

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA

Session One

The Hollywood Renaissance

Dr. Richard Nowell

Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture

Masaryk University

Agenda

16:10 – 17:40

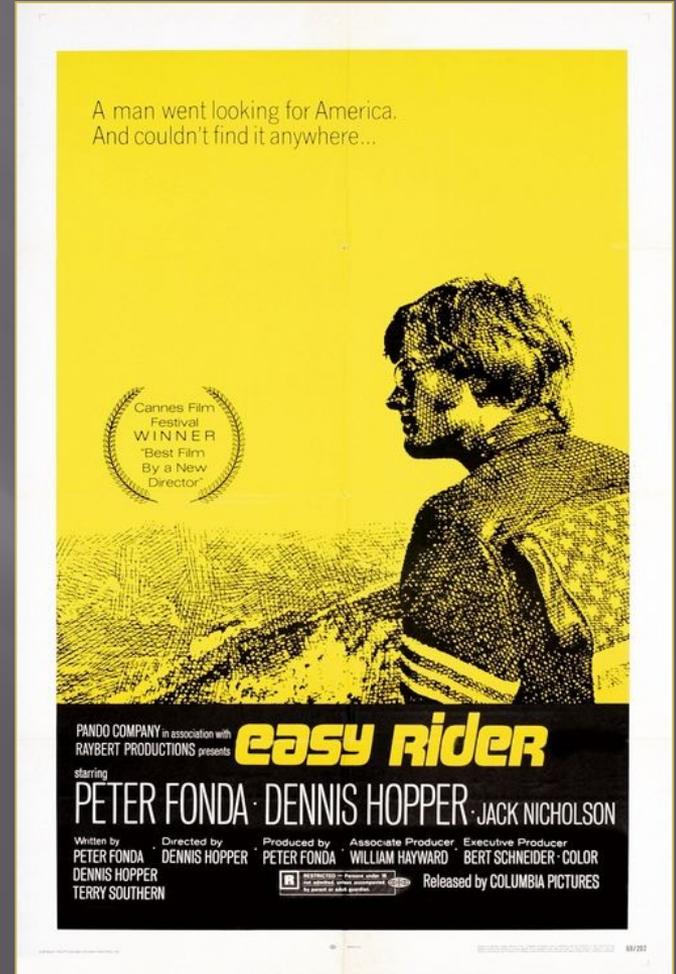
Screening: *Easy Rider* (1969)

17:40- 17:55

Break

17:55 – 19:15

The Hollywood Renaissance



Questions

In what ways does *Easy Rider* exemplify the characteristics of the Renaissance films?

In what ways does *Easy Rider* depart from these characteristics?

How does *Easy Rider* compare to *Bonnie & Clyde* as an “exemplary” Renaissance film?

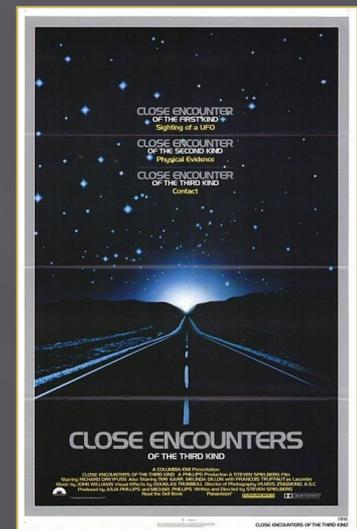
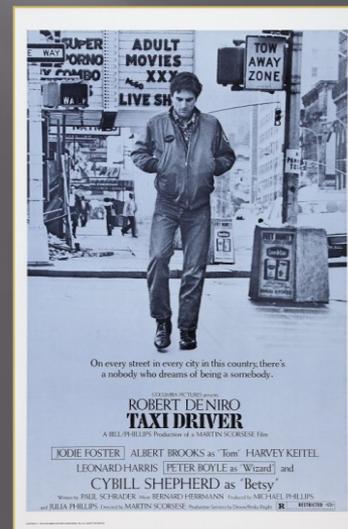
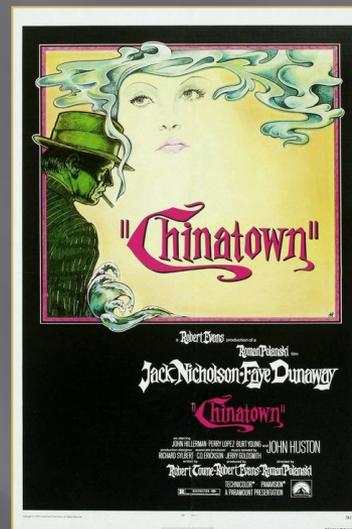
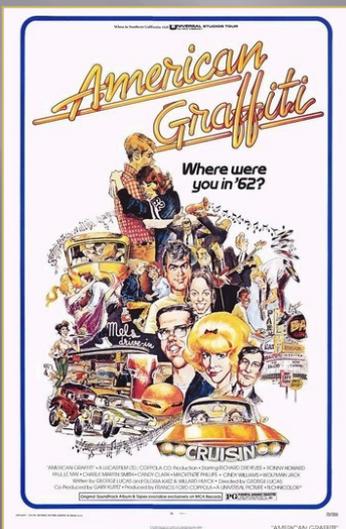
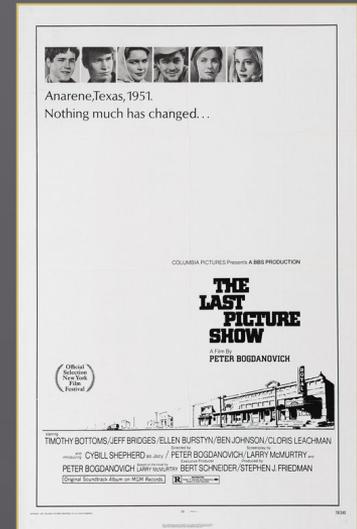
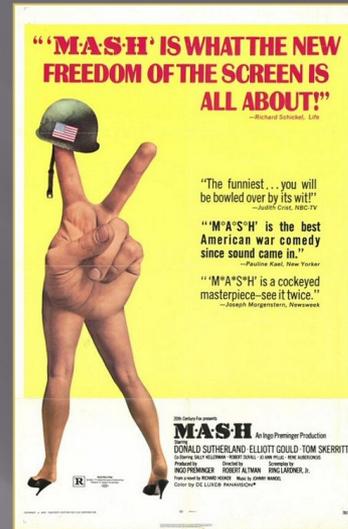
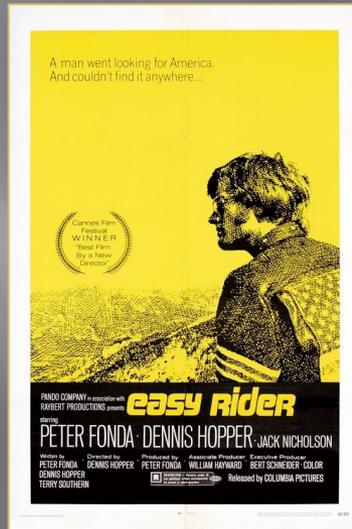
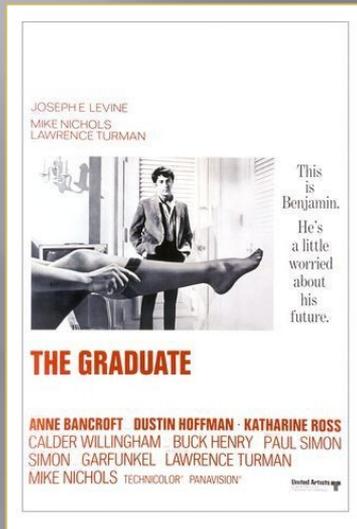
Focus

