial difficulties, the high price of gasoline, the after-taste of scandal, and a stagnant economy brought attention to the seeming inability of mainstream leaders to answer current challenges. In response to these difficult times, the natural inclination of a democratic people might be a desire to kick the bums out and replace them with new faces from outside the seemingly fallible political establishment.

¹ The actions of United States Secret Service Agent Larry Buendorf averted Fromme's attempted assassination of Ford. See Naughton A49.

It was yet to be asked, however, what would be the consequences of replacement.

Nashville (1975) addresses the consequences of replacement: of instant politicians for statesmen, of populist rhetoric for logic, of ironic distance for political engagement.

New Roots

Nashville is a character study of twenty-four individuals, observed during a five-day period, leading up to a political rally for third party presidential candidate, Hal Phillip Walker. The rally takes place in Nashville, the cultural center of country and western music and emblematic of Middle America. The film's director, Robert Altman, had often worked within established genres including the service comedy in *M*A*S*H* (1970), the western in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), and the detective in *The Long Goodbye* (1973). In these films, Altman inverted expected genre conventions. Unlike the hero in a traditional western, the person who brings civilization to the west in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) is an antiheroic procurer and the detective in *The Long Goodbye* (1973) cannot find his own cat. *Nashville* continued Altman's exploration of genre inversion. The film also fit within the antiheroic trend of many 1970s films.²

Nashville combines a story about the music industry with a political drama in order to describe America's cultural landscape on the eve of its bicentennial. The film consists of a series of vignettes loosely organized around a political campaign. In contrast to most political films, the central political character in this film, Hal Philip Walker, never appears on screen. Instead, we see a white cargo van driving around the city of Nashville while the candidate's voice emanates from an attached loudspeaker. The voice is

² In the 1970s, several films with antiheroic main characters were produced including; *Five Easy Pieces* (1970); *The French Connection* (1971); *Death Wish* (1974); *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975); and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).

southern in accent and populist in its message. In his speeches, Walker addresses the current political alienation felt by average citizens. In response to this alienation, he points out that, like it or not, politics directly affects every person because, “when you pay more for an automobile than it cost Columbus to make his first voyage to America, that’s politics.” Walker is for getting lawyers out of government, eliminating farm subsidies, changing the national anthem to something easier to sing, abolishing the Electoral College, taxing church property, and replacing those in power with new leadership.

The Replacement Party’s logo is a map of the United States. The map depicts a tree growing out of the top of the map, where Canada should be, while roots extend through the middle of the country. Above the tree appears the party’s campaign slogan “New Roots For The Nation.” The logo is an obvious attempt to embrace the heartland. The filmmaker’s choice of this sentimental logo for the Replacement Party is an attack on the cynical manipulation of image that is often employed by real life political parties. The film suggests that such sloganeering is not sincere. Walker, himself, is also prone to simplistic political punditry, as in his assessment of the legal profession:

Ever ask a lawyer the time of day? He told you how to make a watch, didn’t he? Ever ask a lawyer how to get to Mr. Jones house in the country? You got lost, didn’t you? Congress is composed of 535 individuals, 288 are lawyers, and you wonder what’s wrong in congress. No wonder we often know how to make a watch, but we don’t know the time of day. . .

Walker’s diatribe takes place just before a massive traffic jam caused by a multiple car freeway accident. Despite the wreckage, Walker does not miss a beat. He continues to denounce the lawyers who, he says, wrote the U.S. National Anthem. At the same time, uninjured motorists mill around in a carnival-like setting. The motorists are oblivious to Walker’s pronouncements. Here, and throughout the film, continual inter-cutting and the

innovative use of overlapping dialogue does not permit emphasis on any one character. Walker's words eventually drift off and become inaudible in the mixture of sounds. He is one more insignificant talking head in the traffic jam of life.

Walker and his party do not always make sense. He offers easy solutions to complex problems and portrays himself as all things to all constituents. The film suggests that this tactic mirrors that of all real political figures. Walker's down-home aphorisms can be interpreted as either pro conservative or pro liberal, depending on the listener's point of view. For instance, Walker rails against high oil prices, while at the same time, complaining about the use of petroleum taxes to fund food stamps programs. Walker's easy solution is to eliminate both, thus appealing to both sides of the political spectrum. Walker displays a further contradiction by professing to abhor lawyers and political insiders, while employing a slick political advancement, John Triplette (Michael Murphy), to manage his campaign. The most illogical facet of the Walker campaign is the notion that a serious presidential candidate would ride around a single city for five days, talking over a loudspeaker, instead of marshaling his national media resources.

In spite of Walker's contradictions, or perhaps because of them, he becomes a national political force. Walker's success causes network television reporter, Howard K. Smith to label him a "mystery man" with "genuine appeal" who "came out of nowhere" "with a handful of students and scarcely any pros" to win three primaries. According to Smith, Walker has "a fighting chance" to win a fourth in Tennessee, a state that has failed to vote for the winning candidate only once in the last 50 years. The film points out that the national media falls for Walker's act just as easily as the electorate. Political journalistic cliché abounds throughout Smith's report, as does illogic. Of course, Walker

has won three primaries; he is running on his own third party ticket, not against the two established parties.³

The third party candidacy of Walker mirrors that of George Wallace who also was able to obtain national prominence in the elections of 1968 and 1972 and predicted the more recent third party candidacy of Ross Perot. Both Wallace and Perot were firebrand; throw the bums out, iconoclasts. The film clearly questions the sincerity of pseudo populist candidates who, like Walker, prey on the public's gullibility. According to the film, candidates from outside the Washington Beltway are no better than those from within its confines; neither makes sense.

The pronouncements of Hal Philip Walker were the product of collaboration between Altman and liberal Mississippi author, Thomas Hal Phillips. Phillips had been instrumental in helping Altman negotiate with local Mississippi politicians when the director was producing *Thieves Like Us* (1974). In addition, Phillips' brother had run for governor of the state, providing him with experience writing political speeches. Altman asked Phillips to author Walker's speeches for his film and to provide their narration. The content of the speeches relied on Phillip's discretion. Eventually, he submitted an eighteen-and-a-half minute monologue to Altman, who cut it up and inserted it at various places in the film. Altman then provided budget for a van, volunteers, buttons, and a driver to organize a miniature campaign within his film. Altman was not always aware of

³ The character of BBC reporter, Opal (Geraldine Chaplin) also parodies political journalistic clichés when she records her observations on American car culture while standing in a junkyard. "I'm wondering in a graveyard. The dead here have no crosses, now tombstones, nor wreaths to sing of their past glory."

where and when the van would appear: the only instruction given to Phillips was to “invade” the film (Stuart 69-71).

200 Years

This film is not earnest in its depiction of the political process. The overriding tone of the film is that of irony. Nothing is quite as it seems. By this time, politics had become the subject of mockery. Public expectations of leaders had been lowered by scandal and misfortune to the extent that President Gerald R. Ford, an all-American collegiate athlete, was portrayed as a clumsy oaf on the newly popular late night television program, *Saturday Night Live*. The program premiered on NBC on October 11, 1975 and provided viewers with comedic skits that used irony as a comedic strategy. An example of this strategy was a skit that portrayed President Jimmy Carter (Dan Aykroyd) receiving a telephone call from a LSD drug user while appearing in a live phone-in telecast that was moderated by an actor portraying respected CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite. The fictional Cronkite tries to bring the telecast back to more serious phone calls, but Carter countermands the anchorman and proceeds to talk the drug user down from his high.

According to images contained in popular culture, politicians of the day seemed to be more common than statesmanlike. In addition to reporting on President Ford’s errant golf swings, the press began reporting on skit-like incidents like President Carter’s encounter with an attack rabbit. Entertainers and sports figures began to replace political leaders in the domination of popular thought. The film *Nashville* focuses on the ascendancy of these new celebrities in public influence and on the blurring between entertainment and reality.

Altman attacks the false patriotism of self-identified leaders displayed in the sanctimonious lyrics of Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson). When first encountered, country

music legend Haven Hamilton is in the process of recording a patriotic anthem celebrating America's bicentennial:

I've lived through two depressions and seven dust-bowl droughts,
Floods, locusts, and tornadoes, but I don't have any doubts.
We're all a part of history, why Old Glory waves to show,
How far we've come along till now, how far we've got to go.

It's been hard work, but every time we get into a fix,
Let's think of what our children face in two-ought-seven six.
It's up to us to pave the way with our blood and sweat and tears,
For we must be doing something right to last two hundred years.

The approaching national bicentennial provided context for *Nashville*. The motion picture, produced in the year before the nation's 200th birthday, is a microcosm of what the filmmakers believed to be wrong with America. Perhaps most of all, the film disparages an American tendency toward self-congratulations. In this sense, it is a negative film. In fact, it is hard to find a positive American political film from this year.

The initial industry response to the approaching bicentennial was tepid. A July 1975 front-page *Variety* article noted the lack of patriotic-themed films in production that year. According to the article, the major American television networks planned to produce a far greater amount of patriotic fare than the film industry. The article speculated that this might be because of the recent box office failure of patriotically themed productions and the fact that the United States government more directly regulated the broadcast industry than the film industry. The article speculated that this regulatory imbalance motivated broadcasters to curry governmental favor through self-censorship (Harwood 1).

The success of blockbuster films *Jaws* (1975) and *The Towering Inferno* (1975) dominated 1975. According to *Variety*, these two films finished first and second at the

box office (Harwood 1). These films continued the so-called “disaster film” cycle of the 1970s. In these films, authority figures are portrayed as ineffectual, as in *The Towering Inferno*, or self-serving, as in *Jaws*. In both, commerce trumps public safety. Even in 1976, the most popular film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1976) and the third most attended film, *The Omen* (1976), took a dark view of the established order.

However, two celebratory films were released concurrent with the bicentennial. The second and sixth most popular films of the year were *All The President’s Men* (1976) and *Midway* (1976) (Harwood 1). *All The President’s Men*, released four years after Watergate, provided evidence that the American system of checks and balances still worked, and *Midway*, released just one year after the fall of Saigon, harkened back to American military victory in World War II. Significantly, the efforts of World War II fighting men were chosen rather than the military involvement in Vietnam. The celebration of America reached far greater heights after the bicentennial year. The unexpectedly successful *Rocky* (1976), released very late in 1976, told the story of a heroic American underdog; *Star Wars* (1977) projected American military supremacy into the future; and *Superman* (1978) reaffirmed faith in truth justice and the American way.

New Leaders

Haven Hamilton displays unshaken faith in his version of truth, justice and the American way. He the patriarch of a musical community, and to some extent, he has replaced the political leaders of the city of Nashville. In the film, he is the most famous and respected country and western performer in the industry. Celebrities want to meet him and perform with him. His fans love him. Haven is aware of his power, so much so that he feels free to imperiously dismiss a musician from his recording session, “when I

ask for Pig, you get me Pig, then we'll be able to record this here tune," as well as a reporter from the BBC (Geraldine Chaplin). Ultimately, everyone meets Haven's demands and the session proceeds.

Although he is the leader of his musical community, he is also a pompous object of derision. When British Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke of blood sweat and tears, he achieved a profound rhetoric. In contrast, Haven's banal delivery of the same words serves to undercut their meaning. The film suggests that America has lasted 200 years by some other means than the self-righteousness of leaders like Haven Hamilton.

After Haven's recording session, he has other duties to perform. It seems that the most popular performer in country and western music, Barbara Jean (Ronnie Blakely) has recovered from a hospitalization at the Baltimore Burn Center and will be arriving at the Nashville airport. Haven, along with local representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, meets her there. Barbara Jean's arrival at the Nashville airport produces a display of pomp and circumstance worthy of a state visit. Marching bands, the Tennessee Twirlers precision drill-team, and local media all descend on the tarmac to attend the beloved singer's arrival.

The white robed, musical superstar exits the airplane and moves to a podium to address her constituency. So many fans are on hand to greet Barbara Jean that many are forced to remain locked in the airport terminal and watch the festivities through the glass doors of the structure. Despite her hospitalization, the singer shows no physical impairment. She does, however, appear to display a heightened sense of emotion that would fit right into a Tennessee Williams play about neurotic southern womanhood. After completing her appreciative remarks to the dignitaries and bands, Barbara Jean

decides to visit with the fans locked in the terminal. Unfortunately, she comes down with an attack of the vapors that cause her to faint. At this point, Barbara Jean's fans become uncontrollable. In a scene that foreshadows the film's ending, they overtake airport security and crash through the terminal doors.

Equal parts Evita Peron and Greta Garbo, Barbara Jean is more important in her fan's lives than traditional civic leaders. She is able to inspire adulation, yet she longs for a release from the burdens of her public role. Tired of celebrity, she wants to return to the remembered comfort of family and her childhood home. Barbara Jean's fans love her because her nostalgic songs make them feel good about themselves and speak of bedrock family values.

Several of the actors composed their own songs for the film. In contrast to actor Gibson's compositions for his character, Blakely's compositions for her character are less satiric of the country music form. In addition, Blakely had professional musical experience that provided Barbara Jean with greater musical skill. As a result, the character Barbara Jean is less an object of derision than Haven Hamilton. Barbara Jean, like most of the women in this film, is portrayed as a victim. Those woman who are not victims are either emotionally unstable or unfaithful to their lovers.

Barbara Jean has worked her entire life in pursuit of success. She is now a troubled artist and cannot seem to escape the unwanted responsibility of her idol status. Her husband Barnett (Allen Garfield) drives Barbara Jean onward. Barnett, played by the same actor who handled Bill McKay's media campaign in *The Candidate*, fulfills much of the same duties as a celebrity manager in *Nashville* that he did as a political operative in *The Candidate*. It is Barnett's responsibility to make sure Barbara Jean performs on

cue while he maintains her emotional stability and protects her public image. According to the film, running a political campaign is not much different from managing a singing career. In addition, the burdens endured by celebrities are just as onerous as those of political leaders.

Management

In the film, while Barnett serves as Barbara Jean's celebrity manager, John Triplette functions as Hal Phillip Walker's political manager. His job it is to recruit singers to perform at an upcoming concert in support his candidate. Triplette feels that movie stars have become too eccentric to connect with the heartland, whereas country music stars "have grass roots appeal." To that end, Triplette visits Barbara Jean in the hospital in order to ask her to perform at a Walker concert and political rally. Her husband Barnett dismisses Triplette out of hand, but will later do business with him.

Triplette moves on to recruiting Haven Hamilton. He attends a cookout at the singer's country ranch. Hamilton also rejects Triplette's efforts, but becomes intrigued by Triplette's promise that Walker will back Hamilton if he ever decides to run for governor of Tennessee. Haven's wife, Lady Pearl (Barbara Baxley) does not trust Triplette. She would prefer that Haven not publicly commit to a particular political leaning. Despite his wife's reticence, Hamilton agrees to participate in the concert if Barbara Jean will as well.

Triplette, like most political organizers in films of this era, is amoral. He recruits an extremely untalented, yet desperately ambitious singer, Sueleen Gay (Gwen Welles) to appear at a smoker held to raise funds for Walker. Sueleen thinks that this is her chance to break into show business, but sadly, that is not the case. Triplette coerces her into performing a striptease for the contributor's amusement. In yet another parallel to

political films of this era, *Nashville* links sexual degradation with politics. After the smoker, Triplette continues his recruitment until he secures enough performers to put on a show at a Walker campaign rally, to be held at The Parthenon, in Nashville's Centennial Park.

Assassination

The Parthenon is a massive structure designed to resemble the original Greek temple. Originally conceived as a temporary structure, The Parthenon went through a reconstruction into its present concrete state. The day of the concert begins inauspiciously with an argument between Barnett and Triplette about the huge "New Roots For the Nation" campaign banner that is on display above the stage. Barnett does not want his wife connected with overtly political imagery and threatens that they will leave. Triplette, however, threatens to go on the microphone and inform the audience that their beloved singer will not perform. The still angry Barnett acquiesces and the show goes on.

In the midst of a duet between Haven Hamilton and Barbara Jean, a series of crowd shots take place. These shots capture both extras and cast members. Throughout the film, a series of troubled, offbeat, or disconnected, minor characters have woven their stories throughout the five days leading up to the concert in the park. For that matter, all of the film's major characters are troubled, offbeat, or disconnected. The crowd scene alternates between the concert and an outlaw biker, an elderly man who has just buried his wife, a spaced out California chic, a taciturn soldier in uniform and a clean cut young man who constantly carries a violin case. The film establishes a sense of foreboding as Walker's limousine motorcade arrives in the park and deploys behind the Parthenon while he waits to go on. Walker's cargo van and the candidate are nowhere in sight. Time and again, we return to the loners in the crowd.

The film suggests a possible violent connection between the disaffected loners and the political candidate. It is interesting that the filmmakers do not feel compelled to emphasize this connection. Countless 1970s films and real world events, including the then recent attempts on the lives of Gerald Ford and George Wallace, conditioned audiences to expect the worst. Their expectations are confirmed when the man with the violin case opens it and shoots, not candidate Walker, but singing star Barbara Jean.

In response to the shooting of Barbara Jean, the characters in the film, even those that had been derisively depicted, rise to the occasion. A disconsolate Barnett carries his dying wife's body off stage for the final time, philandering lovers reconnect with family, and even Haven Hamilton achieves a moment of bravery. Hamilton, who is shot in the arm and has lost his toupee, comes to the microphone to reassure the crowd "y'all take it easy now. This isn't Dallas, its Nashville." The community does not panic and the lone gunman is subdued. Hamilton then turns the microphone over to an aspiring female singer who leads the assembled musicians in a heart-felt rendition of *It Don't Worry Me* and the film ends on a positive, redemptive note.

The replacement of the death of Barbara Jean for that of Walker is nicely representative of a symbolic replacement of celebrity for politician, but it is also a bit formulaic. The film attacks country musicians for reaching for easy sentiments, yet indulges in the often used, crazed-lone-gunman plot. In addition, the assassin's decision to replace Walker with Barbara Jean is thinly motivated. He obviously arrived at the concert with intent to kill somebody, most likely Walker. If he had wanted to kill Barbara Jean, he had had many opportunities. In the midst of her duet with Haven Hamilton, the killer suddenly alters his deadly priorities, leaving one to ask; why?

Production of the Film

Before *Nashville*, Altman had spent over a decade working in television before moving to films. In 1970, he achieved critical and financial success with the motion picture version of *M*A*S*H* (1970). Based on that success, United Artists offered him a country and western based screenplay entitled *The Great Southern Amusement Company*. Altman found the existing screenplay too conventional for his needs and proposed the creation of an entirely original script. Not knowing a great deal about country music, the director assigned screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury the task of visiting Nashville where she was to develop material for the script (Michner and Kasndorf 46-49).

Tewkesbury made several trips to Nashville where she encountered a number of characters and events that inspired similar incidents in the film. For instance, the character of Barbara Jean is noticeably similar to country star Loretta Lynn and the character of Haven Hamilton is similar to Hank Snow and Roy Acuff. Another film related occurrence took place during Tewkesbury's first trip to Nashville when she endured a two-hour traffic jam caused by a freeway accident. Inspired by her experiences, Tewkesbury eventually completed a script that became the backbone of the motion picture (Michner and Kasndorf 49).

Tewkesbury's original work contained the five-day story arc, eighteen of the twenty-four characters, location ideas, and a climatic death scene that Altman had asked for. The director added characters to the story, including Hal Philip Walker, and a greater emphasis on politics. Altman also rethought the film's climax. Originally, the aspiring singer Sueleen Gay was to commit suicide. Altman thought it would be better to stage a political assassination, but with a twist. He would replace the conventional target with an

unexpected victim. In the film, candidate Walker escapes assassination, but superstar Barbara Jean does not (Stuart 65).

Altman recruited a mixture of trusted regular performers from his past films as well as newcomers including Tomlin and Gibson, fresh off their success in television's *Laugh In*. Actors were encouraged to research their roles and to improvise lines. This choice, along with multi tracking of dialogue provided an unstaged quality to scenes. A more controversial choice involved allowing the actors to compose their own songs. Originally, the film was to use actual country standards, but Altman thought this would be inauthentic to the aspiring nature of the struggling characters. Musical director, and composer of some of the film's songs, Richard Baskin pointed out that this was not to be just a musical and concluded that "we wanted to allow the performers to express themselves in whatever music felt best to them (Michner and Kasndorf 49).

Songs serve an important part in the film. Some reveal character, *I'm Easy*, others emotional longing, *My Idaho Home*, others illustrate populist political beliefs, *200 Years*, and *Keep a Goin*. The political songs are all ironic in nature. Each proposes a populist ideal then undercuts its message. This is especially true of *It Don't Worry Me*, reprised by different characters six times within the film. The song alternates lyrics of hard times and affirmation such as, "And you may say that I ain't free, but it don't worry me" in a manner that can either be taken as a declaration of national resolve or a condemnation of a vacuous electorate.

Altman maintained that the film was not an attempt to denigrate country and western music, but it is hard to take him at his word. In the film, performers appear to be petty, their personas exaggerated, and their lyrics banal. Altman acknowledged that

established Nashville musicians were antagonistic to the film's music. The director, however, attributed their antipathy to bruised egos. Altman felt that the country and western musicians were not as angry at the inclusion of original songs as they were at the exclusion of their own individual songs.⁴

Most film critics favorably reviewed the original music in the film. On the other hand, *New York Times* music critic John Rockwell found fault with its quality. "I suspect that many of those who love country music will be bored or even annoyed by these songs, and will find it patronizing that Mr. Altman hasn't cared as much about music as he obviously does about acting" (A24).

Altman was not so much dismissive of country music as he was oblivious to it. The director admitted that he was not a fan and knew little about the musical genre. Altman maintained that the film was not about Nashville, but was rather a metaphor for his perspective on society. Altman used the music industry as a plot device in much the same manner that director Alfred Hitchcock used espionage in his films, as a vehicle to set the film in motion. The use of a musical subculture provided Altman a chance to channel his impression of 1970s America. According to Altman, Nashville's music scene, like the world of politics, offered the promise of success without commitment. Both institutions "keep blaring repetitive words" until no one can pay attention to the lyrics. The film indicts the "instant stars, instant music, and instant politicians" that were supplanting

⁴ Altman maintains that the Nashville musicians have come to embrace the film in recent years. See Robert Altman, "Exclusive Interview with Director Robert Altman," Commentary. *Nashville*. DVD. Paramount, 2000.

established, conservative Eisenhower politics as well as established, liberal Kennedy politics (Altman).

Critical Response

Reviews of *Nashville* were mostly positive. New York Times reviewer Canby labeled it “the movie sensation that all other American movies this year will be measured against” (A32). Canby complimented the actors, their original songs, and Altman’s direction, maintaining that he had escaped his reputation of a filmmaker who appealed only to critics. Canby, however, misread the film’s sardonic take on Middle America. He felt that the inclusion of songs such as Haven Hamilton’s rendition of *200 Years* did not patronize country and western fans because the film also “appreciates the song’s stirring beat and the vast earnest public for whom it will have meaning” (A32).

Time Magazine reviewer Jay Cooks thought *Nashville* to be “a splendidly gifted film, vibrant and immediate, with moments of true greatness” (67). Cooks also felt Altman to be fearless in his ambition to explore themes of contemporary American contradictions. According to Cooks, the film offered contrasts of workday energy versus moral deadness and respect for history versus a constant American need to mythologize (67). *Newsweek* devoted a cover story to the film, labeling it “one of the few Hollywood films as fresh as the morning headlines” (Michner and Kasndorf 46). *Washington Post* reviewer Arnold also referenced the current political climate. For him, *Nashville* was “a brilliant black joke on the seventies” (H1). Arnold’s opinion that the film’s content reflected Altman’s depressed view of life contrasted with *Christian Science Monitor* critic Sterritt’s view that the film’s final vision is at once hopeful, skeptical, and—above all—affirmative of the throbbing social rhythms that help hold us together (A29).

New Yorker film critic Kael was extremely enthusiastic about *Nashville*. After viewing a rough-cut version of the film, she called it “a radical, evolutionary leap” (79), and “the funniest epic vision of America ever to reach the screen” (84). According to Kael, the use of intertwined stories, the multi tracking of dialogue, and the actors’ freedom to work up their own lines and songs allowed the film to create a natural representation of real life. Kael felt that Altman’s sure handed direction made the difficult task of constructing this film look easy.

Kael went on to compare Altman to Goddard in his ability to fuse documentary, fiction, and personal essay. Kael also remarked on the metaphoric use of country and western stars as “symbolic ordinary figures” who become “more like political demagogues than artists” by their false insistence that they do not crave success (81). Finally, Kael remarked on the film’s caution against self-congratulation in the post-Watergate era. She noted that average citizens, just like the characters in *Nashville*, are just as capable of deceit as disreputable politicians.⁵

Fellow *New Yorker* reviewer Gilliatt was not as kind to the film, finding it technically masterful but intellectually simple, especially the climax that she felt to be an attempt to “tidy up loose ends” (104). In addition, Gilliatt felt that some of the improvised scenes dragged on too long (104). *New Republic* reviewer Kauffman also identified some “banalities of image” (22) in the film such as the stripper practicing in her bedroom in front of religious figurines. He felt that Altman was trying to be too ironic in these instances. Kauffman, however, praised *Tewkesbury*’s dialogue, Altman’s

⁵ Kael was an early champion of the film and was instrumental in rallying critical support in order to forestall difficulties in its ability to secure distribution. See Kael 79-84.

juggling of multiple stories, and the actor's performances. He also liked the film's depiction of the symbiotic nature of politics and show business (22).

Esquire reviewer Simon was a bit more negative in his assessment. The film had been trimmed from its original eight hours, to six, and finally to its present two-and-three-quarter-hours in length. Simon thought that the film was well done, but its drastic cutting had robbed it of character development. He felt that many of the actors provided quality performances but felt that the film lacked sufficient detail about the stories of the twenty-four characters. Simon, like Kauffman, also thought the film crude in its symbolism. According to Simon, the parallel between the "horse sense, half sense and nonsense" of Walker's speeches and Country and Western lyrics was too pat. He also found heavy-handed metaphorical significance in the final Parthenon sequence (34).

Conservative political columnist George Will tore into the film and its many enthusiasts. The columnist sarcastically reprinted glowing vignettes from various reviews in order to make them appear inane in their cumulative force. This is, ironically, the same technique used by Altman in his film to parody Middle American culture. Will did not think *Nashville*, as so many critics did, to be a metaphor for America, but rather a naked attempt at greed on the part of Altman. Will concluded that "*Nashville*' is to America what country music is to music—not a close approximation" (A23).

The last statement is ironic in that Will denigrated the music of country and western loving, Middle Americans, the very backbone of the modern conservative movement, a movement within which Will became a media star. Perhaps *Nashville* is not so much a metaphor for America as it is a litmus test. Liberals love it and conservatives

hate it. One can read the film in a number of ways. This is a tribute to Altman's work as *Nashville* is equal parts satire, drama, musical, and soap opera.

Replacement

In his book, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, Schulman delineates the 1970s emergence of the Sunbelt and the growing popularity of "Redneck Chic." According to Schulman, as the new south began to replace the northeast in population supremacy and in political power, its regional culture took on more influence. Among other cultural touchstones, an interest in football, stock car racing, and western attire became more popular. An important component of southern regional culture, country music enjoyed new levels of national appeal. Its message of conservative populism resonated with the public, as did its fashions and celebration of resistance to government. *Nashville* comments on the emergence of this new cultural force. (Schulman 114 -117).

The film attacks pomposity but reaffirms the need for community. Established media found it easy to be enthusiastic about the film because it parodied what mainstream media felt to be the false myths and inauthentic figures embraced by Middle America. This stance presupposes that no symbolic myths are contained in films set in New York City or Washington D.C. The fans of country music were less enthusiastic about the film because they recognized ridicule when they saw it.

It is to the film's credit that it did attempt to explore the populist ideals of Middle America. At this time ordinary leaders, or at least leaders who could pretend to be ordinary, replaced the imperial presidencies of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. The film also documents the crossover from a time when statesmen were preeminent in national political influence to a time of celebrity power. Charismatic cultural leaders like Merle

Haggard and John Lennon soon rivaled traditional leaders like President Ford and President Carter in national influence. This trend would continue into later decades as rock stars like U2's Bono began to influence economic policies for entire continents and film stars ran for public office. In fact, 1976 was the first time that Hollywood movie star Ronald Reagan ran for the presidency, an office he would achieve within the next decade. Eventually, in 2007, the trend would come full circle when former presidential candidate Al Gore achieved success in Hollywood by participating in the Academy Award winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).

Nashville attacks the new celebrity leaders as neurotic demigods who are no more worthy of public trust than mainstream politicians. The film locates the strength of the republic in the average citizen and a family of like-minded musicians. For a film that is so obviously cynical in its depiction of Middle American populism, it is interesting to observe its high regard for the lives of ordinary people who must endure coping with deaf children, dying spouses, and unrealized dreams. In the film, these characters achieve a measure of heroic stature through their perseverance. Only those who betray themselves, through greed, insincerity or lust for power are portrayed as unredeemable.

The film also is significant in that it resurrects the importance of the symbolically ordinary hero. In the past, political leaders assumed the mantle of prestige, as in *Wilson* (1944) and *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960). America has always embraced the political myth of the everyman, who remains untainted by the world, yet emerges as a leader. From the young George Washington, who refuses to lie after cutting down the cherry tree, to Abraham Lincoln who trained to become a modest country lawyer, the nation has embraced this myth. It does not make any difference if the image is not authentic; the

symbolic importance is quite real. Voters want to see themselves in their leaders. In *Nashville*, the musical leaders understand this and act accordingly. This film is very prescient in its understanding of the future of symbolically based populist politics. In the future, successful political leaders would understand how to use media to obtain celebrity. Conversely, successful political leaders would also know how to feign commonality, even if they possessed an oil business, a Hollywood agent, or a degree from Oxford University.

A final significance of the film is that of perspective. In response to over a decade-long bombardment of national crisis, the film reflects a replacement of outrage with ironic distance. From this point on, political films became more sardonic. This use of irony within these films represents a defense mechanism against the disappointment of constant political crisis. *Nashville* fits the tenor of its times in its contention that all political activity is a joke. According to the film, politically committed individuals must be either ignorant, conservative, country rubes or shifty, liberal, city slickers. In this sense, Americans, like minor characters within the film, were troubled, offbeat, and disconnected. Their only hope was to find a group of like-minded individuals, a community such as that achieved by the musicians depicted in *Nashville*.

Alienation

The film *Taxi Driver* (1976) offers little chance of finding communal salvation. Authorship of the film sprung from dark, psychological places. In 1972, aspiring film critic Paul Schrader was at a low point in his life. He had recently endured the breakup of his marriage, burdensome debts, a painful stomach ulcer, and the ill effects of excessive drinking. At one point, he even resorted to living out of his automobile. Schrader's depressive state was influential in the creation of his screenplay for the film *Taxi Driver*.

According to Schrader he was, “looking for something like the metaphor of the cab driver to express the loneliness and agony I was feeling” (Arnold B1).

Another influence on Schrader was his reading of the published diaries of attempted political assassin, Arthur Bremer. On May 15, 1972, Arthur Herman Bremer, a twenty-one-year-old busboy from Milwaukee shot and paralyzed third-party presidential candidate George Wallace. Bremer was an enigma. His personal diary, put into evidence at trial, revealed no ideological motivation for the crime. In fact, Bremer had stalked other prominent political figures including, Nixon, McGovern and Humphrey with intent to kill them. In the end, Wallace was merely an unfortunate target of opportunity. Bremer’s diary entries, including his frustration at not being able to get off a clean shot at Nixon during a presidential motorcade, convinced a jury that he was sane at the moment of his attack and that his motivation for the crime was primarily an attempt to seek fame (Bigart A1; Smith A1).

Schrader drew upon the Bremer diary as an organizational device for his screenplay. His protagonist was a Bremer-like character, who would narrate the film as he wrote events into his diary. Schrader’s inspiration led quickly to his writing a screenplay that took only twelve days to complete. The resulting script, however, did not go into production for three years. Many studios rejected the violent script until Columbia decided to take a chance on this unknown author. The production received the green light in 1975 thanks to its limited budget of \$800,000 and the attachment of recent Academy Award winning actor Robert DeNiro and of hot, new director Martin Scorsese, who was fresh off his successful production of *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974).

Schrader, raised as a Calvinist, and Scorsese, raised as a Roman Catholic, shared strict religious backgrounds. In fact, the young Scorsese had studied for the priesthood, only to rebel in later years and leave the church. An unmistakable religious symbolism is evident throughout *Taxi Driver*. This is especially true in the film's eschatological confrontation between the self-sacrificing Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) and the evil pimps he pumps full of lead.

Scorsese's formative years in New York City's Little Italy neighborhood, his religious upbringing, and his interest in illustration all influenced his future career. After graduating from the New York University film school, he worked in television, and then moved on to working for producer Roger Corman. Corman provided Scorsese with his big break when he assigned the young director production of *Box Car Bertha* (1972), a low budget movie that taught Scorsese how to make first-rate films on an inexpensive budget. Eventually Scorsese progressed to the direction of mainstream films that provided the success needed to obtain backing for *Taxi Driver* (Flatley 34).

Scorsese felt that he needed to make the film in order to explore his own internal psychology. The aimless nature of violence scared yet fascinated him. Scorsese also identified with the tormented lead character of his film and sought to explore his own, as well as society's psychoses. Altman used an entire community as a loosely drawn microcosm of American society whereas the more introspective Scorsese analyzed a single individual. According to Scorsese, the film was about "the outsider struggling for recognition" and the character Travis Bickle was the representative outsider (Flatley 43).

In the film, Travis is a lonely ex-marine with no past and little future. His former military status harkens back to American involvement in Vietnam and the recent fall of

Saigon, which had transpired a year before the film's release. Almost every serious filmmaker of this era was asked to comment on the influence that Vietnam had on his work. Scorsese answered that events such as Vietnam and Watergate had influenced his desire to see changes in America but maintained it was important to start with an understanding of individuals. "You begin by going into a microcosm, the best way is to start with a character, and then put him through scenes, through conflicts, that illustrate your theme (Flatley 43).

Scorsese and Schrader did not want the audience to identify with Travis, who in the film attempts political assassination, displays racist tendencies, and ultimately commits murder. In spite of this depiction, the filmmakers were surprised at audience identification of Travis as a hero as well as their enjoyment of the film's extremely bloody climax. The film ends with a violent shootout wherein Travis attempts to rescue a twelve-year-old girl named Iris (Jodie Foster) from a life of prostitution. The ending was so graphic that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) initially gave the film an X rating. The MPAA revised the film's rating to an R when the filmmakers altered the final print by de-saturating the color red visible in the blood seen spewing from the gun shot wounds sustained by Travis and his antagonists.⁶

The film's increased level of brutality mirrored that of American society. Throughout the 1970s, violent crime continued to escalate. The number of such crimes committed rose from 817,000, in 1971, to 987,000, in 1976. In addition, America became one of the most violent countries on earth, with a homicide rate of 9.1 per 100,000 in

⁶ Violence in media prompted concern for its psychological effect, especially on children. In 1972, the Surgeon General of the United States issued a report that found some evidence of a relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior in children. See Shales C1. For an account of de-saturation in *Taxi Driver*, see Arnold B1.

1976, compared to homicide rates of 2.4 in Canada and 1.3 in Germany. Perhaps the audience identified with Travis because they were troubled as well. Fed up with political and social crisis, they too wished for a “real rain” to wash the scum from the streets of America.⁷

Crazed Loner As Ironic Hero

The entire film takes place within the head of Travis Bickle as he narrates the story. Because of this, there is a possibility that everything in the film is the psychotic wanderings of a madman. At his trial, Bremer expressed self-absorbed fatalism rather than remorse for his actions saying, “Looking back on my life, I would have liked it if society had protected me from myself” (Bigart 54). Travis also expresses a fatalistic lack of control saying, “My whole life has been pointed in one direction, there never has been a choice.” If Travis is a microcosm of society, then all of society is fated to experience the same alienation. In the end, Travis, like Bremer, turns to violence, which ironically transforms him from a lonely assassin into a celebrity.