The Hollywood Renaissance as a distinct chapter of American Cinema

The key characteristics of the Hollywood Renaissance

How the Hollywood Renaissance has been positioned within American cinema history

The Hollywood Renaissance



Periodizing Hollywood

“New” Hollywood: late-1960s – mid-1990s

Hollywood Renaissance: 1967 – 1976

Blockbuster Era: 1975 – 1993.

Global\Conglomerate Hollywood: mid-1990s –

MPAA Members (Hollywood):1967-1979



What was the Hollywood Renaissance?

A New American Quality Cinema

Golden Age from: 1967-1976 or 1967-1979

1. Formally innovative Hollywood films
2. Thematically radical or progressive Hollywood films
3. Tonally downbeat – imbued w/ cynicism and ambivalence

Young directors “wrestled” power from studio management

Response to seismic industrial and social upheaval

Questions

In what ways do *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie & Clyde* exemplify the textual characteristics of the Renaissance films?

In what ways do the two films depart from these characteristics?

How does *Easy Rider* compare to *Bonnie & Clyde* as an exemplary “Renaissance” film?

Putative Causes of the Renaissance

In what sense has it been suggested that the Renaissance was symptomatic of the socio-political character – or the so-called *Zeitgeist* – of late-1960s America?

“Sixties” Begets Renaissance Thesis

Oftentimes framed as reflecting socially unstable times:

Radicalism and anti-authoritarianism increase

Vietnam War condemned by liberals

Second Wave feminists marched for women’s rights

Activists called for civil rights for black Americans

Youth increasingly mistrustful of adult authority

In what ways can this account
be seen as problematic?

Not Simply a Zeitgeist Thing

Social conditions alone do not cause production trends

Industry gatekeepers shape production based on commercial potential; if it won't sell it won't be made or released

Hollywood Renaissance films were targeted to specific audiences; reliable theatergoers with expendable income

1. Middle-brow audiences attending imported Art Cinema
2. Youth sympathetic to romance of the counter-culture

What US social changes have been claimed to directly impact Hollywood's operations, thereby supposedly giving rise to the Renaissance?

Broad Social Shifts: Declining Audiences

Suburbanization

Baby Boom

Television/other leisure pursuits

Failure of new film technologies

Failure to fully secure youth

Explains industry struggle NOT
choice of movies released

These developments conditioned
all of Hollywood output



What major post-war industrial changes are said to have led to the Renaissance?

Industrial Change: Problems, Consequences, Implications

Paramount Decrees end “vertical integration” and “block booking”

Divorcement/divestiture leads to industrial Re-organisation

Rise of outsourced production brings new people and a diversity of ideas into the Hollywood system

End of block booking: all films must be commercially viable

Explains the structures in which Hollywood Renaissance movies were made but not WHY they were made

Inexpensive Solution to Hard Times(?)

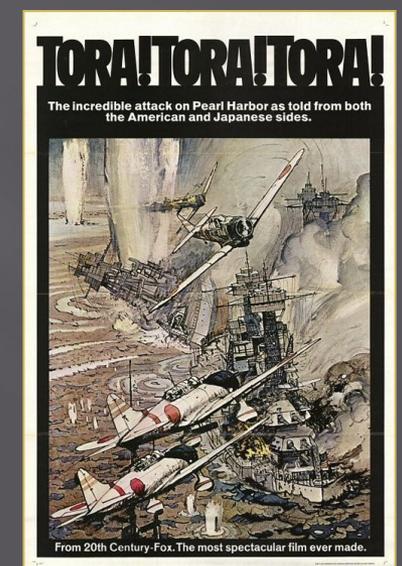
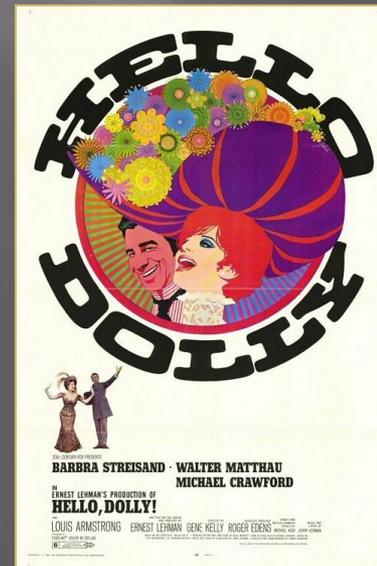
The Hollywood Recession

Lavish historical epics and musicals lose money

Generates budgetary austerity and output limits

Explains appeal of lower cost films ...