Travis is the archetype of the “crazed Vietnam vet” character that became familiar in numerous films including *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Rambo First Blood Part II* (1985). Travis is the quintessential troubled loner with vigilante tendencies. His only interests are in pornography, working and dispatching evil doers. It is interesting that Schrader assigned a former military status to Travis. According to the film, the insanity of a man personified the insanity of war.

⁷ For crime rates, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Crimes and Crime Rates, by Type: 1971 to 1980,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1981* (102nd edition) Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981: 173; and U.S Bureau of the Census, “Homicide—Victims and Rate, Selected Countries: 1976 to 1979,” *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1981* (102nd edition) Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981: 178.

Travis also expresses the rage then felt by many working class Americans who saw crime, high-energy costs, and inflation erode their chance at realizing the American dream. Travis, like the average Joe, works long hours, six to seven days a week, at a thankless job and rails against the dregs of society that rob life of meaning. This identification, along with the dynamic portrayal by DeNiro, is why the audience found the character so appealing. Just like the character Howard Beale in *Network* (1976), Travis is “mad as hell” and “not going to take it anymore.” He strikes out at perverse criminals and disingenuous politicians in a manner that the audience only wishes they could emulate.

Despite his faults, Travis is a likeable figure. When he first applies for a hack license, he states that he will go anywhere at any time. He will even go to supposedly bad neighborhoods, “I don’t care, it don’t make no difference to me.” Travis is unassuming and strangely nice, especially to campaign worker Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) who works at the campaign office of presidential candidate Senator Palantine. Travis likes Betsy because she is untouched by the filth of modern society. The film is very much about purification and redemption. The two female leads are idealized figures that Travis tries to rescue from their unclean surroundings.

It is interesting that the film equates the political world of Betsy and the prostitution of Iris. Both work for powerful men who use them to succeed. Betsy, however, is not as chaste as Travis would believe her to be; she is very good at marketing her candidate. When she lays out her projected campaign strategy for the senator, a fellow campaign worker remarks that “you sound like you are selling mouthwash,” to which Betsy replies “we are selling mouthwash.”

Candidate Palantine is a charlatan. He engages in the same facile rhetoric that Hal Philip Walker did in *Nashville*. “We meet at a crossroads in history, for far too long the wrong roads have been taken. The wrong roads have led us into war, into poverty into unemployment and inflation. Today I say to you we have reached the turning point.” The film depicts Palantine as being able to identify the central problems of the time, but unable to rise above reference to “crossroads” and “turning points.” In a manner similar to Palantine, President Ford identified the then current national problem of rampant inflation, but famously resorted to urging the wearing of symbolic Whip Inflation Now (WIN) buttons in an effort to address the problem. In this instance, national politics turned ironic as buttons replaced policy.

One day, Betsy notices Travis watching her at work but he quickly drives away, only to return a day later wearing a blazer designed to impress the ice princess. He wants to volunteer as a campaign worker, this despite the fact he has no real interest in politics. When asked what he thinks of Palantine, Travis admits that he does not know much about the candidate, but asserts, “I’m sure he’ll make a good president.” When asked how he feels about the Senator’s stand on welfare he says, “I don’t know the senator’s stand but I’m sure it’s a good one.” For some reason, Betsy agrees to go and dine with Travis. He recognizes her as another lonely person just like him. She is charmed. Travis is obsessed. Travis likes Betsy but hates her coworker Tom (Albert Brooks) because of his glib nature. Once again, in films of this era, campaign workers come in for a hard time as Travis challenges Tom to fight.

Travis becomes interested in politics for the wrong reasons. His obsession with Betsy causes him to root for Palantine, whom he starts to stalk. In a disturbing scene,

Travis picks up the senator at his hotel and assures him he is one of his biggest supporters. Travis says that he will tell everyone he knows to vote for the candidate. Despite obvious discomfort at riding in a common taxi, Palantine tells Travis he has “learned more about America from riding in taxi cabs than in all the limos in the country.” The candidate makes the mistake of asking Travis what is the one thing that bugs him the most in America, to which Travis responds with a diatribe about cleaning up the city: “It’s like the president should clean up this whole mess here. He should flush it down the fucking toilet.”

Palantine becomes noticeably uncomfortable while listening to Travis speak, yet fails to stray from his well-rehearsed talking points. Palantine assures Travis he understands his sentiments but tells him “it won’t be easy “and “we have to make some radical changes” to which Travis answers, “damn straight.” Little does the Senator know that, in the mind of Travis Bickle, he has become the scum that now needs to be washed away from the streets.

Travis insensitively takes Betsy to a porn show on a date and, as a result, their relationship ends. The next day he returns to the campaign headquarters, but Betsy will not see him. He enters the headquarters and, after a confrontation, warns her to get out of politics: “You’re in a hell, and you’re gonna die in a hell like the rest of them.” After Betsy’s rejection and encountering a violent racist passenger in his taxicab, played by Scorsese, Travis’ mental state rapidly deteriorates. He buys a cache of guns from an illicit gun dealer and begins practicing with them. Endless repetition produces proficiency at the quick draw as Travis challenges his image in a mirror with the ominous question: “You talking to me?”

Travis begins to exercise and changes his diet. He needs to be ready. Travis begins following Palantine to all of his campaign stops. Also at this point, Travis meets Iris and sublimates his interest in Betsy for an interest in her. This interest is not sexual but paternalistic. Travis wants to save her from her life on the streets. Finally, Travis is ready for action. He attends a Palantine campaign rally with intent to assassinate the Senator but woefully fails in his mission. When the secret service notices his presence, Travis runs away in fear. This is a rare filmic moment when an assassin fails in his mission. At this point Travis' wrath shifts from Palantine to Iris' pimp and he goes on a shooting rampage, eventually killing three men. Once again, the film equates politics with prostitution.

Travis survives multiple gunshot wounds, but ultimately succeeds in returning Iris to an innocent life in her hometown of Pittsburgh. Because of his sacrifice, Travis becomes a media hero. Later in the film, Travis reads a letter written to him from Iris' grateful parents while close-ups of newspaper clippings proclaim his good works. It is as if her past life of prostitution never transpired. The negation of past exploitation mirrored a mid 1970s desire to forget about recent political malfeasance. A second consequence of Travis' violent actions is that he finally impresses Betsy. He proves to her that men of action, as he fancies himself, are superior to men of rhetoric like Palatine. In the last scene, Travis returns to work as a cab driver and picks up Betsy as a fare. They exchange pleasantries and part as friends. All is well, at least in the internalized thoughts of Travis Bickle.

Disengagement

Taxi Driver is a political drama where the assassin is the hero. In thirteen short years, American films have gone from a complete unwillingness to address the subject of

assassination, to a film where a character based on the attempted assassin Arthur Bremer is now the hero. Even more significantly, one in which the audience can identify with the assassin. This is a complete reversal of standard plot development. The bad guy is now the good guy. *Taxi Driver* employs this reversal to express the then current, ironic detachment from politics. Travis is a microcosm of an alienated electorate who feel unable to control national events. Increasingly, Americans turned inward in their focus. Local issues replaced national issues as people became detached from civic involvement. In the end however, we do not fully come to understand the reason for Travis's detachment. His motivations seem to be an unfocussed rage. He, like Bremer, is expressly apolitical in his ideology. Kill them all.

A measure of American disengagement from civic life occurred in the response to the 1975 financial crisis that took place in New York City. At that time, the city of New York was in dire straits. A severe monetary shortage threatened to place the city in bankruptcy. At the peak of New York City's financial crisis, President Ford delivered a speech to The National Press Club indicating he would veto any bailout for the city to prevent its default. According to Ford, "There is a practical limit to our public bounty." This sentiment reflected the sentiment of the rest of the country. Only 42 % of Gallup Poll respondents felt that the federal government should provide funds to bail out New York.⁸

It is interesting to note how Scorsese depicts the city of his birth and how it mirrored popular perceptions of the Big Apple. Unlike Altman, who was an outsider looking in at a community; Scorsese was an insider looking out at America. In Altman's

⁸ For a transcript of Ford's speech see, "New York—'Unwanted and Abandoned,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 October 1975: A20. For poll results, see Carroll A1.

film, many characters are disingenuous demigods, but the actions of a few good characters redeem the city. In contrast, the characters in Scorsese's film are grifters, rootless loners, and exploiters. Even its minor characters are constantly arguing and fighting while seen on the periphery of the action. Both films use vehicular movement to propel action; however, *Nashville* sets its action on the open highway whereas *Taxi Driver* resides within the claustrophobic confines of an urban jungle. Most scenes in *Taxi Driver* take place at night, rendering New York City as a dark, barren wasteland. This film is not an ode to the romanticism of a major American metropolis, but rather an exposition of its rotten core.

The film also expresses a rejection of, and a wish to escape, the past. Travis attempts to flee his demons in his taxicab. At the same time, Americans were increasingly moving away from their history established in the older cities of the northeast and the rust belt. Consequently, those cities were losing political power and influence. People were moving to Sun Belt cities like Nashville that promised a brighter tomorrow economically, climatically and psychologically.

In addition to its demographics, America also changed its perceptions of political outsiders. The legitimacy of established political leaders further eroded as presidents became the object of derision. Those outside the Washington beltway were considered more authentic because everyone inside the beltway was perceived to be rotten. In this film, there is a complete rejection of the possibility of effecting nonviolent change within the established system. Nor is there a sense of a redemptive community that can band together to provide relief from crisis.

In America at large, confidence in progress and social change eroded to the point that individuals turned inward in their attempts to make sense of their lives. This inward focus extended to political issues as well. The stature of political leaders declined and the health and superiority of the American economy was not to be trusted. When leaders projected that the economy would soon turn around if we would just Whip Inflation Now, the electorate took it as a cynical manipulation of their hopes and dreams.

Critical Response

Christian Science Monitor reviewer Sterritt called *Taxi Driver* a “nasty masterpiece” that captures Travis’ desperation, but wallows in excessive gore (A23). *Wall Street Journal* reviewer Boyum acknowledged the pane of glass metaphor of the taxicab windshield as a means of looking at the lower depths of the modern city. He complimented the camerawork of Michael Chapin for his evocative depiction of New York City at night and the lush compositions of renowned composer Bernard Herrmann who had died shortly after completing his final film score. Boyum however, found fault with Schrader’s script, contending that it violated the film’s point of view by showing scenes that Travis could not possibly know about. Boyum noted the film’s connection with the story of Arthur Bremer. According to Boyum, both are “apolitical rebels” whose only motivation is the desperate need to achieve notoriety (A11).

Both *Nashville* and *Taxi Driver* were prescient in their understanding of this desperate need on the part of some disturbed individuals for attention. *Nashville* predicted the celebrity assassination of John Lennon and *Taxi Driver* actually motivated the attempted political assassination of President Ronald Reagan. Violence, celebrity, and politics seem to go hand in hand in American history. John Wilkes Booth, slayer of President Lincoln, was himself an actor driven to murderous action. The difference in the

modern era is the apolitical nature of assassins. No longer solely motivated by frustration at political events, men like Bremer seek fame for its own sake.

Newsweek critic Kroll called *Taxi Driver* a “traffic pattern of despair, fear, and frustration” and favorably compared the film to the work of Dostoevsky’s underground man in its examination of loneliness. In addition, Kroll drew comparisons to director Sam Peckinpah’s depiction of film violence. “The climactic blood bath is post-Peckinpah in its choreography of repressed forces blasting their way from deep inside a thwarted personality” (82). Kroll, along with most critics, also praised the intense performance by DeNiro.

New Yorker critic Kael gave a positive review to the film. She thought Scorsese’s “appetite for pulp sensationalism” made him the appropriate director to capture “underground resentment” of American men (82). According to Kael, “No other film has ever dramatized urban indifference so powerfully” (83). She also liked Scorsese’s ability to draw quality performances from the cast, especially Sheppard and DeNiro. On the other hand, Kael found fault with Herrmann’s “over-wrought” musical score and Scorsese’s tendency to call attention to his directorial style (85). Kael cited the scene where the camera pans to an empty hallway while the rejected and dejected Travis talks on the phone to Betsy as particularly overdone because it aped strategies used in Antonioni films (85).

New York Times critic Canby gave the film a mixed review. He thought that Scorsese’s direction was fine, and DeNiro’s acting excellent, but disliked Schrader’s script, calling it simplistic. According to Canby, “At the end you may feel a bit cheated, as you do when the solution of a whodunit fails to match the grandeur of the crime”

(A35). *Time Magazine* critic Cocks was more negative, charging that the film was an overly familiar case study. He disliked how the film attempted to take a slice of life and turn it into full-scale melodrama. Cocks concluded that social commentary was beyond Scorsese and that the director could only resolve conflict through forced violence (Cocks 62).

New Republic critic Kauffman liked the film even less. From the opening shot of steam coming out of a manhole, he thought the film was metaphorically simplistic. Schrader comes under explicit criticism. Kauffmann accused Schrader of imitating the themes of French director Robert Bresson, catering to the audience, and tacking on a fake ending devoid of meaning. He acknowledged the ironic intent of the film but questioned its message. According to Kauffmann, the conclusion implies either that Travis will kill again or that he achieves a miraculous cure. Kauffmann thought Herrmann's score to be "elephantine" and the acting inadequate. He labeled DeNiro superfluous, saying actor Robert Blake could have done as well, and Jodie Foster as "only minimally effective." In his review, Kauffmann underestimated the abilities of DeNiro and Foster and betrayed a bit of ageism, criticizing the 33-year-old Scorsese as one of the new, young Hollywood directors who seeks to replace the forced clichés of old Hollywood tinsel, yet only achieves "facile naturalism." (Kauffman 18).

A New Generation Has Gone Forth

Scorsese was part of a new cohort of filmmakers who adopted a different view of America. Mediated by media versions of reality, they assumed a more self-reflexively cynical view of the world. For instance, Hal Ashby addressed sexual politics in *Shampoo* (1975), Paddy Chayefsky, who was not so new, addressed media practices in *Network* (1976) and John Badham addressed white ethnic aspirations in *Saturday Night Fever*

(1977). For them, the realm of current social events was dramatically ironic. In order to appreciate their films, the audience required some prior knowledge of how their themes fit into film history and an understanding that what that was projected on the screen was not to be taken literally.

This is not to say that all films of the era were so cynical. *Rocky*, released in the same year as *Taxi Driver*, was very upbeat and *Star Wars* (1977) presented a mythic hero journey similar in theme to *PT109*. Perhaps this accounts for their massive box office success. Political films always seem more willing to tackle darker themes. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle embarks on one of the most negative hero journeys in narrative history. He is the anti-Rocky Balboa or anti-Luke Skywalker in his pursuit of righteousness. Despite their differences, however, it is significant that all three films present the redemption of society through violence. Whether it be boxing, destruction of a death star or vigilantism, America still valued a strong hand when dealing with perceived threats to its way of life.

The stories of *Rocky* and *Star Wars* are more reassuring than the nihilistic *Taxi Driver*. This duality represents the schizophrenic nature of 1970s America. On the one hand, the nation proudly celebrated its bicentennial. On the other hand, it fretted over political, economic, and social shortcomings. *Taxi Driver* relates to the political climate of its time in its expression of an unfocused rage over these failings, the resulting diminution of political involvement, and a wish for escape to a better world free from duplicity.

CHAPTER 7
INTROSPECTION: *THE SEDUCTION OF JOE TYNAN* (1979)
& *BEING THERE* (1979)

But I am in politics, I am politics.

--The Seduction of Joe Tynan

In 1976, Jimmy Carter pledged that he would never lie to the American people. Carter's perceived sincerity helped him to win a close presidential election over the incumbent Ford. Carter, like the fictional Hal Philip Walker, was southern, homespun, and ideologically hazy. Unlike Walker, his oratory was not bombastic. At first, Carter was a popular president. His attention to detail and his plainspoken style reassured America. The new president promised to balance the budget, reorganize the executive branch, deregulate the airline, banking, and communication industries while at the same time helping the less fortunate. In an effort to move past the national split over Vietnam, Carter immediately granted a limited pardon to those who resisted the draft (Schulman 124-125).

Carter remained popular into 1977. In a Gallup Poll conducted in March of 1977, 75 % of respondents stated that they approved of the president's job performance. Unfortunately for Carter, his approval rating would never be as high again. Problems of inflation and energy shortages eroded his popularity. Carter proposed extremely detailed plans to deal with national problems. These comprehensive plans confused and alienated

the public. Despite Carter's efforts, economic and energy problems persisted throughout the remainder of his presidency. By 1979, Carter's approval rating had declined to 29 %.¹

Once again, in the view of the American public, a political leader proved not to be all he seemed. Ironically, the very traits that had propelled Carter into office proved to be his undoing. The public voted for Carter because of his mixture of intellect and unassuming style. Disenchantment with Carter grew because of his insistence on the engineering of policy detail and his inability to inspire hope. Eventually, Carter would fail in his 1980 bid for reelection, losing to charismatic film actor Ronald Reagan.

Industry Trends

By the first year of the Carter presidency, the film industry had completely shaken off the slump of the early 1970s. According to *Variety*, the year 1977 was the most profitable in film history with box office revenues topping over \$ 2.3 billion. The most popular film of that year, *Star Wars* was a science fiction saga set in outer space. The film depicted a popular rebellion against an evil empire. In a manner similar to most political films of the era, representatives of the government were evil and the rebels were heroes ("1977: Biggest Year in Film History").

Star Wars became a blockbuster because of its innovative special effects and dynamic action sequences, as well as because of its idealized view of society's potential

¹ In an October, 1977 survey, 35 % of respondents indicated that inflation was the most important problem facing the country, followed by unemployment at 24 % and energy at 18 %. See "November 10, Most Important National Problem, Interviewing Date: 21-24 October 1977, Survey # 986-K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977*, v2. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 1219; For job approval ratings, see "April 8, President Carter, Interviewing Date: 18-21 March 1977, Survey # 970-K," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972 -1977*, v2. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978: 1036; and "June 29, President Carter, Interviewing Date: 22-25 June 1979, Survey # 131-G," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1979*. Wilmington DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1980: 190.

for good. This is in contrast to films about the political process, which by their very nature, question national motivations. It is interesting that *Star Wars* takes place in a different time and location than 1970s America. This choice allows the film to offer an uplifting message to an American public that was tired of bad news. In outer space, if not always in the terrestrial realm, the good guys always win. The film expresses faith in a metaphysical “force” that is responsible for maintaining social harmony. Inclusion of a metaphysical force for good reconnects the film to American core beliefs in self-sacrifice and communal good. The force is available only to an elite group of pure individuals. At the same time, destruction of the empire requires the communal contribution of many different individuals. In *Star Wars*, social change entails great difficulty, but ultimately it is achieved.

In 1977, heroism in space trumped heroism on earth. In that year, Tom Laughlin attempted to release *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977), the fourth film in his very successful *Billy Jack* series detailing the exploits of a metaphysical martial arts expert. The character Billy Jack, like the Jedi knights in *Star Wars*, champions rebels against those holding power. The film is an updated version of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* that substitutes manipulation of the nuclear power industry for manipulation of the hydroelectric industry. Despite the *Billy Jack* series’ past success, film distributors regarded *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* of so little potential interest to their audiences that it never had a regular theatrical run.

A more successful film about nuclear energy is the environmental action thriller *The China Syndrome* (1979). In a stroke of good fortune for its producers, the film was released concurrent with a highly publicized environmental accident at the Three Mile

Island nuclear power facility in Pennsylvania. As in *All the President's Men*, and *The Parallax View*, this film depicts journalists to be more reliable guardians of the public's interest than corporate officials. *The China Syndrome* also continued a trend, established in many political films of the decade, toward the depiction of cover-ups and ineffectual leadership. Films of this period also began to address the Vietnam War in greater depth. *Coming Home* (1978) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978) addressed the psychological impact of military engagement upon the individual, and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) cast the conflict as a national journey into psychosis.

Charisma

The Seduction of Joe Tynan (1979) is about a journey into neurosis. It is about covering up one's true ambitions, both public and personal. The film is similar to and derivative of *The Candidate*, a film that preceded it by seven years. Once again, the trappings of power seduce a handsome young senator to betray his integrity. Once again, he must make a choice between career and family.

In both films, the lead character is a much more charismatic figure than the actual political leaders of their time. In the 1970s, neither Nixon nor Carter could generate as much star power as the fictional McKay or Tynan, not to mention the actors portraying their respective film roles. Robert Redford, who starred in *The Candidate*, was a highly celebrated film actor and Alan Alda, who starred in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, was an established actor in the extremely popular television series *M*A*S*H*.

It is not surprising that the stars of these two political films were so charismatic. Both films were star-driven vehicles, packaged by the lead actors, and designed to appeal to a ready-made fan base. What is surprising is that so many of the political leaders of the decade, Nixon, Ford, and Carter, were not very charismatic. These leaders came from an

earlier generation than that which matured in this period. Their public images favored Fords over Lincolns and peanuts over fancy cuisine. In this sense, the leaders of the 1970s were out of step with the times. As the children of the television generation matured, the face of politics would literally change. In future decades, fictional characters like Joe Tynan and Bill McKay would become more representative of what a successful political leader looked like.

Not only is Tynan charismatic, he is effective. Unlike McKay, or the real life Carter, Tynan's service in the senate provides him with the inside knowledge required to manipulate the system in order to further his political agenda. As a result, Tynan does not suffer from policy gridlock or malaise. He is the very model of what the electorate desires in a leader. This was especially true of times of economic, energy, and foreign policy crisis like those experienced by America the late 1970s.

The Seduction of Joe Tynan is unique in the 1970s in its portrayal of a political insider as lead character. In this entire study so far, no lead political character begins a film in governmental office and successfully remains there for the film's duration. Most are either seeking office, forced by circumstances to assume the burden of office, or subjected to investigation while in office. Many films focus on those working in opposition to government. Almost uniformly, those already in power are evil or irrelevant.

Joe Tynan possesses only a touch of evil, and as such, presages political depictions contained in films of more recent vintage. Despite his flaws, Tynan has some redeeming qualities. He is as a champion of civil rights and loves his family. In the film, Tynan's political liberalism defines him as capable of redemption. The ends justify the means.

This film suggests that, although the political system around him is evil, strong men like Tynan can bend it to their will in order to the benefit of society.

Ambition

The premise of *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* is that ambition can undermine friendship and family. The film opens with a montage of inner-city children experiencing the patriotically inspiring monuments of Washington D.C. In ironic contrast, the next scene transitions to the nearly empty United States Senate Chamber where Tynan delivers an impassioned speech to empty chairs and a few bored senators seen reading newspapers or conversing. “How many children can this nation afford to let go hungry?” Tynan asks, knowing that his histrionics go unnoticed. This scene establishes Tynan as a clever, yet caring professional, the other senators as political hacks, and confirms real life concerns that the political leaders of the 1970s do not care about gridlock. It is interesting to contrast Tynan’s senate chamber speech with Jefferson Smith’s in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. The earlier rendition is both impassioned and earnest while Tynan’s speech is impassioned yet self-aware. Tynan knows that politics is also show business and that he is really performing for the media.

Tynan is astute at the business of politics. He promises his political rival and mentor Louisiana Senator Birney (Melvyn Douglas) that he will not oppose the appointment of Supreme Court nominee Anderson. Senator Birney, who is getting old and a bit senile, wants the man appointed so that he will not have to run against him in a state election. The film establishes a collegial relationship between the conservative Senators Birney and Kittner (Rip Torn) and the liberal New York Senator Tynan. They meet in private basement offices where Kittner and Tynan engage in a bipartisan food-eating contest while discussing politics with Birney. This competition establishes a connection

between Tynan's appetites for food and for power. Later scenes will expand Tynan's appetites to include sex.

Tynan's chief of staff, Francis (Charles Kimbrough), wishes that his boss had tried to extract more from Birney in exchange for noninvolvement. Once again, the unelected political staffer fills the role of villain. Soon, Anderson's racist past catches up to him and Francis sees great potential. It seems there is an old kinescope of the Supreme Court nominee saying, "In my heart, I have never accepted integration and I never will." No one thought that the kinescope still existed, but rumors of its discovery now had surfaced. An African American community leader meets with Tynan to discuss the film. He threatens to release the nominee's statement with or without Tynan's support. When the community leader leaves, Tynan indicates that he does not think that the nominee is now a racist to which Francis replies, "He is to them and also it's a hell of an opportunity." Still, Tynan states his reluctance to, "betray a friend for the sake of opportunity."

In an effort to seek more proof as to the nominee's racist leanings, Tynan travels to Louisiana. Once there, he joins southern labor leader, Karen Traynor (Meryl Streep) in search of the kinescope copy. They fly in an airplane, piloted by Traynor, to a remote soybean field where Tynan attempts to persuade a black woman congressional candidate to give him the kinescope. The title of the film implies that Tynan is the one seduced, but throughout the film, he is the one who persuades people to act against their best interests. The candidate points out that she risks a great deal by aiding Tynan and that he stands to gain far more by this political gambit. As a minority candidate in 1970s America, she must avoid racial issues that could compromise her anticipated Democratic Party campaign funding and organizational support. In spite of her reluctance, she agrees to

turn over the kinescope to Tynan who then promises to remember her favorably when he ascends to power.

Traynor and Tynan obtain the kinescope and eagerly view its damning content. A flirtatious relationship begins to take hold. In the senator's office, he kisses Traynor and confesses, "I think I'm infatuated with you, you remind me of John F. Kennedy. If you looked behind his eyes you could see his intelligence, his wit, his compassion, just like you" to which Traynor asks, "Did you make a pass at Kennedy?" After bedding Traynor, the couple eats in bed, discuss political strategy, and engage in a food fight.

The film portrays Tynan's marital indiscretion as romantically humorous. Other politicians do not fair as well. Uncouth Senator Kittner provides comedic relief when caught receiving oral sex under his desk in his senate office--the ultimate under-the-table political deal. Later, Kittner's wife sees him dancing lasciviously with a young woman at a political cocktail party. Tynan advises Kittner's wife to go on vacation together with the senator in order to reestablish marital bonds, but she responds, "why would I take a vacation with him, I won't even drink out of the same cup as him." The film differentiates between charismatic and non-charismatic leaders. Tynan is more suave than his ill-mannered colleague is and for this reason, alone he is a more legitimate leader.

Domestic Conflict

The film offers little new about the seductive nature of politics, but it does provide a new perspective on the personal life of political leaders. Several scenes incorporate family dinners and domestic life. Tynan has a tryst with Traynor, but he still loves his wife. Just as Tynan is the model charismatic politician of the late twentieth century, his wife Ellie (Barbara Harris) is the model political wife. She is attractive, loyal, and intelligent. Unfortunately, for Tynan, she dislikes politics. An early exchange establishes

their relationship when Ellie complains about campaigning with her husband as he makes the same boring speech everyday. According to Ellie, “I may not like politics, but I love you” to which Tynan replies, “but I am in politics, I am politics.”

Later a prying reporter tricks Ellie to reveal her distaste for politics. This revelation angers Tynan who asks, “How could you let her get you to run down politics like that?” Her error precipitated a domestic squabble. In the same story, Ellie also reveals having received psychiatric treatment in the past due to a miscarriage experienced while campaigning for her husband. Ellie, now recovered from her illness, works in New York City at a prominent psychoanalytic clinic. This too causes friction in the marriage because Tynan would like her to give up her career and move to Washington to be a dutiful senator’s wife, and presumably, forestall temptation from Traynor.

The film sets up a dichotomy between homemaker and career woman; however, the film favors the more glamorous Traynor. Traynor has many traits that Tynan finds captivating. She wears suits, has long hair, smokes cigarettes, flies an airplane, has a father who is a career politician and speaks glowingly of the impact Tynan will make with his opposition to Anderson. Tynan feels conflict between his commitment to his wife and his attraction to this modern, feminist woman. The fact that Ellie also wants a career and Traynor already has a husband further complicates the matter. By this point in time, American women were moving into careers in ever-greater numbers as a matter of personal choice as well as their family’s economic necessity. As in the film, adaptation to new gender roles did not always go smoothly.

The Ellie/Traynor split in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* reflects the 1970s cultural battle fought over woman’s role in society. Ellie represents the woman as homemaker

whereas Traynor represents feminism. In 1972, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to state legislators for ratification. At first, the amendment enjoyed easy confirmation. By 1973, thirty states had ratified, but the amendment became bogged down after the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion. By 1977, thirty-five out of a required thirty-eight states had ratified the amendment. Ultimately, no more states would back the amendment and it failed to gain ratification. By the time of the film's release, the legislation was moribund, but still a subject of intense debate (Schulman 168-169).

In *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, the conflict between career woman and wife plays out neatly for the always-fortunate Tynan. The senator gets to romance a Kennedyesque woman without promise of commitment. Tynan can leave Traynor at any time without fear of losing of her support in their efforts to thwart Anderson's Supreme Court nomination. Reconciling with his wife proves to be more difficult for Tynan, but not impossible. Ellie finds out about her husband's affair and reacts with anger. Tynan assures Ellie that everything he cares about in his life was a result of their joint efforts, implying that he values domestic life more than politics. Eventually, she too will acquiesce to his wishes. *The Seduction Of Joe Tynan* reflects ambivalence toward the changing gender roles. Tynan is attracted to Traynor's power, but in the end chooses the safety of traditional marriage.

Traynor might be a dalliance for Tynan, but his true love is wielding political power. Senator Birney once again asks Tynan not to block Anderson's nomination. When pleading does not work, Birney threatens to bottle up all of Tynans future legislation in committee. Birney's threats do not faze Tynan. He skillfully grills Anderson during

confirmation hearings before the Senate. Anderson claims not to have made the racist remarks, allowing Tynan an opening to ask Anderson if he would like to see film of the event. The revelation of a smoking gun causes a Watergate-like sensation within the Senate chamber and generates huge media attention for the telegenic Tynan.

Tynan's crusade against Anderson receives attention from the party hierarchy. He obtains an opportunity to give a nominating speech before the Democratic National Convention. The senator knows that if this speech goes well, so will his political future. Before his speech, Tynan meets backstage with Ellie. The film takes a melodramatic turn as Tynan asks Ellie for another chance and promises to pay more attention to his neglected family. Tynan's stated motivation for this promise is his love of Ellie, but it could also be his need for the show of public support from his political wife. The couple then reconciles while exchanging knowing looks during Tynan's career making performance.

Ambition is Tynan's other mistress, a mistress that Ellie can never defeat. The film suggests that such seductive political leaders will, and should, rise to power. Their legitimacy to govern derives from an ability to manage events rather than ethical or ideological purity. *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* offers the vision of an effective, liberal politician in marked contrast to the perceived malaise of the Carter presidency. In this sense, the film represents a wish to return to an era of strong leaders and a trust that they will do what is best to improve society.

Creative Influences

Alda, who wrote the film's screenplay, wanted to create a motion picture that would address the tension between private life and success. The film and television actor was familiar with this tension due to a lifetime spent in show business. Alda recognized

the many parallels between show business and politics. His successful run in M*A*S*H often required that he fly back and forth between a sound stage in California and home in New Jersey in order to visit his wife Arlene and their three children. Alda was aware of the strain this arrangement placed upon a marriage. According to Alda, “most men feel that family kind of works on its own steam and you can keep the family on the self for a while, while you do this other, so-called, truly important work of you business, your career.”²

Alda’s professed awareness of gender issues led him into the political arena. Alda became very committed to campaigning for the ERA. During a ten-year period, he took time out from his acting career to appear in local churches and town halls lobbying for ratification of the amendment. In the key state of Illinois, he addressed the state legislature, only to encounter catcalls. Alda’s experience in politics left him with a negative impression. According to Alda, “I’ve met too many people in state legislatures who didn’t even seem especially inspired by the founding fathers (sic); if they’d ever heard of them.” In addition, Alda was discouraged to learn that some legislators offered to trade votes in exchange for participation in parades or for arrangement of sexual favors (175-176).

Alda expresses his distaste for political hacks in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*. In the film, Tynan offers encouragement to a veteran senator who is in the midst of losing a roll call vote. The vanquished senator rejects Tynan’s encouragement saying, “I won’t be here next session, I’ve had enough. After a while, you start to forget what you’re here for

² Alda wrote several episodes of M*A*S*H from 1973 -1982, but this was his first screenplay, see Kaye D1.

and then getting clout and keeping it is all there is. You start lying to your constituents, your colleagues, to everybody, and you forget what you thought you cared most about in life.” In this film, even the insiders want term limits.

Alda stated that *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* was not autobiographical, but his own experiences certainly must have influenced the film’s content. In his memoir, Alda recounts his life-long struggle with his mother’s psychiatric disorder. Her infirmity progressed from eccentric episodes as a young mother, to mental illness, and finally to her death while Alda worked on M*A*S*H. Alda’s experience with his mother’s illness certainly informed his sympathetic characterization of Ellie’s despair at being a political wife as well as with Senator Birney’s early stage dementia (171-174).

Critical Reaction

Newsweek Critic David Ansen thought the film to be “intelligent and beautifully acted” (62). *Christian Science Monitor* critic David Serritt gave the film credit for making useful observations on politics (A19). *Washington Post* critic Judith Martin labeled *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* “a rare film of subtle political satire” that refuses to rehash the story of a politician lusting for success, instead choosing to tell a more complicated story of managing success (A29). According to Martin, the senator’s dual nature was fascinating. The senator campaigns against the Supreme Court nominee despite acknowledging the man is not a racist. In addition, Tynan is immoral, not because of traditional notions of sin, but because he is not torn between wife and mistress and would like to keep the support of both (A29).

Other reviews were not as positive. *Time Magazine* critic Frank Rich acknowledged Alda’s breakthrough performance and the work of actors Streep, Douglas, and Torn, but found Alda’s script to be overambitious. According to Rich, the script

contained, “an exhausting round robin of ethical and personal conflicts for its hero” (56). In contrast to Martin, Rich thought the conflicts and their resolution predictable and dated. Rich also thought director Jerry Schatzberg’s use of “stale details” made the film look like a rehash of 1950’s political dramas (56). *The New Yorker* critic Veronica Geng also disliked Schatzberg’s direction, especially what she considered to be clichéd shots of hats and confetti at the Democratic National Convention and the too pat concluding scene of Ellie signaling her reacceptance of Tynan by twitching her mouth and holding a paper flag (89).

New York Times critic Janet Maslin felt that the film tried to achieve simplistic solutions to complex problems. In one scene, Tynan is busy preparing for a possible presidential campaign, and then suddenly returns home to tend to the problems of his teen-aged daughter without an explanation as to how the campaign could spare him. Maslin also notes how implausibly easy it is for Tynan to resolve the situation between his wife and mistress without massive repercussions. Most interestingly, Maslin points out the misnomer contained in the movie’s title. According to Maslin, Tynan is not passive enough to be seduced, nor is he obsessed enough to care only for political life (C6).

New Republic critic Stanley Kauffman found *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* interesting because it dealt with a different sort of political life. He applauded its focus on the day-to-day reality of life in office. According to Kauffman, most political films begin with campaigns and end with elections; few pick up the story after that point. Up until this time, few films depicted the consequences of victory on the public and personal lives of politicians (25).

Dual Nature

As Kauffman noted, *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* is unique for its time in portraying the home-life of politicians. Until this period, in film and real life, the private affairs of leaders remained somewhat obscured. A tacit agreement existed between the press and the powerful that insured circumspection in private matters, but the glare of media gradually penetrated the wall of confidentiality. The public craved information about their leaders and cultural icons as never before. The August 1977 death of musical icon Elvis Presley resulted in a massive wave of book publishing, memorabilia sales and even house tours of his mansion, all devoted to knowing the real Elvis.

The need to know about private lives gradually extended into politics as the public took interest, as never before, in whether their president lusted in his heart or how the first lady viewed important national issues. Past first ladies had conducted televised White House tours and attended state dinners, but in this era, they moved from their husband's shadows to being co campaigners. The lives of Rosalyn and Jimmy Carter now became newsworthy. On a positive note, increased familiarity brought the public closer to its leaders. On the other hand, increased familiarity eroded the ceremonial dignity of public office.