... but NOT the Renaissance films specifically



An alternative view

The Renaissance comprised two overlapping trends –
Formally innovative films
Counter-culture films

Speculative attempts to generate capital

Consistent, early commercial success inspires imitations

Short-lived based on commercial under-achievement

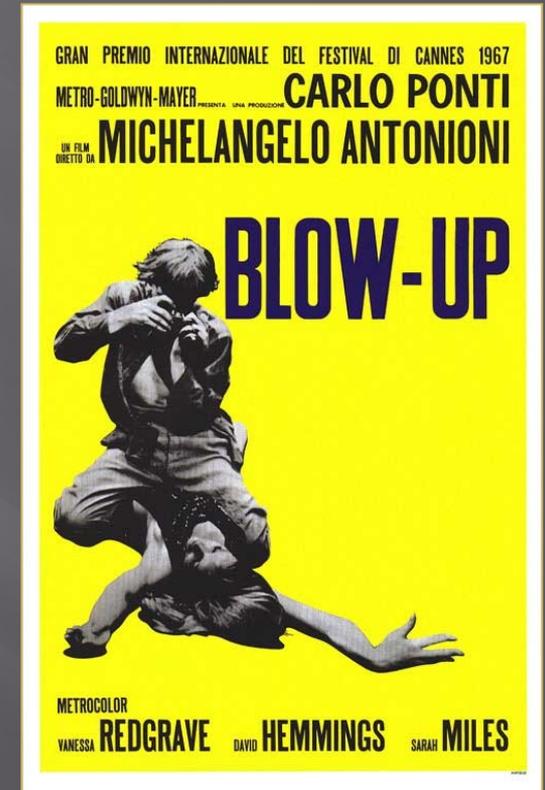
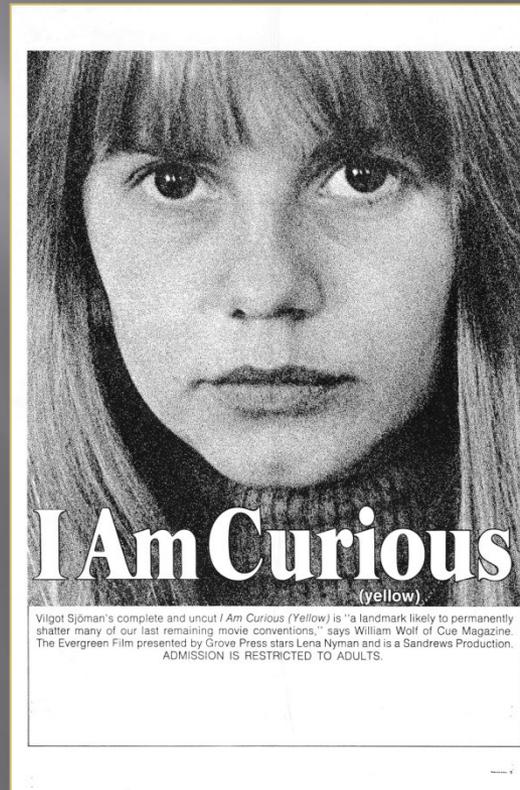
Evince the challenges of corporate subcultural targeting

Catalysts of the Hollywood Renaissance

Abandonment of the Production Code enables adult content and themes in movies

This content allows youth market and liberals to be targeted

Imported youth-oriented Art Cinema performs quite well

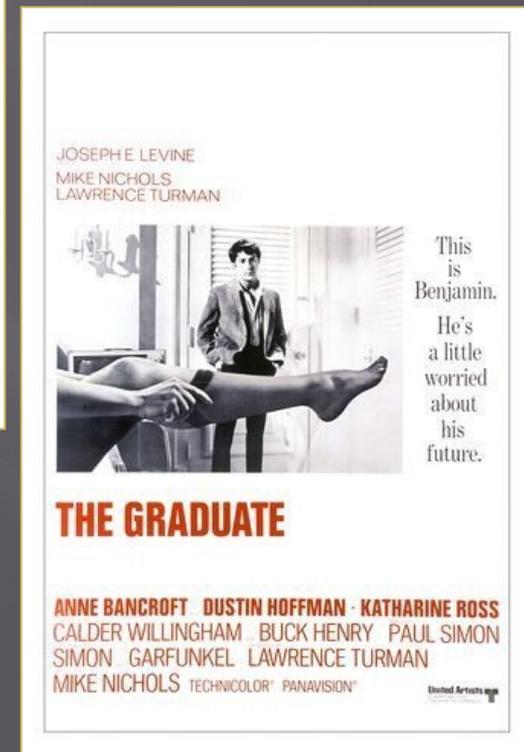
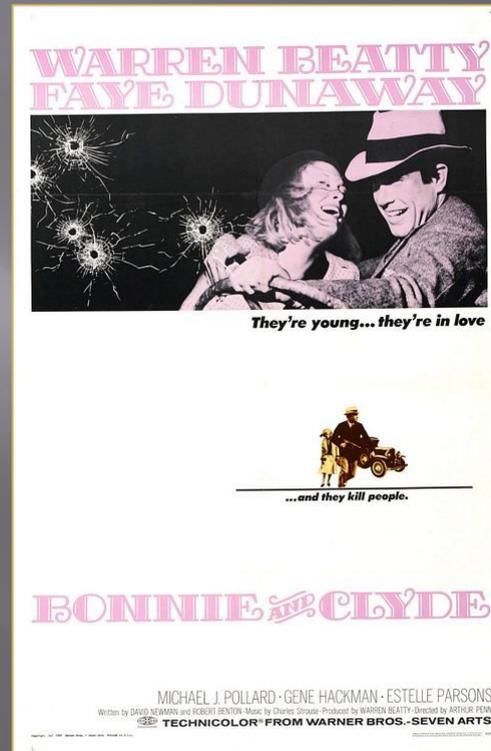


Triggers of the Hollywood Renaissance

Bonnie and Clyde and
The Graduate (both 1967)