Tynan espouses a belief in family values and almost half of the film deals with his relations with his son, daughter, and wife. He and his wife Ellie struggle to balance career and private life in a manner familiar to the increasing number of two income American families of the decade. This novel insight into domestic politics might account for Kaufman's favorable assessment of the film. Tynan is a political animal as well as a family man.

As Martin maintained, Tynan did possess a dual nature; in the film, he professes to love his family, but conducts an extramarital affair. Despite his wife's distaste for politics, Tynan induces Ellie to return to his side when he requires her to be on display in public life. After his affair with Traynor, Tynan returns to his wife, but at some cost to her emotional well-being. Ellie does not want to be a political wife. She wishes to pursue a career in New York, but she will not be able to do so if her husband achieves higher office in Washington.

A second facet of Tynan's dual nature reveals itself in his political life. Just as Tynan experiences ambivalence between his mistress and wife, so too does he experience a dichotomy between liberals and conservatives. Tynan promotes high profile liberal issues in public, but spends most of his quality time with conservative colleagues. In his personal life, Tynan has a dalliance with the wild side of life and returns to a more conservative lifestyle. In politics, Tynan reverses this choice. Despite his word to the contrary, Tynan quite willingly rescinds his promise of noninvolvement to Senator Birney. The fact that he does so in the stated cause of furthering civil rights is an interesting aspect of the film. The film, ironically, depicts Tynan as a hero for his opposition to Senator Birney. This forces the audience to ask, if Tynan can so readily abandon his mentor, will he not also abandon the cause of civil rights when it becomes politically expedient?

Although Kaufman thought the film unique in its lack of cynicism, the film does contain a number of weighted comparisons. The issue of racism makes Anderson a very easy target for Tynan. In addition, conservative Senator Kittner is impossibly uncouth, while liberal senator Tynan remains suave, even while besting Kittner at their gumbo-

eating contest. Senator Birney approaches senile dementia while Tynan remains mentally sharp and even sympathetic toward the elderly politician. Kittner and Birney also make convenient foes for Tynan. Their personalities are no match for Tynan's charisma; therefore, their political positions must be suspect. Perhaps it would be more interesting if the filmmakers had included less clear-cut choices between competing political factions.

Tynan also escapes blame for compromising his integrity. According to the film, political pressure compels him to rescind his political promises, his wife's shrewish lack of commitment to politics makes him seek another woman, and his lover is so captivating that he cannot resist her charms. Finally, the fact that film and television star Alda portrays Tynan seduces the audience into identifying with the senator. The film implies that politics is a realm controlled by those with the countenance of movie stars rather than by those who possess the ability to govern.

The Me Decade

The Seduction of Joe Tynan indicts a prevalent attitude in what has derisively been called "The Me Decade." The popular perception has come to be that the 1960s were a period of altruistic social activism and the 1970s a period of excessive self-interest. Others contend that to view the 1970s as devoid of political involvement because of a decline in mass-movement politics is incorrect. According to Michael Nevin Willard, those who label the decade as apolitical suffer from 1960s era nostalgia or historical amnesia. Willard contends that the decade "was immersed in conflict" as "the system of political accountability and the administrative intervention in (and oversight of) the

economic and social institutions that made industrial society possible were taken apart and reassembled.”³

The Seduction of Joe Tynan shares the popular anti-Me Decade position. In the struggle between what is best for the individual versus what is best for the community, Tynan certainly favors his own self-interests. The character continually indulges his various appetites without concern for others. In addition, the senator avoids paying the price for any of his actions. Ironically, the worse Tynan behaves, the more he succeeds. For example, even though Tynan goes back on his word to the conservative wing of his party, Senator Kittner still glowingly introduces him at the national convention.

Tynan is not the only self-centered character. His children pout over meal selections, his wife complains about submitting to an interview, his chief of staff jealously guards access to him and his mentor refuses to step down from the Senate despite encroaching senility. In the film, conformity to social norms is not valued when it gets in the way of gratification. The film is ambivalent on this point however, at once condemning self-interest and rewarding characters who put themselves above the needs of others.

Interestingly, the only truly altruistic character is labor lawyer Traynor. For this, she pays a price. This symbolic, career woman maintains integrity by walking away from her love affair with Tynan and returning to a more staid relationship with her husband. On the other hand, the symbolic traditional woman Ellie chooses to remain at her husband's side, but ironically, will now have to embark on a public career. The Tynan family must leave its home in New York and go on the campaign trail. The film calls into

³ For a discussion of opposing views on relative levels of political awareness in the “Me Decade,” see Willard 182-183 and Schulman 193-199.

question the bedrock nature of the family as the fundamental American social unit. Tynan returns to his wife and children, but none of his family's issues have been resolved.

The end of this film is much different from *The Candidate*. Tynan suffers from marital malaise but not from political malaise. Here, the film's solutions are a bit simplistic. Tynan is definitely not apolitical and unlike McKay, has a plan of action. One gets the sense that he will succeed in fulfilling his political ambitions. He will suffer momentary remorse over compromising his personal integrity, but will survive unscathed. In politics, as in sausage making, it is best that one not question the attainment of results.

The self-indulgent characters in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* are perhaps a more genuine depiction of the American people than displayed in previous political films. A democratic form of government promotes self-interest so it should not be surprising that the motivations of American citizens are not always altruistic. There has always been a duality in the American psyche, a conflict between individual and community. This was especially so in the uncertain transitional period of the 1970s. In the words of a popular Fleetwood Mac song of the era, "You can go your own way, but don't go away" (Buckingham). The dual nature of the film incorporates a chastisement of the politics of self-absorption along with an acknowledgement of the inherent fallibility of political leaders.

Changing Channels

The film *Being There* (1979) takes self-absorption to the ultimate degree. The main character of the film Chauncey (Peter Sellers) has no thoughts of his own except those acquired through endless hours watching television. Chauncey is a blank slate and absorbs whatever attitudes others project on him. Those who encounter Chauncey seem

extremely gullible. When Chauncey talks about gardening procedures, they assume that he is speaking in metaphor. Seeing themselves mirrored in Chauncey's responses, they think him profound.

Chauncey is so proficient at spouting perceived metaphors that he acquires a reputation as an economic sage. Eventually Chauncey develops into a potential presidential candidate. This very cynical film reduces democracy to the absurd. According to *Being There*, the electorate is easily convinced to back any leader capable of parroting their thoughts. It makes no difference if the leader does so with or without awareness of their own actions. This is a harsh indictment of politicians and of voters; ironically, it came at a time when the political process became more transparent. Thanks to investigative journalists and increased media attention during the decade, people found out more about their leaders, maybe more than they really wanted to know. At the same time, political communication strategies became much more sophisticated and manipulative.

Chauncey has spent his entire life as a gardener in the employ of a wealthy Washington businessman. He has never learned to read or write, drive a car, and has never left the businessman's townhouse. He has no social security number, or paper trail. Even his clothes are not his own. Chauncey wears old suits donated from his employer. The seemingly autistic Chauncey spends every minute he can viewing television. Chauncey learns all of his life lessons from the tube including such mundane activities as exercising and shaking hands. The film attacks the banality of popular culture at every turn, suggesting that America has become a nation of video obsessed idiots.

This was not a new complaint. In 1961, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Newton Minnow addressed the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) on the need for television to serve the public interest. In his speech to the industry executives, he labeled television “a vast wasteland.” This sentiment resonated with many intellectual and cultural elites who thought the masses needed paternalistic protection from their own worst impulses.⁴

In addition to government officials like Minnow, even veterans of the television industry’s “golden age” of critically acclaimed live productions chose to attack the medium. In 1976, former television screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky’s film *Network* (1976) deconstructed the myth of broadcast news credibility. In the film, the industry’s instinct for profit corrupted the journalistic mission of a network news program turning it into an entertainment program. Of course, Chayefsky was swimming in the same pool of entertainment while he was criticizing television. If an entertaining film, like his *Network* could serve to educate the audience, could not an entertaining news program do the same?

Network also contained the quintessential popular response to a decade of frustrating social and political transitions. In the film, a network news anchor screams, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” Pressure from the broadcast industry drove the news anchor to insanity, a characterization that implied that all things influenced by television were in danger of sliding into madness. The film *Being There* adopted a similar dismissive view of modern media culture. The film also implies a desire to return to a supposedly ideal age of high culture. Note that most scenes take

⁴ Minnow continues to criticize the television industry and to advocate increased public service requirements. See Jones 3-8.

place within a stately mansion and are augmented by symphonic music on the sound track. Throughout the film, the chaotic modern world only intrudes into the characters' lives through the television screen or during Chauncey's brief trek through a Washington ghetto. This film is positively Socratic in its political stance. According to the film, the masses are as unworthy of power as are the plutocrats.

The Rich, They Are Not Like Us

When "the old man" expires, Chauncey loses his status as gardener and must move out of the businessman's brownstone. He exits the house for the first time in his life, not to symphonic music, but to a jazz-fusion rendition of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss. A more traditional version of this work was used in *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968) to herald in the birth of a new age of humanity in outer space. Here, Chauncey emerges to what has become an inner-city ghetto. He begins walking the streets of Washington. When confronted by a youth gang, Chauncey attempts to use his television remote control to change the channel.

For Chauncey, television is more real than reality. After wandering around Washington for a day, Chauncey happens upon an image of himself displayed on a large screen television on display in a department store window. Chauncey is so interested in his own image that he absentmindedly backs up into traffic and is hit by a limousine that belongs to Eve Rand (Shirley MacLaine), the wife of prominent businessman Benjamin Rand (Melvyn Douglas). Actor Douglas seems to have specialized in portraying elderly men of power who succumb to old age or illness. In *The Candidate*, *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* and here he plays a role that symbolizes a connection between established power and decrepitude.

Seeking to avoid litigation, Mrs. Rand offers to take Chauncey to her mansion in order to allow her husband's doctor to examine him. She offers Chauncey a drink and asks his name. When he says his true name "Chance the gardener" while choking on alcohol, Mrs. Rand takes him to say Chauncey Gardiner. It will be the first in a series of misunderstandings of what Chance/Chauncey has said. Because Chauncey is dressed in his former employers' expensive suit, the Rands jump to the conclusion that he must be a successful executive. While talking over dinner, Chauncey tells his hosts that he had to leave his house. The Rands mistake this statement to mean that he has lost his business due to a financial reversal. Rand expresses sympathy for Chauncey and states his contempt for the government's harsh treatment of business leaders.

Being There depicts the upper class as extremely dense. In the film, the wealthy make an easy target. Rand is obviously not part of the middle class nor does he care about their basic freedoms. The film trades on both liberal and conservative fears that Washington fat cats have gained control of the nation's economy and act as its kingmakers. In this sense, the film reflects the anti-Washington populism that helped Carter, and later Reagan, to achieve the presidency. Carter began his campaign as an unknown personality upon which the electorate could project its hopes and aspirations. Reagan was more of a known political commodity who embraced many positions that Rand would have admired. Interestingly, the public did not view Reagan as a plutocrat. He was able to project a populist persona that resonated with voters.

The Wise Fool

Rand is dying of Aplastic Anemia and having Chauncey around serves to lift his spirits. When the President of the United States (Jack Warden) pays a visit to discuss national affairs, Mr. Rand insures that his new friend Chauncey is there as well. The

single joke of the movie is that no one except Mr. Rand's physician, Dr. Allenby (Richard Dysart), ever realizes that Chauncey is simple minded. Dr. Allenby, as a man of science, serves as a Socratic observer. He questions events but does not intrude upon their outcome. The president, along with Chauncey, joins Mr. Rand in his massive library to discuss the nation's business cycle. The president solicits advice on his proposal to improve the economy. Rand tends to disagree with the president and asks his new friend Chauncey what he thinks.

After a long pause that is taken by the other men as careful deliberation, but more likely to be incomprehension, Chauncey replies. "As long as the roots are not severed, all is well and all will be well in the garden." To this response the president looks confused but Chauncey continues, "In a garden growth has its season, first comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter and then we get spring and summer again."

The president and Rand are still confused until Rand concludes that Chauncey must be speaking in metaphor. Rand interprets Chauncey's statement as a comparison between the cycles of nature and the American business cycle. Rand's conservative heart loves the idea that neither requires tampering. When Chauncey assures them that there will be growth again in the spring, he literally means in a real garden--not a metaphorical one. At this point even the president begins hearing what he wants to hear and considers Chauncey's analysis "refreshing and "optimistic." Chauncey is the ultimate political pundit, capable of spouting authoritative-sounding predictions in convenient sound bite packages. The film suggests that real life political commentators are no more aware of economic reality than Chauncey and that they march lemming--like toward embracing fashionable trends of thought.

Soon Chauncey becomes a media celebrity. The financial reporter for the *Washington Post* calls him for a clarification of his relationship to the Rand owned First American Financial Corporation. Unfortunately, Chauncey is busy watching television when the call reaches him. He tells the reporter to talk to Rand instead of him, and puts the receiver down. The reporter takes this action as evidence of Chauncey's laconic nature and mastery at "playing his cards close to the vest." Ironically, Chauncey's unwillingness and inability to articulate thoughts gains him even more credibility with the media. The less he says the smarter he seems.

According to theological scholar Peter Phan, the concept of the wise fool has been a staple of both western and eastern philosophy. With every advance in human existence, most cultures have experienced nostalgia for a simpler, non-empirical path to wisdom, a path where the wise are foolish and the foolish are wise. The prototypical wise fool was Socrates. In his rhetorical conversations, Socrates feigned ignorance with his supposedly superior foes until his innocent questions gradually undermined their philosophical positions. Other examples of the wise fool include the Zen Buddhist concept of "holy madness" that leads to enlightenment and the Christian tradition's emulation of "Christ the Fool" who faithfully surrendered himself to the benevolence of higher power (730-753).

The wise fool entered the world of politics with the establishment of the medieval court jester, a comedic performer who could savagely mock the powerful, yet felt no fear of retribution. The idea of wise fool reached its fullest expression in the Renaissance, typified by the character of Don Quixote, a man tilting at windmills. Phan sees the Renaissance as a time of transition between the Middle Ages and modernity and

compares it to our own. According to Phan, periods of transition require mechanisms to “hold tensions together” whether it is between rationality and irrationality or between wisdom and folly (746).

In times of crisis, the American republic has often embraced the leadership of holy fools, or at the very least of wise innocents. According to this line of thought, providence chose George Washington over the more experienced Jefferson and Franklin to be the father of his country. Born in a log cabin, Abraham Lincoln wrote his lessons on the back of a shovel. He then emerged from relative obscurity to lead the nation through the civil war. On a more dangerous level, Senator Joe McCarthy reported knowledge of far reaching Communist cold war conspiracies revealed only to him. All of these widely believed myths belie the true nature of much more complex men. In times of transition, people seek the reassurance of enlightenment.

The 1970s were a period of transition between the postwar liberal consensus and the conservative ascendancy under Reagan. This period required mechanisms to bridge the gap between eras, and modern holy fools such as Chauncey Gardener filled that role. The character of Chauncey, like the Renaissance court jester, or hugely successful 1970s comedian Steve Martin, obtains license to poke holes in the foibles of the modern world through his foolish wisdom. Excuuuuuuuuuuuuuse me!

Media Reality

Chauncey draws the attention of the producers of a national television talk show. They offer him a chance to appear on the program, an offer to which he readily agrees. When told that more people will tune in to see him in one night on the talk show than have witnessed all of Shakespeare’s plays, Chauncey innocently asks “why?” once again displaying the filmmakers’ bias against television.

Once on the talk show, Chauncey continues to speak of gardening. Others mistake this as political metaphor. The host maneuvers Chauncey to question the president's competency asking him "do you feel that we have in your words a very good gardener in office at this time?" At this point in the film, there is a cut to a disgusted president. Chauncey eventually agrees that the nation needs a lot of gardening, producing even more apoplexy in the president. One word from a total unknown on a talk show undermines his entire economic policy. Soon after Chauncey's critical appearance, the president begins to experience sexual impotence due to increasing anxiety over his national image. Once again, the film contains a connection between sex and politics at a most elemental level. Those with power are able to perform; those who are weak are not able to perform. Politics is all about potency.

Chauncey's punditry extends to foreign relations. He and Mrs. Rand attend a party given for the Russian ambassador. Chauncey escorts the now infatuated Mrs. Rand with the blessings of Mr. Rand. At the party, a senator informs the guests that the ever more famous Chauncey is both a lawyer, a doctor and speaks multiple languages. A book editor offers Chauncey a contract to which he replies "I can't write." The editor takes this as a witty observation on modern life and he offers the service of a ghostwriter to which Chauncey replies, "I can't read." The film repeatedly attacks the elitism of the upper class, but it also contains inherent elitism of its own by suggesting illiteracy among the great-unwashed masses.

Rand grows ever fonder of Chauncey and in preparation of his death begins transferring shares of stock in his company to him. Rand also encourages his wife to sleep with Chauncey, but the asexual Chauncey claims that he only "likes to watch,"

meaning watch television not sex. Mrs. Rand, however, takes this to mean that Chauncey wishes to watch as she pleasures herself. Ironically, she experiences her peak sexual experience. In sex and in politics, he who governs least governs best.

Rand's disease progresses and he dies. The film ends at his funeral where the president commemorates Rand with the man's own words. In the ultimate straw man argument he is quoted as saying, "I have no use for those on welfare, no patience whatsoever. But if I am to be honest with myself, I must admit that they have no use for me either." As the president speaks, six pallbearers take Rand's coffin up a series of steps to his crypt. The grey old men plan for the nation's future leadership. They want to replace the sitting president because they agree that to have him run for a second term would be a "disaster." After discussing a couple of options for potential replacements, they land on Chauncey.

The grey old men express whispered concerns about Chauncey's lack of a past, but conclude that this lack could be an asset in politics. "A man's past cripples him. His background turns into a swamp and invites scrutiny." The men agree that Chauncey would be perfect for the job; he has no record on issues that could be held against him and after his appearance on the national talk show, his approval rating was an incredible 95 % positive.

The faceless kingmakers agree that this is why they must implement Rand's final wishes and back Chauncey. While they negotiate the fate of the nation, Chauncey walks off to a nearby pond. He straightens a little shrub tree then begins to literally walk out onto the water. Here again we see the holy fool. Chauncey does not sink as he moves forward on the liquid surface. Chauncey tests the water's depth by placing his umbrella in

to the hilt while the president quotes Rand's final observation that "life is a state of mind."

Who are we to trust? According to the film, media is a tool of Fascism, the upper class is dim-witted, and the average citizen is easily swayed. Democratic institutions do not safeguard against despotism and rationalism bows to the fool. Of course, this film, as is the case with many political films, is didactic in nature. It captured a general unease with the current state of affairs and recommends increased scrutiny of all social institutions. The film also promotes the need for a philosopher king who could rise above the self-absorbed materialism of capitalist and the media obsession of the masses.

Production History

Being There was a collaborative effort of three individuals: author Jerzy Kosinski, director Hal Ashby and actor Peter Sellers. Kosinski, a childhood survivor of the Holocaust, immigrated to the United States in 1957, where he studied Sociology at Columbia University. Eight years later, he published his first and most successful novel, *The Painted Bird*, based on his own experiences as a homeless, mute child escaping the Nazis in his native Poland. The novel established Kosinski's international reputation as an author, but came to haunt him in later years. Polish authorities reacted to the publishing of *The Painted Bird* by accusing Kosinski of national slander. Later, in 1982, they accused Kosinski of plagiarizing all of his fictional works including *Being There*. Kosinski denied these allegations and many prominent authors rose to his defense (Corry D1; Rothstein A10).

Kosinski wrote *Being There* in 1971 as a commentary on the influence of television and celebrity in America. Kosinski was ahead of the curve in his understanding of media culture in America. (The final release of the film in 1979 might put it a bit behind the

curve) Kosinski saw celebrity as devoid of depth. “It is based on appearing as a man of importance. The question asked is not ‘is he a good man?’ it’s what circles does he move in?” According to Kosinski, Martha Mitchell, the wife of discredited Attorney General John Mitchell, was similar to Chauncey Gardiner because, “the more pathetic and sick she was, the more of a celebrity she became” (Harmetz C18). As further evidence of the vacuous nature of celebrity, Kosinski also referred to a survey that indicated 88 % of the voters who cast ballots for Republican presidential candidate Pete McCloskey had done so because he seemed sincere on television rather than because of their understanding of his political position on the issues (C18).

Soon after publishing the novel, Kosinski received a cable from Peter Sellers indicating his intense interest in portraying the character of Chauncey. Over the years, actor Sellers had acquired a reputation for his ability to disappear into his film roles, an ability that made him similar to and perfect for the portrayal of a cipher such as Chauncey. Sellers went so far as to pretend to be the character every time he chanced to meet Kosinski in public. Eventually, Kosinski began to receive reports that several Hollywood producers were soliciting scripts similar in plot to his novel. He then decided to sell a screenplay of his work with the caveat that Sellers receive the lead role in the film (Harmetz D1).

Sellers, along with Ashby, brought the project to Lorimar in 1978. Ashby had a career as a successful film editor before moving to the director’s chair. He had created several films tinged with sociopolitical commentary including *Shampoo* (1975) dealing with the self-centered narcissism of a Los Angeles hair dresser, *Bound For Glory* (1976) the story of folk singer Woody Guthrie, and *Coming Home* (1978) dealing with re-

assimilation to society after horrific Vietnam wartime experiences. Ashby was a good fit as director. He understood the delicate hand required to interpret Kosinski's metaphorical work. "The balance is just incredible. It could be ruined in a second if you let it become too broad. Peter's character is a sponge." (Harmetz D19).

Transition from novel to film required changes. In the novel, Chauncey's youthful attractiveness accounted for some of his ability to transfix those around him. In the film, Chauncey is much older due to his portrayal by Sellers. In addition, the setting of the film moved from New York to Washington thus emphasizing the political aspects of the story. In one sense, Sellers was the perfect actor for the role based on his sponge-like ability to inhabit characters, on the other hand a younger actor would have rendered Chauncey less idiot savant and more a cutting commentary on political figures who display the vacuousness of game show hosts. The setting of the film, whether in New York or Washington, reflected an ingrained American suspicion that government was beyond the control of the average citizen.

Christian Science Monitor film critic Sterritt applauded the changes from book to film. He found the book to be an "icy vision of human experience" whereas he thought the film more nuanced because of its more empathetic portrayal of Chauncey. Sterritt credited Ashby's "controlled style" and Seller's versatility as an actor for creating this empathetic response (A19). *New York Times* critic Maslin called the film "a stately, beautifully acted satire," but found Ashby's "elaborate, solemn, approach" to the material wore thin. Maslin also maintained that the plot becomes repetitive because every situation Chauncey encounters tends to resemble one another. According to Maslin, the film began to drag (C20). *Washington Post* critic Arnold went even further, calling

Kosinski's original novel "extravagantly over-praised" and the film over reliant on the suspension of disbelief (D1).

For a film about the pernicious impact of media, *Being There* is remarkably conservative in visual style. Ashby's direction is devoid of the quick cuts and altered framing found in many television programs of the period. Before becoming a director, Ashby was a highly accomplished editor. For this film, he assumed a very solemn, almost literary, approach. The pacing fits the approach of literary satire, but not necessarily that of film. If the filmmakers wanted to demonstrate that television was leading the nation on the road to Fascism, it might have better served their purpose if the film exhibited more evidence of how this transition would occur. Instead, Ashby repeats the same themes over and again. Ashby does insert footage from actual television shows, but they seem to be part of Minow's uninteresting, vast wasteland rather than seductive examples of modern media. It requires a suspension of disbelief that such content could warp minds.

Being There is cynical to the extreme. Big business, the media, and the electorate all come under attack as either Fascists or self-absorbed fools. According to the film, there is not merely a conspiracy to cover up wrongdoing, but rather the entire government is superfluous. There is no trauma in this picture as there was in earlier political films. Fascism is the status quo. The president of the United States willingly reports to the Rand estate when summoned. He is an employee of the shadow power elite and his legitimacy derives from their blessing. Leaders assume their positions of power by appointment. They are not strong or bright, but rather infirm and easily duped by their own ego. Society does not change through violence or the ballot box but by the whim of a cabal.

The film also condemns the electorate. The age of media obsession results in vacuous leaders who have nothing to say. The American people wish only a blank slate upon which to project their dreams. This film, as so many political films do, refers back to the work of Capra. In *Meet John Doe* (1941), a similar wise fool captures media attention because of his perceived innocence and encounters manipulation by powerful business leaders. Fears of economic ruin, and of creeping Fascism, influenced Capra's film. *Being There*, produced in similarly complex times, also represents fears of a corporate takeover of government during a period of malaise. The difference between the two films is that Capra's film ends with John Doe's awareness of subterfuge, whereas in *Being There*, the wise fool remains innocent and ironically assumes power. This contrast reflects depression-era optimism versus 1970's era defeatism.

In both films, the means of manipulating the public is achieved through mass media. *Being There* is extremely critical of television. The mere act of watching seems to warp Chauncey's mind. Interestingly, watching television does not destroy the minds of the other characters. They are quite capable of self-delusion without its pernicious effects. Chauncey is least self-delusional; he makes no pretense of knowing a great deal about anything except gardening. The others are so self absorbed that they cannot get past their own ego driven lives. In fact, Chauncey is more aware than the others are as to what the new order will be and quickly learns the skills required of a skilled television performer.

American media project an image of the nation as a future role model for the world. According to the film, Chauncey represents that future. In it, Americans will not have to face hard political choices. They, like Chauncey, will trust banal media celebrities to lead them. In the film, Chauncey intently watches the children's television program *Mr.*

Rodgers' Neighborhood, a program designed to help young children feel good about themselves as they naturally are rather than as harshly critical society ordains them to be.

There is a parallel here to *Nashville*. The slogan "New Roots For a New Nation" is very similar to Chauncey's gardening advice. Both films speak of a return to the garden and at the same time attack the insincerity of modern political rhetoric. When Chauncey speaks of harvesting in the fall, television viewers believe him to be profound. Unlike *Nashville* however, no redemptive community counterbalances insincere members of the group. This lack of hope serves to dampen potential for political involvement among the film's viewers.

Being There conveys a sense of inevitability to the triumph of plutocrats over democratic ideals. This could be because of Kosinski's horrific wartime travails. Like fellow compatriot Polanski, he was a survivor of the Holocaust and experienced America as an immigrant, seeing America, as he feared it might one day become. Writer Kosinski however, was not solely responsible for the thematic content of the film. Director Ashby also contributed to the cabalistic nature of *Being There*, including such subtle visual information as the Masonic iconography depicted on the front wall of Rand's funereal crypt that implied an unseen hand ruled the land.

The film suggests that technology in all of its forms including medicine and media is more of a burden than a boon to society. Further, the film maintains, as do most films, that money is the ruination of the political process. In spite of this belief, expressed in film after film, the real life American electorate never marshals the will to divorce money from politics. A love-hate component exists within class warfare. The film depicts the mean streets of Washington D. C. and contrasts them with pleasantness within the Rand

mansion. The sedate nature of the film encourages viewers to identify with the upper class while, at the same time, fear its control.

In many films, politics is seen as a battle between youth and age. This is not true in *Being There*. Significantly, the age of Chauncey was altered to make him older. In fact, everyone in the film is old. This too suggests a belief in the inevitability of the status quo. The film also encourages political apathy. The only character to decipher Chauncey's true nature is Dr. Allenby. However, he does nothing to prevent Chauncey's increasing influence. It is very unlikely that no one else would have recognized Chauncey as a fool, but his true nature remains unrevealed. This inclusion reflects a profound distrust in a political system where a man of marginal celebrity can assume ultimate power.

The film suggests that rational citizens have opted out of the political process and that this is the logical course for others to follow suit. The process is beyond redemption. *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* and *Being There* represent a trend toward introspection. In each, the filmmakers find the political process in a hopeless state and advocate avoidance of its seductive charms. Based upon a decade-long experience of political scandal and failed government policies culminating with the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis this is not an unreasonable conclusion. In November of 1979, Iranian militants took 53 Americans hostage after storming the United States embassy in Teheran. Once again, the nation experienced televised images of American failure in response to crisis.

The Iranian hostage crisis dragged on into the following election year and helped Ronald Reagan win the presidency. The film *Being There* presages the election of Reagan. In his campaign rhetoric, Reagan reassured the electorate that it was morning again in America. He was very clever in allowing the public to project a wish for a

brighter tomorrow upon his persona. Reagan was also efficient in his ability to break with issues of political irrelevance and cover-ups. These traits enabled him to reconnect with past political film heroes, Fonda, Stewart and Robertson, instead of the then current, vacillating, heroes of 1970s political films.

Being There and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* are self-critical films. Each contains a knowing cynicism of a system ruined beyond repair. Each contains flawed, self-obsessed characters that serve to indict governmental institutions. For the most part, liberals create films about the political process. This is especially true of political films produced in the 1970s. Something exists within the nature of liberal philosophy that promotes self-examination, and even self-recrimination. Time and again, political films exposed the negative aspects of public life. Not only did they attack traditional liberal targets of the upper class, they also attacked mass culture. In this sense, the filmmakers abdicated the political playing field to those who could provide a more positive outlook.

The tendency toward self-examination can make for great art, but often promotes political quiescence. Conservative filmmakers, on the other hand, tend to work in more celebratory genres including war movies, westerns, and science fiction sagas. The decade of the 1970s was a time of transition from confidence to uncertainty. Political films of this era reflected this transition and set the stage for a conservative ascendancy. In addition, 1970s films established the template for future filmic themes of ironic political irrelevance and of ingrained political conspiracy that would remain unchanged throughout later decades.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

This study examined motion pictures as artifacts of American history during a twelve-year-period from 1968 to 1980. Films are appropriate historical documents because they are instruments of mass communication. The word mass implies a need to appeal to a large commercial audience. American filmmakers must respond to market forces. In order to show a profit, they must identify and replicate the values, attitudes, and aspirations of a mass audience. It is for this reason that motion pictures serve as a unique record of the time period of their creation. This study examined how political films have replicated changing American values and how they have functioned as critics, forecasters, and mediators of political reality.

The period from the late 1960s to 1980 was important in film history and national history. The 1960s saw the end of American postwar consensus and the emergence of political divisiveness as new social movements challenged the status quo. The period from 1968 to 1980 saw a corresponding upheaval in the American film industry. A new production model more amenable to experimentation replaced the Hollywood studio system. Films enjoyed unprecedented freedom to confront political norms. Ongoing traumatic events including the war in Vietnam, student unrest, crime, Watergate, race relations, economic stagnation, inflation, and the Iranian hostage crisis challenged America to reexamine its national direction. Political norms are not static. They change over time as new realities replace old beliefs and political films from 1968 to 1980 helped record these new realities.

This study asked a number of questions about political films. First, how did films mediate political reality for audiences? What rituals and fables were considered important and how did they change? Second, what were the political critiques put forward in the films? Were they effective, did they change, and why? Third, what were the important political values of the age? Did they change, why and how? Fourth, to what extent do the films of the period from 1968 to 1980 conform to historical reality and other accounts of historical reality? Fifth, to what extent did the films influence future political values, critiques, events? Lastly, what are the implications for future research based upon these findings?

Rituals of Power

Nimmo and Combs identify rituals of power as popular fables that are included in films. These popular fables mediate political reality by instituting learning through fantasy. For example, the populist fantasy contained in 1930 films was a response to the great depression and the commitment fantasy contained in the 1940s films was a response to potential involvement in World War II. Each film cycle offered instruction in how to react to national crisis. According to Nimmo and Combs, *Casablanca* mediates the reality of war by recasting it as an opportunity for redemption. In the film, redemption was achieved through commitment to a noble cause (110). How then did rituals of power develop in political films from 1968 to 1980?

Early period films recalled fantasies from past decades. *Wild in the Streets* relied on the alien fantasy often found in 1950s films. The film is ostensibly a camp send-up of the 1960s generation gap, but concludes with the hippie ideal gone horribly wrong. A band of hedonistic young people use rock music to manipulate young minds and take over the government. The film recast student protests as nihilistic exercises in self-indulgence.

Eventually, absolute power corrupts absolutely, resulting in the establishment of concentration camps. It seems that too much democracy can be a bad thing. The film obviously responded to fears of destruction from within. *Wild in the Streets* is comparable to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a similar allegory for power run amuck. Interestingly, the film could also be read as an allegory for the establishment run amuck. In the film, established political leaders turn to violence when they cannot cope with the shape of things to come. In this sense, *Wild in the Streets* presented a youth culture fantasy that was similar to the adolescent rebellion contained in a great deal of 1960s popular music.

Films of political conspiracy, cover-up, and assassination were never more popular than during this era. This era spawned the ritualized "crazed Vietnam" vet as disaffected loner that would recur throughout later decades. The assassins of *Taxi Driver*, *Executive Action*, and *Nashville* recast psychopathic behavior as indictments of the entire American system. According to these films, the aliens among us were symptomatic of a deeper national sickness. The fear was that this sickness could manifest itself in anyone at any time, even within ourselves. To this day, assassination films seem to fascinate audiences. Viewers often embrace conspiracy fables as a means of searching the past in hopes of finding out where things first went wrong. For them, it is somehow comforting to blame present troubles on past atrocities committed by a convenient scapegoat or representatives of a broader malaise.

Similar to the alien fantasy was the shadow government fantasy that became extremely popular after the Watergate revelations in mid decade. Films like *Walking Tall*, *The Parallax View*, *Being There* and *All The President's Men* recast political history as a struggle between indigenous populations and malevolent aliens who might as well have

been from outer space. The word Chinatown became a metaphor for a spiral of silence. According to these films, no one from the big city, big business, or CREEP could be trusted to leave America unconquered. This fear traces back to the founding of the republic when small states feared the power of larger states and frontier states feared original colonies. In the 1970s, America became more and more interconnected by interstates and mass media, but remained distrustful of power wielded from a distance.

The preoccupation with conspiracy caused Nimmo and Combs to refer to the 1970s as a decade of doubt and drift, and Cook to refer to a decade of lost illusions. Certainly, there was a lot of malaise in 1970s political films. However, there also were countervailing fantasies that offered alternatives to doubt and drift. Fantasies of commitment were popular within this era. *Medium Cool* recast 1960s era radicalism as a left-wing version of World War II. In this case, the film's political backdrop changes from prewar Casablanca to the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Its protagonist begins the film as an existential camera operator who is unwilling to stick his neck out for anyone. Later in the film, he experiences a change of heart. His personal relationship with a mother and child inspires him to choose engagement over the safety of ironic distance. Welcome back to the fight.

All the President's Men is an old-fashioned celebration of investigative journalism. The committed journalist fable has long been a staple of Hollywood films. In the film, the little people defeat the big people through their dedication to journalistic ideals. The Watergate affair was recast as a struggle to preserve the constitution of the United States. This film turned the alien fantasy on its head. In this case, the "aliens" fail to take over the country thanks to the efforts of journalistic heroes and the decision of low-level

secretaries and bureaucrats to help them unravel the cover-up. Americans like to think that they will do the right thing, and in this case, they do. The journalistic fable, contained in this film, was also very reassuring to audiences who learned that someone more cynical and perceptive than the common folks was out there protecting them from nefarious politicians.

Waling Tall introduced the western fable to political films of this era. In the film, Buford Pusser's small town origins provide him the resolve needed to resist the seductive force of power. At first reluctant, Buford Pusser eventually decides to fight the vice-lords who have taken over his community. The film suggested that evil thrives when good men fail to act. Concurrent with this theme was the disturbingly anti-populist notion that only a strong man can lead the way to reform. Hollywood films are star driven vehicles; consequently, individual heroes often dominate stories at the expense of mass movements. The resulting fable is often that of the lone gunslinger as savior of the embattled townsfolk.