Blockbuster hits thanks to
American youth market

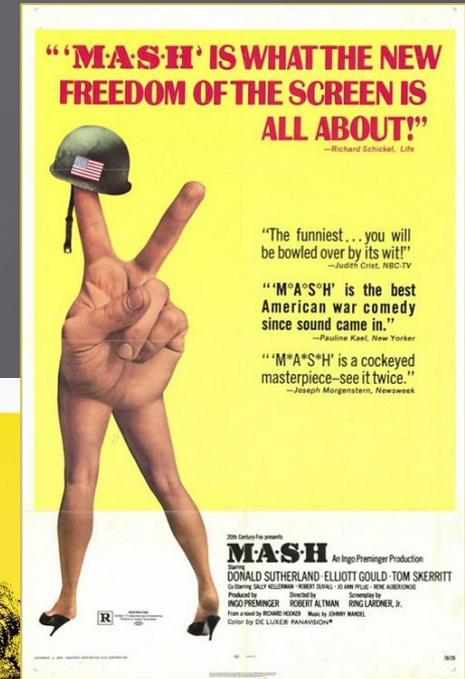
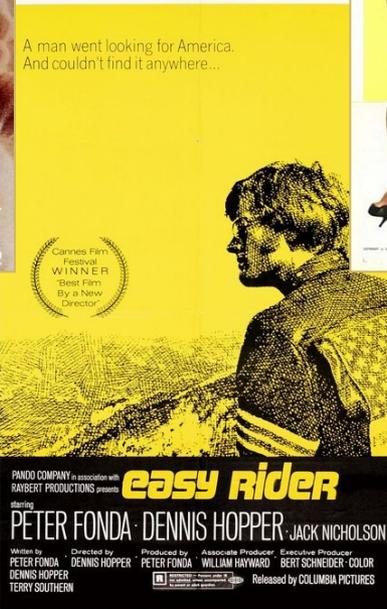
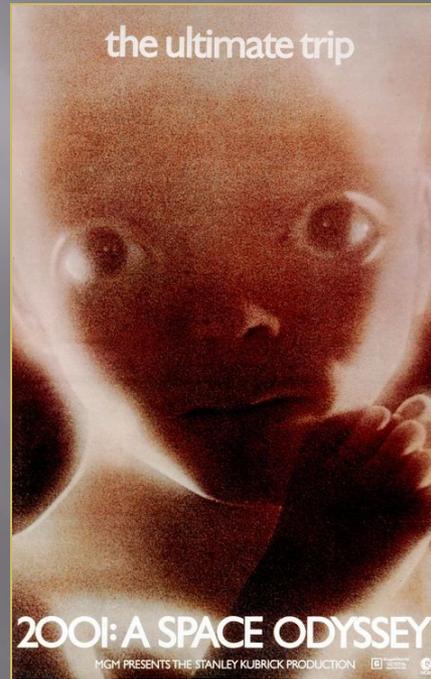
Framed in the press as
thematically radical and
formally innovative –
exaggeratedly so



The Deal Breakers ...

Confirm
profitability of
thematically
radical and
formally
innovative films.

Generates a surge
in production of
similar films

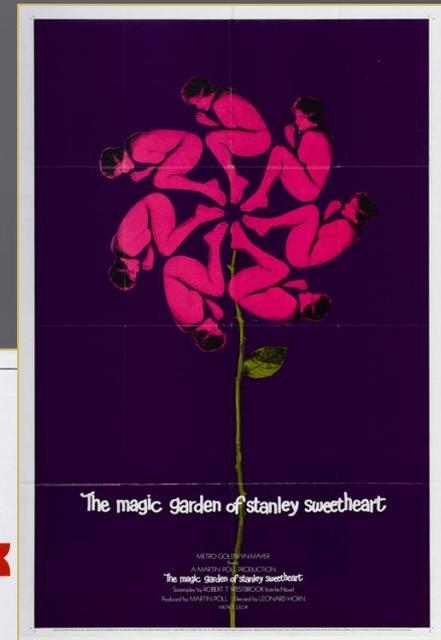
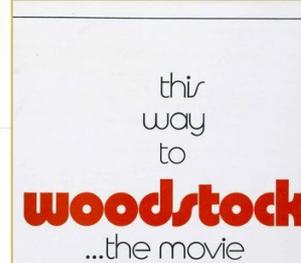
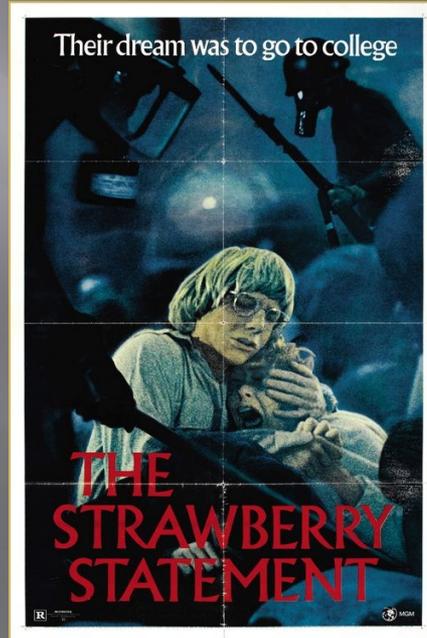