Nashville introduced the populist trend to 1970s films. The film was very harsh on elements of hypocrisy that it identified within the establishment of country and western music, but just like *Walking Tall*, the film concludes with a lesson of redemption through commitment. According to *Nashville*, political success is not as important as love of family, broadly defined to include members of musical subcultures. In both films, key individuals rise to the occasion at a point of crisis. It is interesting that redemption occurs not in Washington but in the nation's heartland. Traditionally, political films have cast Washington as a land of evil enchantment and Middle America as a land of virtue.

Besides alien fantasies and commitment fantasies, a third category of fantasies exhibited in the time period was the fable of lost innocence. The victorious youths in *Wild in the Streets* find governing far less enjoyable than being musicians. Bill McKay, in *The Candidate*, starts with noble ideals, but slowly comes to realize he is no less ambitious than his father, and Joe Tynan sees himself as protective of the disenfranchised, until he too betrays friends and family. On the other hand, Chauncey Gardiner never loses his innocence because he is mentally impaired. Many of these films include a political consultant who leads the once pure politician astray, seemingly absolving him of culpability. Upon closer inspection however, personal egos lead them to stray. Repeatedly, political films of this era criticized ambition as evil. This is a double bind however, because political victory requires some sense of ego and social problems cannot be resolved without ambition to effect change.

The period from 1968 to 1980 was beset by national crisis. Leaders elected to confront these trials were often found wanting. It is not surprising that films of the period answered this failure with a critique of ethics. This critique maintained that the ethical responsibility of political leaders was to resist the seduction of power, often symbolized by sexual indiscretion. In both leaders and private citizens, integrity was most prized and compromise frowned upon.

Films containing the loss of innocence fable spoke to the hubris of the 1960s. Political films expressed frustration at the slow pace of change as issues of war, poverty, and race carried over into the next decade. Perhaps the most frequently occurring ritual in films of this era was the bogus political rally. Several films took great pains to instruct viewers as to the difference between public politics and backstage politics. What the

candidate tried to sell in public was not necessarily, what he believed in private. In this sense, films that contained the loss of innocence fable undermined films that presented the commitment fantasy. By the end of the decade, the loss of innocence fable overtook the commitment fantasy in political films. The prime lesson of the age was the wisdom of ironic detachment. The films suggested that the best way to avoid frustration with government was through lowered expectations, or perhaps through commitment to smaller groups of like-minded individuals who focused on local issues.

Political Critiques

According to Neal, difficult times lead to either deliberation or liberation. In such situations, individuals can resort to moral judgments of right and wrong, efforts designed to right social ills or restore traditional values, overwhelming fatalism, or a search to discover underlying problems through investigation and national debate. Films of the study period responded to historical uncertainty in similar fashion (Neal 17-18).

Political films, circa 1968 through 1980, tended to exercise moral judgment of right and wrong. Deceit, above all, was most often condemned. Those who misrepresented events or themselves were demonized. In contrast to other film eras, few films outside of *Medium Cool* and *Walking Tall* attempted to spur a crusade to right society's ills. A number of films advocated the restoration of traditional values. Interestingly, the films that ended with a restoration of traditional values achieved the highest financial reward. Audiences stood at the conclusion of *Walking Tall*, and *All The President's Men* inspired a generation of future investigative reporters. It would appear that many political films adopted a stance of overwhelming fatalism. Uniformly, the political films from 1968 to 1980 ended badly. However, if we examine them with regard to their strategy of

adjustment to national trauma, they present a different story. Most political films sought to uncover underlying problems through investigation.

Time after time, political films called for a changing of the guard. Political amateurs were preferred to political professionals. Film heroes were uniformly younger than film villains. In *The Candidate*, Senator Jarmon is nicknamed “the crocodile.” In *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, Senator Birney suffers from early stage dementia. The desire for new voices stemmed from the emerging political power of the baby boom generation as well as the experiences of the filmmakers, many of whom came from outside the Hollywood establishment. Frustrations with the slow pace of change led to negative portrayals of senior political figures. While perhaps this was an accurate portrayal of changing political attitudes, it did not represent a change in political reality. The Bill McKay cohort did not come to dominate political office until the 1990s.

The growing influence of media met with harsh criticism throughout the period. In several films, audiences learned of the pivotal role that media played in the political process. Filmmakers sought to demystify political process by showing exactly how media covered politics. Familiarity often leads to contempt. The media often received negative marks as either passive bystander or willful manipulator of events. It is interesting however, that several films contained highly positive portrayals of journalists and broadcasters. In many films, journalists and camera operators were cast as defenders of the constitution. According to films of this era, their professionalism helped save the country. This was most especially true of *All The President's Men*, a financially successful film as well as a film that was highly influential in the career choice of many future investigative reporters. On the other hand, the role of campaign organizers and

media consultants was uniformly condemned. This dichotomy reflects a common fear of a permanent political class of professional manipulators and a positive view of political outsiders. Political professionals would learn how to capitalize on this fear and eventually everyone would run as a political outsider.

Films of this era lauded newspapers, but condemned television as a potential instrument of brainwashing. Visual images proved capable of warping minds in *The Parallax View* and *Being There* and the suggestion was made that the viewing public could not resist the seductive charms of television. This contention was a bit hypocritical, as practitioners of one visual art leveled it against practitioners of another. More perceptive was the recurring critique that television changed the political process by forcing politicians to stage media events similar to *The Candidate's* hastily organized photo opportunity at a Malibu fire. The films were also perceptive in criticizing media for creating "instant politicians," and for its ritualized attraction to violence. In spite of these critiques, television became more important in the political process with every passing decade.

Increasingly, the relationship between those who govern and the governed became more distant. Early period films depicted one-to-one interaction between politicians and voters. These physical interactions were not always pleasant, but they still implied an opportunity to reach the candidate. In later films, such interaction became rare to nonexistent. For instance, the municipal water department ignored the complaints of small farm holders in *Chinatown*, and then threw them out of their meeting. Another instance of distant government occurred in *The Parallax View*, when a star chamber sequestered itself while investigating an assassination. Eventually, politicians became

disembodied voices in *Nashville* or images on television in *The Seduction of Joes Tynan*. Filmmakers might have intended the depiction of an ever more distant government as a critique designed to promote political involvement, but instead promoted the opposite response. Depictions of inaccessible government promoted fatalism and alienation.

Passivity was criticized in filmic depictions of the electorate. In an early film of this period, Wexler embraced the role of the electorate. Protesters exercise their right of public petition in *Medium Cool*. At the conclusion of his film, Wexler symbolically turns the camera toward the audience, thus inviting viewers to join in the protest movement. On the other hand, many of the later films depicted the voters as unworthy of their leaders. Plant workers are indifferent to McKay's campaigning, and later in the film: an irate voter slugs him for no good reason: the townspeople in *Walking Tall* tolerate vice until a champion arrives to rescue them: and even political assassins like Travis Bickle are uninformed about the issues. In general, political films, of the era, portray the public as gullible followers of fashion who are in need of strong leadership. This implication, once again, served to depress political involvement by encouraging audience identification with passive characters.

Filmmakers are acutely aware of the fickle nature of audiences. It must be frustrating to devote time and energy to a project only to see it ignored at the box office. It would be tempting for jaded filmmakers to conclude that the motion picture audience was not worthy of their ideas and creativity. This would help explain the mistrust of the public found in many films. Mistrust also stems from a larger frustration with national events. From viewing the films, it seems that filmmakers did not trust the abilities of

American voters to choose the future course of the nation and as the decade wore on, their suspicion increased.

Political films of this era tackled a variety of issues. In order of films discussed in this study, the agenda of most important issues consisted of voting rights, race relations and Appalachian poverty, environmentalism, crime, water rights, freedom of information, campaign finance reform, lyrics to the national anthem and tort reform, prostitution, past racism of a Supreme Court nominee, and excessive taxation of the wealthy.

The agenda is interesting for what it includes and what it leaves out. Every film addressed domestic policy issues. No film directly addressed foreign policy issues. There was no *Fail Safe* or *Dr. Strangelove*. The Vietnam War received tangential reference in films including *Medium Cool* and *Taxi Driver*. For most of the period of this study, Vietnam remained too divisive an issue for commercial film presentation. Even when Hollywood began to produce films about the war, political films of the period did not address the conflict. One must extrapolate that Travis Bickle's rampage stands for the horrific experience of war.

On the domestic front, Watergate was referenced allegorically in *Chinatown* and directly in *All The President's Men*. In the latter film, the focus was on the detective work required to discover names on a list of contributors to the president's reelection committee rather than the inner workings of the Nixon administration. Watergate also was a divisive issue. On the other hand, crime and violent assassinations were important in the agenda of film issues. Action plays well at the box office. Complex geopolitical issues and depressing revelations of corruption do not. In Hollywood, commercial considerations often trump personal inspiration. It is for this very reason that American

films provide such a valuable insight into national values, attitudes, and beliefs. Only those novel ideas, that survive the production process of a mass entertainment medium, can be judged as important to a society.

Issues of class appeared repeatedly in political films of this era. Young people, blacks, poor whites, and country music fans formed a coalition against the Rands of the world. In America, the wealthy make an easy target as no one considers himself or herself to be elitist. As in the case of violence, populism plays well at the box office. This was a strange critique, coming as it did from wealthy filmmakers and corporate giants within the entertainment industry.

Values

Having examined the mediation of political reality and the political critiques presented in political films of the period, changes in political values will now be analyzed. From World War II to the mid 1960s, America enjoyed a period of self-confidence based on a shared system of beliefs including the assured safety, sanctity and legitimacy of leadership, the gradual nature of social change, the health and superiority of the American economy, the superiority of the American military, the need to contain communism, the ability of American ingenuity to solve problems, and that America was the best role model for the world and the future (Schachtman 22-30).

An important issue in any form of government is the legitimacy of its institutions. In a republic like the United States, institutional legitimacy derives from adherence to a core set of constitutional beliefs established at the beginning of the nation's history and preserved by the rule of law. The legitimacy of individual political leaders derives in turn from the constitution as well as the will of the people as expressed at the ballot box. How

was legitimacy reflected in political films? What were the inherent tensions contained in these portrayals, and what can we learn about political values of the period?

In such a volatile time, it is interesting that so many films maintained belief in basic constitutional values. *Medium Cool* stood for the right of assembly, *All The President's Men* stood for freedom of the press, and *Walking Tall* for the establishment of a system of justice. From this, we learn that no matter how negatively Americans view their current leaders, they still maintain faith in basic concepts set forth in the Constitution. The constitution never lost legitimacy, and only one film, *Wild in the Streets* advocated overthrowing the government. Even then, the government fell by constitutional means.

The institutions of governmental administration did not fair as well as the abstract constitution. Some films depicted governmental actions that violated civil rights. In others, government bureaucracy proved ineffective in establishing justice, providing for the general welfare or insuring domestic tranquility. According to the films of this era, bureaucrats lacked legitimacy because they were appointed rather than elected. Repeatedly, individuals were blamed for political failures and core beliefs were not.

Films of the era, characterized the political process as “organized dishonesty.” Campaigning for office forced candidates to compromise their positions. The need to reach the public through television caused candidates to court celebrity, or become as blank a slate as Chauncey Gardiner in *Being There*. It is not surprising that bureaucrats and television came under fire in political films. What we learn here is that the level of public frustration with the political process was never higher and would set the tone for future decades of cynicism.

Hollywood films usually focus on the actions of single individuals. This is true of political films as well. As so often is the case in real life, the legitimacy of positively depicted political leaders derived not only from serving in office, but personal character traits. Here we learn that character was more important to Americans than ideology, at least as long as the rule of law was maintained. Positive leaders drew their legitimacy from their youthfulness, charisma, perceived strength, and willingness to act. This reflected an antidemocratic wish for a single dominant leader.

Unfortunately, positive political leaders were few and far between. This period in film history is remarkable in its almost total lack of positive political figures. In the rare instance that positive political figures did appear, they often had feet of clay. This speaks to disenchantment with actual political leaders of the period. The taped, private conversations of President Nixon hardly preserved the sanctity of executive office.

The safety of political office was very much in doubt. Several films contained violent attacks on political leaders. The only films that did not contain an attack on a political leader were *All The President's Men*, *Nashville*, which did include an attack on a surrogate community leader, and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*. An entire subgenre of assassination films could be listed within this genre. As late as 1980 *Winter Kills* still dredged the Kennedy assassination for material. This trend continued throughout future decades. Often the films would cast doubt upon official accounts of historical events suggesting conspiracy. This reflects mistrust with governmental investigations of past assassinations and a lingering nostalgia for what was perceived to have been an idealized time. It is interesting that 1960s political violence predominates. No films were produced about the assassinations of Presidents McKinley, Garfield or even the attempt on Ford.

No bio-pics of Johnson, Nixon, or Carter were created. In this sense, 1970s political films looked backward more than forward.¹

A second important established American value was the belief in gradual nature of social change. Films of this era were more willing to challenge the status quo. This reflects the infusion of new creative talent to Hollywood and the influence of the emerging youth market. Early films, like *Medium Cool*, were very committed to rapid change. Later films like, *The Candidate* and *Chinatown* introduced a note of doubt that change was possible in the current political system. Other films suggested that change comes only through violent means. *Nashville* poked fun at reform movements with their “new roots for the nation.” Some films did not advocate change at all, but rather promoted a return to a prior state of social equilibrium. Buford Pusser wants to return his community to its natural, vice free state; so too do Bickle, Woodward and Bernstein. Pusser, Bickle, Woodward and Bernstein all succeed in their reform efforts. What we learn here is that political films of this era were slightly more reactionary than they appear to be. They do not resist change but do wish that reform would reestablish a prior idealized state.

How then is change made possible? According to the films, if change is at all possible, one of two means will achieve it. Some films advocate trust in established constitutional ideals, while most others advocate trust in political outsiders or even political amateurs. In either case, strong individual leadership provides the impetus for community involvement. Other instruments of change have traditionally included money, technology, and ingenuity. It certainly is not surprising that Americans harbor ambivalent

¹ The film, *Winter Kills* concerned investigative efforts of the younger brother of an assassinated president to find the responsible parties. It was not included here because it failed to turn a profit.

attitudes toward money in politics. The films certainly indicate that it takes money to gain political power, and in turn, an opportunity to achieve good things for society. However, the films suggest that once in office, money will inevitably become a corrupting influence. In fact, the most famous political sound bite of the era was “follow the money.”

The unfavorable portrayal of the wealthy McKay and Rand families provides an example of class warfare reminiscent to depression era films. The difference being, wealth was not portrayed as glamorously here as it was in 1930s Hollywood productions. In *Being There*, Rand is depicted as a dying old man whose money cannot save him, nor can modern technology. Technology, most often represented by mass media, receives very low marks as an agent of change. In assassination films, technologically advanced weaponry is downright dangerous. American ingenuity, however, receives favorable treatment in political films. For example, plucky candidate McKay outsmarts Jarmon at their televised debate and Woodward and Bernstein find a way to trick secretaries into naming names. Here we learn nothing new; according to political films of this period, hardworking, ingenious, committed individuals can still beat the system.

Is America still the best possible role model for the rest of the world and for the future? No, it is not, at least according to the films studied here. Here we learn that self-doubt first entered the American psyche. Of course, political films are by their very nature ambivalent. It is interesting that the political films of this era do not address other foreign issues, except tangentially, Vietnam. These films seem to be totally about internal political events. The Cold War is not referenced, as it was in films produced in the 1950s and 1960s, nor are larger global issues, as in films of more recent vintage. It is surprising

that conflict with the Soviet Union failed to be included. This was still an era of intense rivalry between the two superpowers. From this omission, we learn that Americans feared the enemy from within more than they feared the enemy from without. Perhaps political leaders misread the importance of the cold war to average Americans.

According to the films of this era, political values changed from earlier eras due to a growing lack of confidence. Belief in the legitimacy of leaders eroded and faith in the gradual improvement of society declined. The lack in confidence was not so much in government as it was in individuals. Hollywood films adhere to a bad man theory of history wherein evil resides within symbolically evil villains. According to this point of view, eradication of evil requires vanquishing of the Simon Legrees of the world. The decade of the 1970s, in film, represented the search for new political values including such inherently contradictory notions as legitimacy of leadership based on charisma as well as integrity, political commitment and political cynicism, self-sacrifice and promotion of self-interest.

Conformity to History

While it was not the intention of this study to find how film interpreted actual historical events, changing values in film do reflect changing values in society. Further, historical events alter values in society. How then did political films respond to historical trends and to what extent did they conform to historical reality?

First it must be stated that there is an inherent lag time built into the motion picture production process. The American motion picture industry requires huge financial investment and long production schedules. Negotiations required to green light a project can take years. Rights must be acquired, scripts written, financing secured, actors attached to the project, and locations prepared -- all before shooting begins. Witness the

time it took for *All The President's Men* to transform from newspaper articles to book to film. By the time a film wraps, its subject may no longer be of interest to the public. This factor forces filmmakers to consider carefully what stories they tell.

A second factor that can affect the lag time of a film is psychological. Certain subjects are so sensitive that filmmakers shy away from them lest they upset the audience. Of course, it could be argued that great art is that which does upset the audience. The Hollywood production model encourages a much quicker turn-around time on sensational issues rather than on sensitive issues. A perceptive scene in Preston Sturges' comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) depicts a successful director of fluff who proposes that his next film will be a more serious social drama entitled *Oh Brother Where Art Thou*, to which the studio head offers the addendum, "with a little sex." The director agrees and production moves forward.

Films of the study period encountered problems of lag time to greater and lesser degrees. *Wild in the Streets* was a low budget AIP production. AIP actually encouraged topicality. The film capitalized on front-page stories of campus revolt and rode the popular wave of youth protest films; however, the film greatly sensationalized its subject matter. The film offers more about the generation gap than it does the mindset of the Weather Underground. Conversely, *Medium Cool* does offer a bit of the mindset of the radical movement, all the more amazing given its production by a major entertainment corporation. The 1960s recession in the film industry prompted production companies to seek out innovative new voices. When the industry recovered in the late 1970s, corporations were less willing to entertain controversy and the film's director, Wexler, had a much harder time mounting projects.