The Decline of Youth-Cult Films

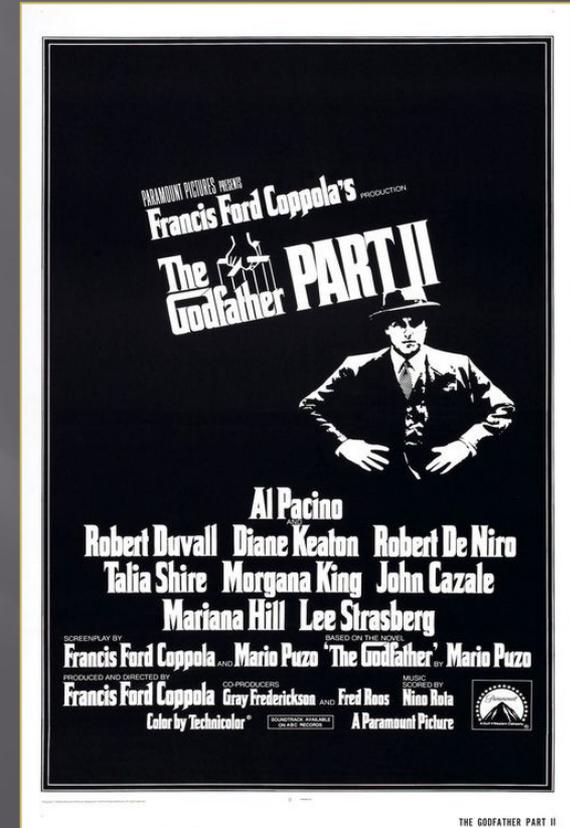
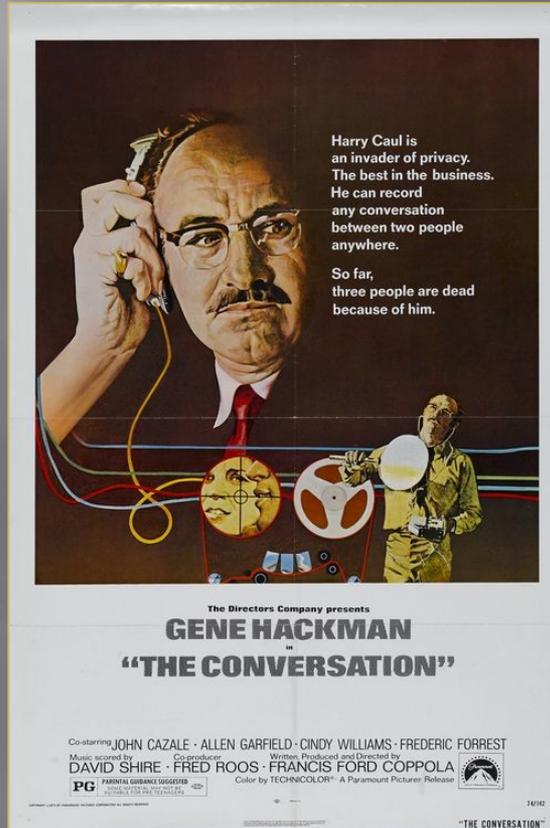
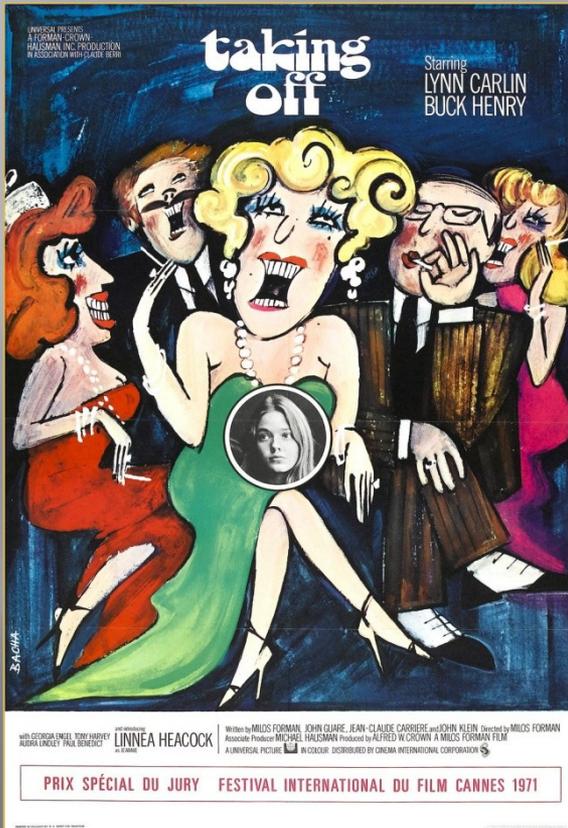
Most later youth-cult films flop

Campus press calls for boycotts on corporate exploitation

Near abandonment of youth-centred films



Formally Innovative Films also Underperform



The Myth of the Movie Brats

The Movie Brats or the New American Auteurs

Failure of youth-centered films sees supposed shift to youth-centered production

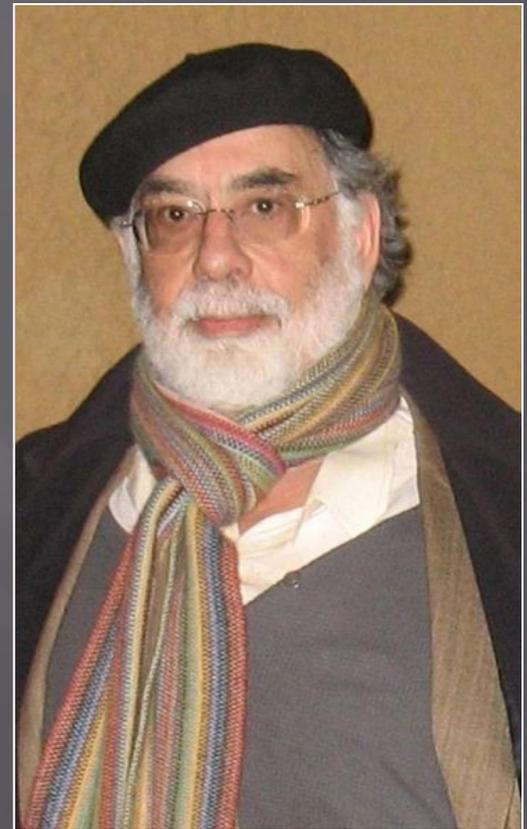
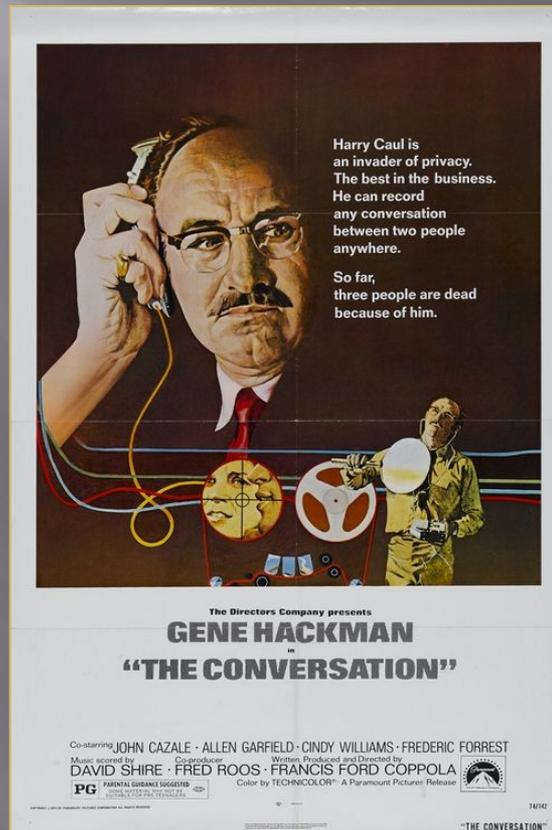
Management claims to abdicate creative control to filmmakers