The Candidate drew inspiration from the Eugene McCarthy presidential campaign in 1968. Despite a four-year lag time, the film accurately portrayed the ins and outs of a modern political campaign. The film is similar to other exposés including the 1969 book *The Selling of the President* by Joe McGinnis and *The Making of the President* series by Theodore White. These popular books also brought their readers inside the complicated world of political campaigning. The film, *The Candidate*, was perhaps as influential in its era as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was in the past. The film provided the template for many future political films including *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, the revival of political films in the 1990s, and the production of *The West Wing* on television in the 2000s. Like *The Candidate*, these works focused on the marketing of candidates and the complex, moral choices encountered by modern politicians. This film was also ahead of its time in real world political events. *The Candidate* did not predict Watergate but it did capture the ambiguous moral climate that would lead to the event.

Walking Tall captured Middle America's frustration with the moral ambiguity depicted in works like *The Candidate*. Based on the actual anti crime crusade prosecuted by a Tennessee sheriff in the 1960s, the 1973 film reflected public concerns with crime in the streets. Examination of Gallup poll results finds that crime was a very important issue at the time. A number of politicians, including Nixon, seized on this issue to run on a law and order platform. *Walking Tall's* violent revenge fantasy resonated with audience fears, earning it blockbuster status. Crime is an often violent, visual, and sensational issue. The resulting film was as well. Interestingly, the film's revenues increased in its 1974 re-release, a period concurrent with increased Watergate revelations.

Chinatown employed a fictional account of municipal cover-up as an allegory for Watergate whereas *All The President's Men* was a docudrama about actual historical events. Watergate dominated popular culture as no political scandal had ever done before. The Watergate hearings drew extensive news coverage and huge television ratings. Woodward and Bernstein's book was a best seller initiating an avalanche of books about the subject penned by every reporter, investigator and codefendant involved in the conspiracy. *All the President's Men* capitalized on this trend to be one of the most profitable political films of all time. The film version of *All The President's Men* told history from the point of view of journalists. The film did simplify the contributions of legislators, justice department investigators and other journalists in cracking the case. This is somewhat understandable given the time constraints of a two-and-a-quarter hour motion picture.

The connection between violence and politics increased in the period under study. *The Parallax View* presented a rather unrealistic depiction of a vast political assassination conspiracy. The film is a paranoid fantasy, but it also reflects suspicions of investigative cover-ups that linger to this day. The decade of the 1970s taught Americans to become better informed about investigative procedures. The time required to assimilate the death of admired national leaders can be quite long. It is interesting to see how long it takes motion pictures to digest traumatic national events. Vietnam took at least two decades to play out and we still see films about 1960s assassinations as in *Bobby* (2006). The events of September 11, 2001 took five years to reach the screen in *United 93* (2006) and will undoubtedly remain an important film subject.

Taxi Driver presented a chillingly violent view inside the mind of an Arthur Bremer-like assassin. In fact, the film was based, in part, on the Bremer diaries. More than merely the account of a psychopath, the film reflected deeper national fears. At the time, people were afraid of violence, urban decay, an uncertain economy, and moral decline. Travis Bickle, intended by the filmmakers to be a villain, actually drew a sympathetic response from the audience for his vigilantism. They too wished to clean up the streets. Unfortunately, the film *Taxi Driver* inspired two unintended future events, creation of the “Crazed Vietnam Vet” film cycle and the attempted assassination of President Reagan by John Hinckley. Such is the power of film.

Just as *Taxi Driver* inspired violence, *Nashville* predicted it. *Nashville* concludes with the assassination of a beloved musical icon. The murder of Barbara Jean, however, was not intended to be the central element of the film, but rather a dramatic device designed to tie together a mosaic of storylines. Never-the-less, the murder did highlight a growing national obsession with celebrity. This obsession turned violent and eerily mimicked *Nashville* when Mark David Chapman assassinated musical legend John Lennon. Despite its violent conclusion, *Nashville* is much more about the splintering of America. The film rejects national politics in favor of family and loyalty to local, like-minded communities. The film sensationalizes its depiction of the Nashville music community, but it accurately depicts America at the time of its bicentennial. Included in the film, are different religions, political party affiliations, races and musical tastes, all overlapping in dialogue and motion and sometimes resulting in a massive freeway jam.

The last three years of the 1970s were the beginning of Hollywood’s blockbuster era. As the financial stakes increased, the willingness to invest in less profitable genres

decreased. This factor resulted in a reduction of films about the political process. A second contributing factor to declining production was national fatigue with bad news. Only so many introspective films that can be made in a given period before the audience loses interest. It was bad enough that the public witnessed actual domestic and foreign policy crisis without having to see them again as entertainment.

In 1979, the motion picture industry did produce *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, which was derivative of *The Candidate* and *Being There*, based on a book originally published in 1971. *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* did however, offer new insights into the domestic life of political leaders and reflected the changing role of women in society. For its part, *Being There* was prescient in predicting the coming domination of television in the political process. This film's obsession with the negative impact of media brings us full circle with the first two films discussed in this study.

Americans do not only have an ambivalent relationship with the political process, they also fear and love the seductive force of visual entertainment. *Being There* asks the intriguing question whether the audience is an active participant in the media experience or a passive vessel waiting to be filled with information. The creators of *Being There* imply that the audience is no more than a passive vessel. On the other hand, motion pictures like *Being There* provide the audience with increased sophistication about the political process as well about how media, even film, manipulates the viewer. Insight into such techniques provides defense against manipulation.

Future Political Values, Films, and Events

It is difficult to attribute direct causal effects between individual films and changes in society. Rarely does a motion picture provide so powerful an impact that it radically changes the world. More often than not, films subtly alter their audience's worldview.

Films such as *The Candidate*, *Walking Tall*, and *Being There* helped change popular perceptions of what it takes to be a leader. There is a large difference between the extremely positive portrayal of the political establishment in *Sunrise at Campobello* and the promotion of those from outside the political establishment in *The Candidate* and *Being There*. In the modern era, being an outsider has become almost a prerequisite for gaining the trust of the electorate.

Political films have also had unintended consequences. Scorsese intended *Taxi Driver* to be a negative portrayal of alienation and loneliness in modern society. The director was shocked, however, to discover that audiences cheered the vigilantism of the film's main character. This enthusiastic response can be attributed, in part, to the casting of one of Hollywood's most dynamic actors, Robert DeNiro in the lead role. Instead of decreasing the level of violence in society, *Taxi Driver* served to inure audiences to increased brutality.

Yet another film that had unintended consequences was *All The President's Men*. The film not only made audiences aware of the Watergate affair, it also helped change the relationship the press and the government. A new generation of reporters, influenced by Woodward and Bernstein, or maybe Redford and Hoffman, entered the profession. The new generation of journalists broke the convivial relationship that existed between the press and politicians. Journalists came to believe that they possessed an inherent checks-and-balance role within the political process and acted upon that belief with increasing vigor.

Another consequence of the political films of the era was an increased awareness of political manipulation. Films like *The Candidate* and *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* made

audiences aware of their susceptibility to image management. As media became more sophisticated manipulators of image, so too did political leaders. President Carter jettisoned trappings of an imperial presidency in favor of a symbolic walk to the inauguration designed to promote a connection with the common people. Future political leaders would rely more and more upon professional media consultants to mold their public image. Politicians were more willing to appear on entertainment programs and informal interviews rather than organized press conferences. Being seen with movie stars became more valuable than being seen at the Kremlin. Politicians emulated Bill McKay's campaign strategy, but were not burdened with his ambivalence toward exploitation.

Awareness of political manipulation leads to the adoption of ironic distance as a political stance. Books and motion pictures demystified the political process. In addition, news reports revealed that trusted political figures had feet of clay. A more perceptive electorate was less willing to place unconditional trust in national leaders. They had been disappointed too many times before. In the 1970s, popular culture established irony as the proper defense mechanism for the complexity of modern life. *Taxi Driver* recast the political assassin as community activist. By the 1980s, Rambo asked, "do we get to win this time?" This statement employs a heavy layer of sarcasm to buttress frustrations at defeat in South East Asia.

By the 1990s, *Wag The Dog* (1997) presented war in the Balkans as political cover rather than an international crisis to be taken seriously. In the 2000s, ironic political distance exploded in popularity. Both conservative talk show radio and liberal cable pseudo newscasts sought to arm their loyal fans with the sarcastic armor required to fend off, and not think about, opposing political viewpoints. The ironic divide of the modern

era derives from 1970s era films that championed political cynicism and greatly enhanced techniques for the effective use of derisive depiction of ideological opponents.

Films of this era encouraged a more adversarial relationship between those with opposing viewpoints. Films provided paranoid conspiracy stories that readily provided rhetorical ammunition to left-leaning as well as right-leaning opponents. This trend toward paranoia accelerated through later decades and continues to this day. Violence in films continued to escalate as well. Political assassination films remain popular to this day. It is interesting that, while political violence remains a problem of society, it is overrepresented in film. Filmic depiction of political violence has increased national anxiety and promoted a mean world perspective of modern life.

Depictions of political violence, political malfeasance, and a tendency toward self-recrimination have led to political passivity within the electorate. The number of citizens who register and who actually vote in elections has trended downward throughout the period. Many other reasons have contributed to this phenomenon, but the negative depiction of the political process in popular fiction must also be a contributory factor.

The depiction of governmental leaders in motion pictures colors the audience's understanding of the political process. This is especially true of younger audiences who are still forming political attitudes. In the period from 1968 to 1980, young people attended films in ever-increasing numbers. Many drew upon films for information about the political system and for definitions of leadership. In this sense, future politicians have had to measure themselves against the film personas of Alan Alda and Robert Redford. In comparison to such figures, motion picture heroes make it hard for political leaders to shine. Is it any wonder that film actor Ronald Reagan won election to the presidency in

1980? Here was a candidate who projected the new values of effectiveness, charisma, and returning to core beliefs.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest other avenues of possible research. This study provided insight into the development of a particular genre of films, in a particular period of time. Inherent in the selection process of films and times are certain decisions. One decision that must be made is when does an era begin and when does it end. Historical eras are not always neatly packaged into discrete blocks of time, nor are film trends. For instance, *Dr. Strangelove* has the same sense of ironic detachment that would become standard in political films of the 1970s. The film was ahead of its time, but not included in this study.

The years 1968 and 1980 seemed quite logical bookends for this study because of the many important history-making events of 1968 and the changing of the guard in 1980. A selection of different time periods would provide insight into other important moments in history. It would be interesting to learn of the changing American values depicted in films between World War I and World War II and to compare them to those of the study period. This effort might prove difficult due to missing and deteriorating copies of early motion pictures. Films of more recent vintage are much more available and will doubtlessly be used to explore values of the Reagan era, the post cold war era, and changing political values in the age of globalization.

The decision of which films to include and which to keep out also is important. This study excluded non-profitable films because they did not reflect mass appeal. However, a study of non-profitable or less publicized films might also be worthwhile. The reasons for a film's failure often speak volumes as well as the reasons for another

film's success. This study assumed that mainstream films speak for America. That is why widely released, commercial films were selected. Such films reflect the values of most Americans. Regional differences in attitudes, values, and beliefs are harder to detect, as are the values of nonconformist, sociological subgroups. A study of nontraditional films would be of value.

A third avenue of research would be a comparison between 1970s political film values and values found in other genres of the same period. Films about police work might provide a more conservative view of America. Then again, it would be interesting to find the points of agreement between political films and *Dirty Harry* or even between political films and anti westerns. Another comparison would be cross-cultural. The values, attitudes, and beliefs contained in American political films could be compared to those from other nations. This examination might prove difficult due to the need for expertise in foreign languages required to grasp nuances of dialogue.

This study explored politics and governmental institutions. Selection of other institutions would provide insight into other important aspects of society. A mass communication history of science in film would provide information on the changing role played by technology in society. Other topics could be health care and society, labor and society, the judicial system and society, religion and society, and even the role of the entertainment industry within society. All would tell us something about how Americans think about important societal institutions over a particular period of time.

This study relied on historical analysis of changing political values. A quantitative approach would also provide interesting results. A content analysis of political films could discover what the filmmakers and the motion picture industry considered to be the

most important issues of a particular time period. In addition, the character traits assigned to legitimate political leaders could be identified. Data could then be compared to data from other media at the time of the selection of films' release. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to discover the effect of historical film content on audiences. That ship has long since sailed.

Finally, the study of individual filmmakers, or groups of filmmakers, would be interesting. The politics of New Hollywood could be compared to the political values of filmmakers from other eras. The development of individual filmmakers should be studied, especially those who had a particular interest in political issues. Director Hal Ashby would make a fascinating subject for a biography. Much has been written about Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese, but it would be interesting to trace the political development in their films. Robert Redford has not only produced and appeared in politically themed films, he has been actively involved in environmental issues. Redford is not the only celebrity who has lent star power to favored causes. It would be interesting to examine the increasing role of celebrity in real world politics.

What Do We Do Now

The history of mass communication is both vast and small: vast in terms of impact on modern society and small in terms of historical duration. The motion picture industry has existed for little over a century. Scholars are still coming to grips with how film affected, and in turn, was affected by society. Different approaches have resulted in different interpretations. Films have been extensively studied from aesthetic and biographical points of view. Film has not been extensively examined as an artifact of mass communication history. Mass communication history requires not only an account

of truth told about the past, but how filmmakers, acting as opinion leaders, have used advanced technology to discover truth.

It used to be that everyone wanted to write the great American novel. This changed in the Twentieth Century. Now, everyone wants to create the great American film. Even in the television and internet era, films retain cultural cache. Film also remains one of our best records of intellectual history. Film is not an ephemeral medium. Motion pictures record a long-lasting summation of deeply felt thoughts and feelings. Filmmakers play a unique role in society as conduits of those thoughts and feelings.

This study sought to understand how filmmakers served as intellectual and emotional conduits. It advances the field of mass communication history by adapting long standing and highly reliable techniques, often associated with the pursuit of journalistic history, to the field of entertainment history. There exists a vast history of how journalists have served as intellectual and emotional conduits of American values, attitudes, and beliefs. This study provides an incremental step toward understanding how film does the same.

One could spend a great deal of time examining political films. Some of the most entertaining and intellectually challenging films ever made have considered the American political process. They tell much about different eras. The 1970s were a fascinating period in film history. This period produced some of the greatest works ever, perhaps equaled in quality only by films of the 1930s. Real craft and genuinely new ideas were presented in motion pictures of the period. As Hollywood became more dependent on blockbusters, the level of quality of political films sagged a bit, only to be revitalized in the new independent film production environment. Interestingly, 1970s political film

veteran Robert Redford helped pioneer this new production model by creating The Sundance Film Institute that offered support to independent film production and distribution.

The seventies will remain a very significant time in film history because of a significant influx of new talent. Filmmakers from television and from film schools explored new avenues of discourse that continue in viability to this day. This era is significant in political film history because it provided a bridge between films of the American political consensus and films of the modern era. Many recent trends had their origin in this era including abhorrence of celebrity politics, political indifference, ideological polarization, and condemnation of self-indulgence.

This study assumed that political cynicism would be found within films of the study period. Cynicism certainly was found. This can be explained by the genre of selection and by the difficult times under study. Political films, by their very nature, seek to comment on core beliefs. This is a healthy endeavor. Sunny, popular films can be even more cynical than political films by hiding the true nature of events. There comes a time when society must face its political shortcomings. From 1968 to 1980, American political films delineated those critiques and traced changes in political values of an important era.

APPENDIX A
FILMS IN STUDY

All The President's Men. Prod. Walter Coblenz. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Writ. William Goldman. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Robert Redford, and Jason Robards. 138 minutes. DVD. Warner Brothers, 1976.

Being There. Prod. Andrew Braunsberg. Dir. Hal Ashby. Writ. Jerzy Kosinski. Perf. Peter Sellers, Melvyn Douglas, and Shirley MacLaine. 130 minutes. DVD. Lorimar Film Entertainment, 1979.

The Candidate. Prod. Rupert Coblenz. Dir. Michael Ritchie. Writ. Jeremy Lerner. Perf. Robert Redford, Melvyn Douglas, and Peter Boyle. 109 minutes. DVD. Warner Brothers, 1972.

Chinatown. Prod. Robert Evans. Dir. Roman Polanski. Writ. Robert Towne. Perf. Jack Nicholson, John Huston, and Faye Dunaway. 131 minutes. DVD. Paramount, 1974.

Medium Cool. Prod. Tully Friedman, Haskell Wexler, and Jerrold Wexler. Dir. Haskell Wexler. Writ. Haskell Wexler. Perf. Robert Foster, Verna Bloom, and Harold Blankenship. 110 minutes. DVD. Paramount, 1969

Nashville. Prod. Robert Altman. Dir. Robert Altman. Writ. Joan Tewkesbury. Perf. Karen Black, Ronee Blakley, Lily Tomlin, and Henry Gibson. 159 minutes. DVD. American Broadcasting Company, 1975.

The Parallax View. Prod. Alan J. Pakula. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Writ. David Giler and Lorenzo Semple Jr. Perf. Warren Beatty, Hume Cronyn, and William Daniels. 102 minutes. DVD. Paramount, 1974.

The Seduction of Joe Tynan. Prod. Martin Bregman Dir. Jerry Schatzberg. Writ. Alan Alda. Perf. Alan Alda, Barbara Harris, and Meryl Streep. 107 minutes. DVD. Universal, 1979.

Taxi Driver. Prod. Julia Phillips and Michael Phillips. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Writ. Paul Schrader. Perf. Robert DeNiro, Cybil Shepard, and Jodie Foster. 113 minutes. DVD. Columbia, 1976.

Walking Tall. Prod. Mort Briskin Dir. Phil Karlson. Writ. Mort Briskin and Stephen Dowling. Perf. Joe Don Baker and Elizabeth Hartman. 125 minutes. DVD. Bing Crosby Productions, 1973.

Wild In The Streets. Prod. Samuel Z. Arkoff and James F. Zanuck. Dir. Barry Shear.
Writ. Robert Thom. Perf. Shelley Winters, and Christopher Jones. 94 minutes.
DVD. AIP, 1968.

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- Alice's Restaurant*. Prod. Hillard Elkins. Dir. Arthur Penn. Perf. Arlo Guthrie. DVD. United Artists, 1969.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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