Film school-educated, influenced by European Art cinema

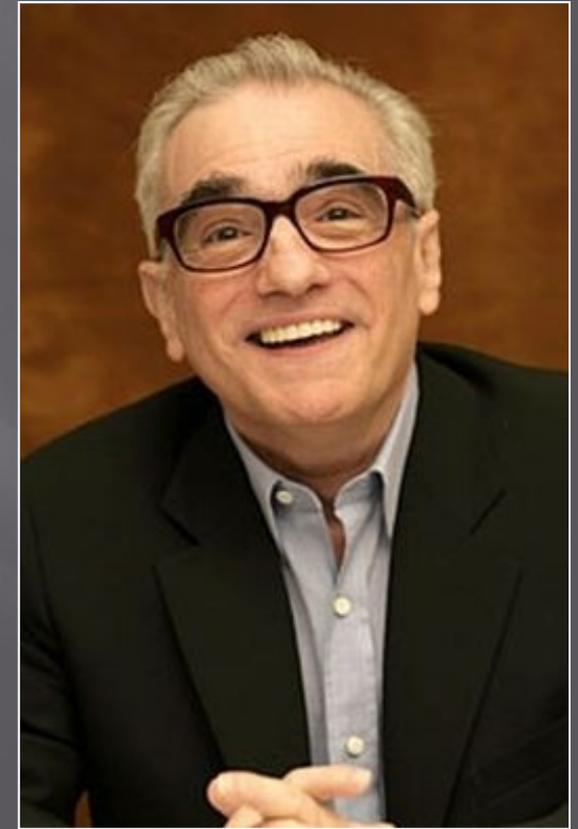
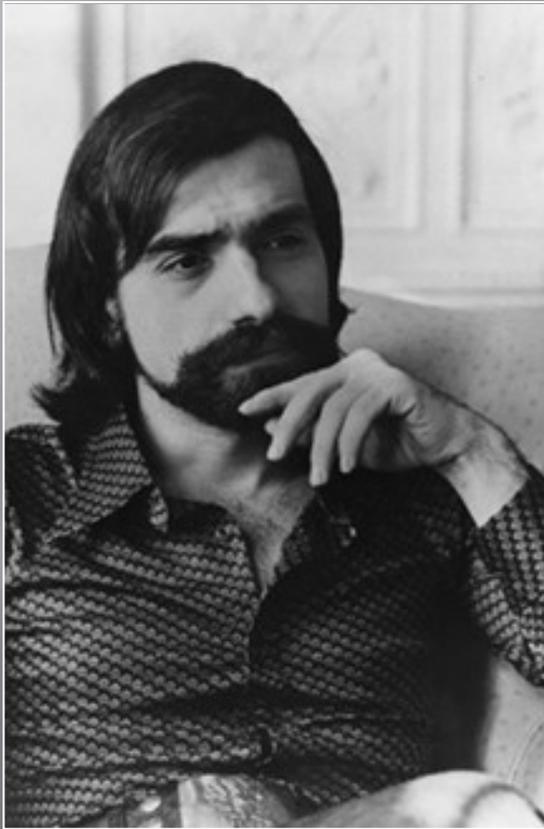
Draws on Auteur Theory – visionary directors transcend capitalist structure to imprint personal vision across films

Also part of Art cinema marketing strategies!!

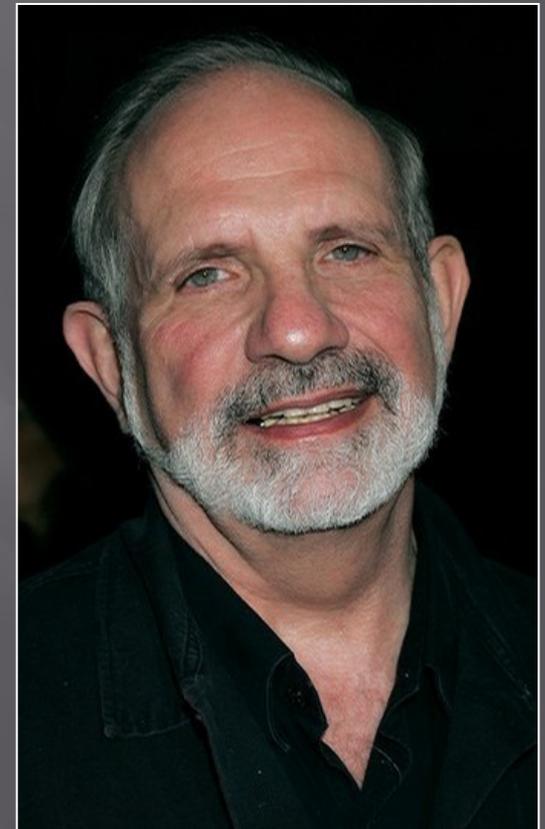
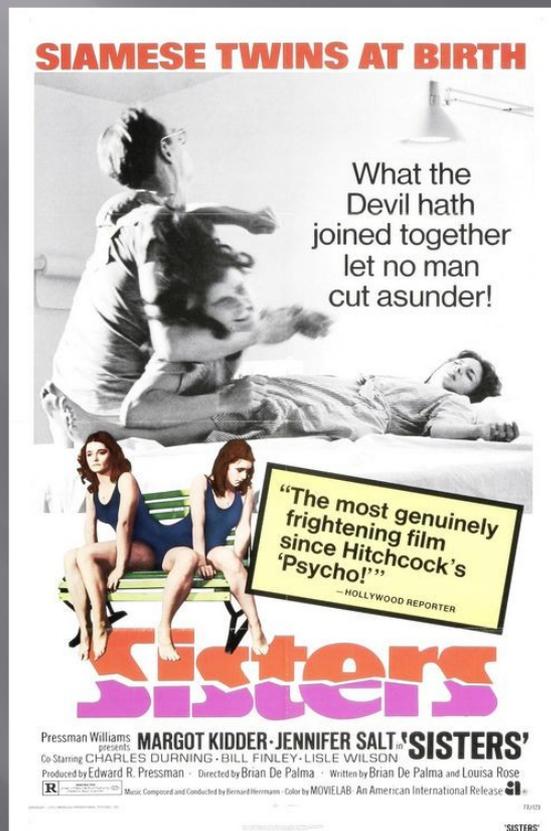
Movie Brat: Francis Ford Coppola (b. 1939)



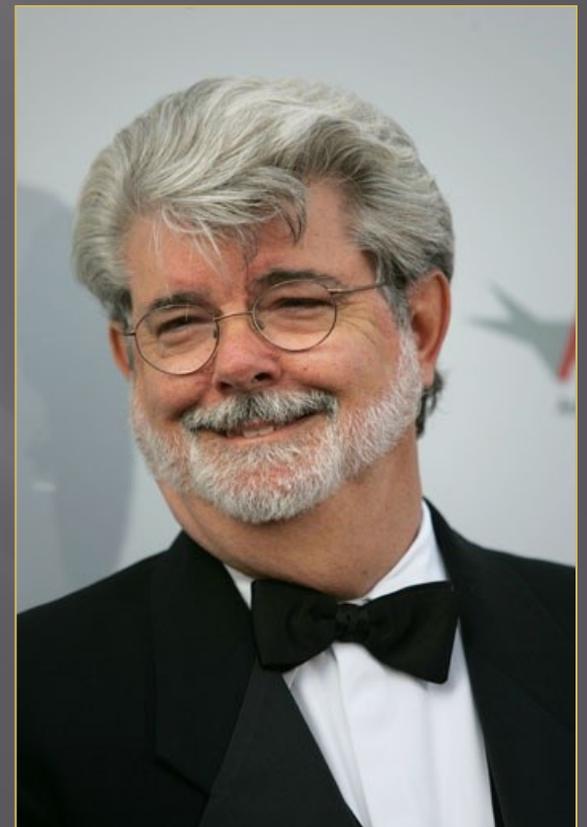
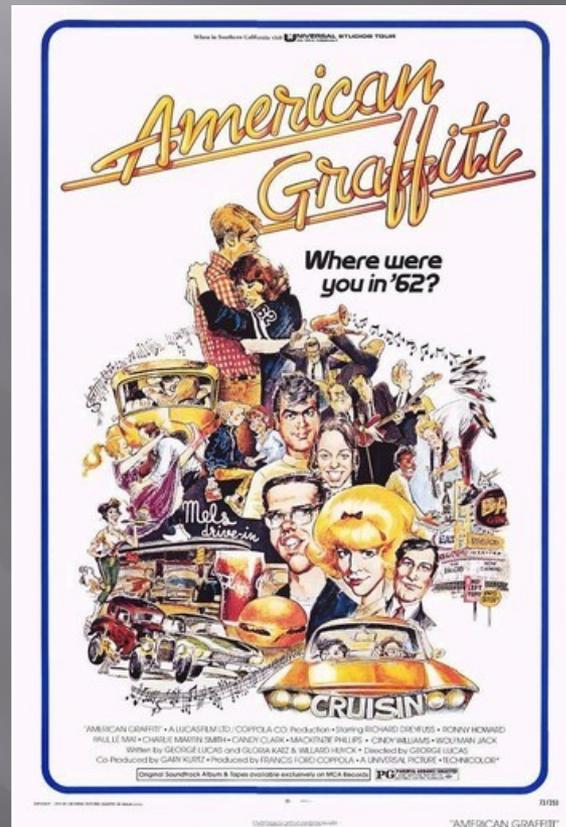
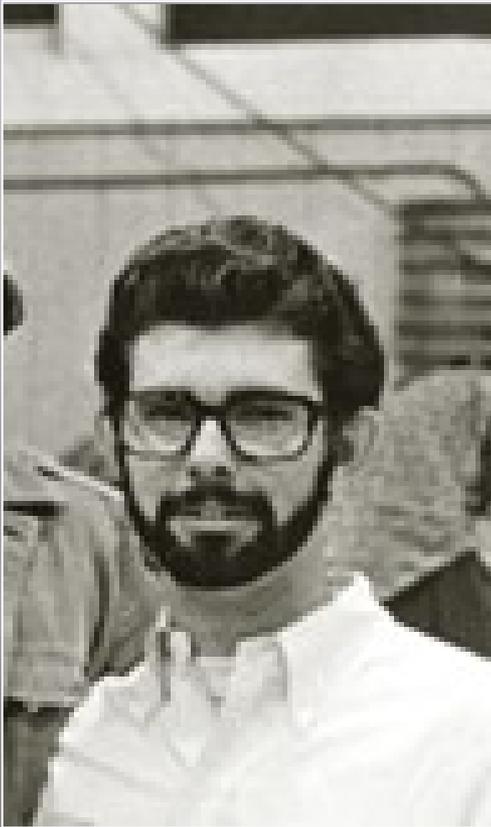
Movie Brat: Martin Scorsese (b. 1942)



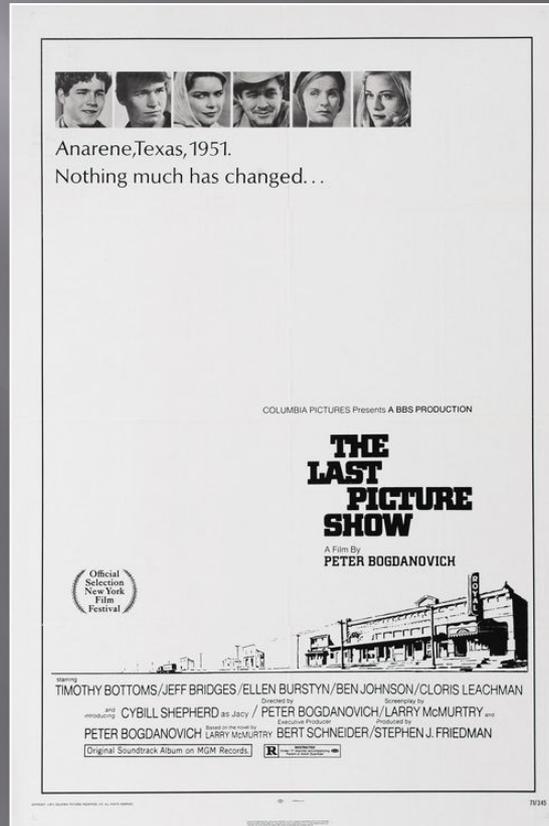
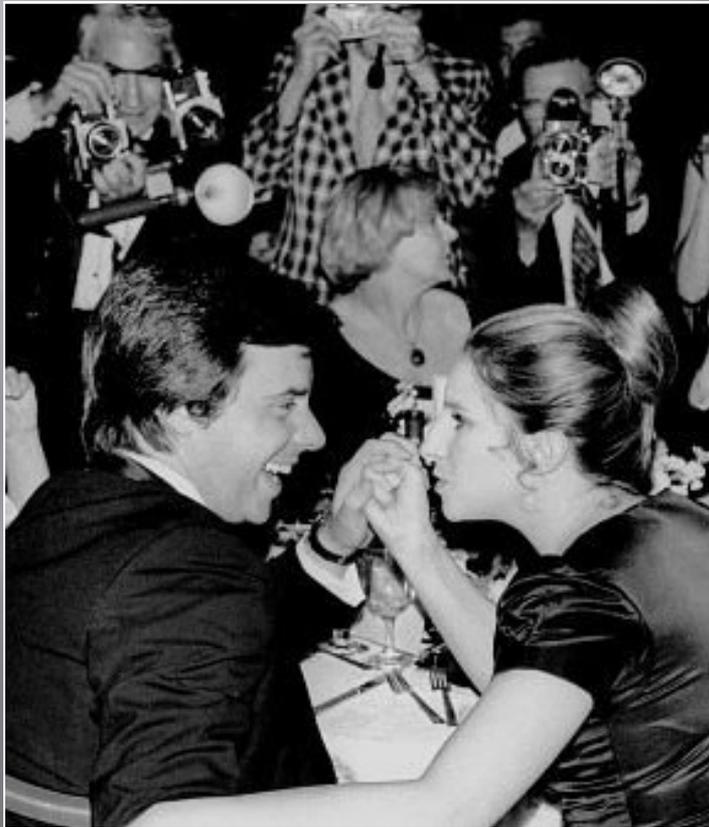
Movie Brat: Brian De Palma (b. 1940)



Movie Brat: George Lucas (b. 1944)



Movie Brat: Peter Bogdanovich (b. 1939)



Who Directed the Key Films of the “Hollywood Renaissance”?

The Graduate: Mike Nichols (b. 1931, Berlin);

Bonnie and Clyde: Arthur Penn (b. 1922);

Easy Rider: Dennis Hopper (b. 1936);

MASH: Robert Altman (b. 1925);

Chinatown: Roman Polanski (b. 1933, France).

The Allure of the Auteur Theory

- Movie Brats contributed few touchstone Renaissance films
- Most touchstone films directed by older, non-US, filmmakers
- A marketing sleight of hand
- Masked conglomeration strengthening management's control
- Targeted liberals with democratization of Hollywood practice
- Targeted youth with tales of generational conflict

Relativizing the Renaissance

Overplays Aesthetic and thematic difference

Most Renaissance films made to established genre frameworks

The Renaissance homogenizes and erases output

The Renaissance films were marginal industrially

- less than 1% of output
- rarely attracted large audiences

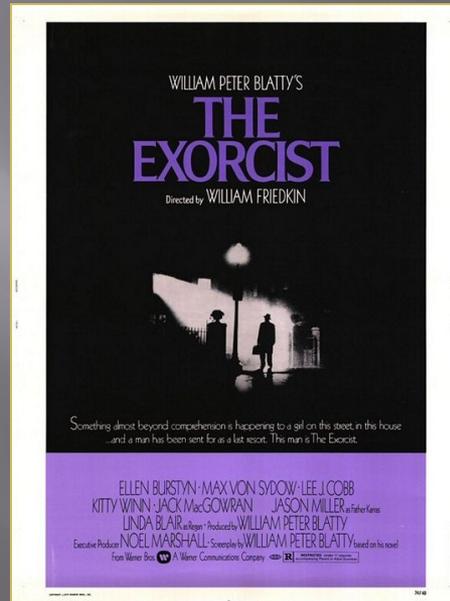
Radical and/or innovative films were not confined to 1967–1976

Business (almost) as usual ...

But production limits were designed to pressurize exhibitors!

Hollywood continued to make calculated blockbusters

Many Renaissance movies were high cost movies themselves



Conclusions: The Prestige of Prestige

Reflected tastes of middle-class journalists and academics

[Not “popular” hits consumed by a mass audience]

Enabled interested parties to accumulate cultural capital

Enabled critics to participate in belated American new wave

Enables film to be discussed as part of prestigious social histories

These latter functions have endured to the present day

Points to Consider

Was there a Hollywood Renaissance in the first place, or was it mainly a clever marketing strategy?

Have historians failed to interrogate the Renaissance because they prioritize change over continuity?

Are left-liberals overly protective of the idea of creative mavericks usurping power from businessmen that they sometimes end up masking the actual balance of power in the creative industries?