

New Hollywood, Version I

The Hollywood Renaissance

The thirteen years between *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 and *Heaven's Gate* in 1980 marked the last time it was really exciting to make movies in Hollywood, the last time people could be consistently proud of the pictures they made, the last time the community as a whole encouraged good work, the last time there was an audience that could sustain it.

Peter Biskind¹

Not since the mid 1970s has American cinema promised so much. Taut screenplays, subtle performances and moral ambiguities.

Observer, January 2000²

A giant pair of red lips fills the screen. The face turns away and we see the reflection in a mirror. The distinctive arched features of Faye Dunaway. Half a smile as she peers into the glass before turning away. Cut to a mid-shot in which Dunaway continues to turn and rises. But the match between shots is not quite right. An instant of transition is missing. The cut is abrupt, disarming. Dunaway pouts, naked to the waist but framed above the line of the breasts. She looks around her, moves to lie down on a bed. Cut to the final movement from a lower angle and a different position. Again the shift is not quite what we expect. Jumpy. As if a number of frames have been omitted. Dunaway's character grabs at a passing insect. Thumps the bedstead in frustration.

She pulls herself up, head framed through the horizontal bars. A sultry pose. The camera lurches awkwardly into a big close-up on her eyes and nose. Focus is lost momentarily in the process.

Thus begins *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and with it, arguably, the version of New Hollywood that became known and widely celebrated as the Hollywood 'Renaissance'. The jump cuts and other disorienting effects are direct borrowings from the films of the French New Wave, but used here to potent and specific effect. The impression created is one of restlessness, edginess and a palpable sense of sexual hunger or longing. These are expressions of the state of the fictionalized character played by Dunaway, the Depression-era bank-robber-to-be Bonnie Parker, but also perhaps of the moment in which the film appeared. Parker is presented, in a few bold stylistic strokes, as a figure as barely contained by her humdrum surroundings as the opening of the film is constrained by the 'rules' of classical Hollywood style. She is bursting with desire to escape. So, it seems, were some of the filmmakers coming to the fore in the late 1960s, along with a whole stratum of American culture and society.

The same year saw the release of *The Graduate*. Dustin Hoffman is Benjamin Braddock, a brilliant student and track star, newly home from college and also imprisoned, if in a more wealthy suburban milieu. His parents buy him a diving suit to celebrate, in which he lurks at the bottom of their swimming pool. Another expressive image of youthful alienation and incipient rebellion. Both films were box office hits, although *Bonnie and Clyde* was not initially given a very wide release. Two years later, in 1969, two unkempt figures high on drugs and laid back on motorcycles dispelled any doubts about whether these films were part of what was becoming a significant shift within the Hollywood landscape. *Easy Rider*, made on a budget of \$500,000 by a first-time director, was another box-office success, sparking a rush among the studios to cash in as the 1960s youth culture phenomenon finally gained a hold in the Hollywood mainstream. A key development was the fact that *Easy Rider* was released by Columbia Pictures, one of the major studios, rather than, as originally planned, American International Pictures (AIP). AIP was a low-budget operation that had specialized since the mid-1950s in cheap 'exploitation' material such as biker films, horror movies, beach movies and others aimed at the growing teenage

audience. *Easy Rider* marked a point at which this kind of filmmaking crossed over into the Hollywood mainstream. Money flowed more freely, if not in huge amounts, to a new generation of filmmakers who, if they did not exactly ‘take over’ (as the title of one classic account suggests³), made considerable inroads into the culture and business of Hollywood.

The period from the late 1960s until the mid or late 1970s has gained almost mythical status in the annals of Hollywood, its advent marked usually by the appearance and success of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider*, although there were earlier foreshadowings. It is remembered as an era in which Hollywood produced a relatively high number of innovative films that seemed to go beyond the confines of conventional studio fare in terms of their content and style and their existence as products of a purely commercial or corporate system. For some, this period represented the birth (or rebirth) of the Hollywood ‘art’ film, or something very like it. For others, it was a time when Hollywood made a gesture towards the more liberal or radical forces in American society. The period is often taken as a benchmark for measuring the state of Hollywood in subsequent decades. The products of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s are generally found wanting by comparison. Occasional signs of intelligent life in Hollywood today are often referred back to this earlier period, as suggested by the newspaper comment cited at the start of this chapter.

But what exactly happened in the Hollywood of the late 1960s and the 1970s, and why has it gained such resonance? A distinctive group of films did appear in this period, although exactly how far they stray from more familiar Hollywood themes and forms remains subject to debate. This chapter will explore some of the characteristics of these films and the debates surrounding them, and seek to explain why they appeared when they did. In doing so, it will follow closely the pattern suggested in the introduction, examining the Hollywood Renaissance from social, industrial and formal perspectives. The Hollywood Renaissance provides a good illustration of the need to combine such approaches.

It was, quite clearly, to some extent a product of a particular social and historical context: from the fervid brew of 1960s radicalism and

counterculture to the icy paranoia of the post-Watergate period. Yet, as will be seen, the ability of this context to become translated into the cinema was conditioned to a large extent by developments in the industrial structure and strategies of Hollywood from the 1950s onwards. The distinctive nature of the Hollywood Renaissance also needs to be considered at the level of film style. This is related in part to the social dimension. To question dominant myths and ideologies entails at least some departure from the formal conventions that play a significant part in their maintenance. The stylistic innovations of the Renaissance also have their own dynamic, however, traceable to sources such as the European 'art' film.

From counterculture to Watergate: the social context of the Hollywood Renaissance

The civil rights movement, race riots: 'black power'. The counterculture, hippies, drug-taking: 'flower power'. Youth, popular music and fashion. Protests against the war in Vietnam. Student radicalization and the 'New Left'. A new wave of feminism and demands for gay rights. Political hopes, dreams and nightmares. Kennedy, the Kennedy assassination. Another Kennedy: another assassination. Martin Luther King: assassination. My Lai, Cambodia and the shooting of students at Kent State. Battles on the streets of Chicago. Nixon. Watergate. Humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam. The oil crisis and a reduced scale of global American economic power. Making connections between Hollywood movies and the times in which they appear is not as straightforward a business as it might often appear. Sometimes, however, the case seems more clear-cut; the times are such that they appear to impose themselves forcefully on our consciousness, unmistakably invading the terrain of popular entertainment such as Hollywood cinema. The late 1960s and early 1970s appears to be such a time.

These were years of quite extraordinary upheaval and drama in American society.⁴ Far from everyone in America was directly involved in the events sketched above. Many probably continued to live their lives more or less unchanged. But these events had an undoubted impact

on American culture, if only through their pervasive coverage in the media. Single issues such as Vietnam and Watergate were potent enough in themselves. What is most striking about the period, however, is the sheer number of crises and upheavals. Their cumulative impact in a relatively short period of time is what gives grounds for assuming a further-reaching challenge to some American values and assumptions. Images of America as a place of freedom and democracy were dented, if not more seriously damaged.

How, though, were these events reflected in the films of the Hollywood Renaissance? A major ingredient of many of these films is a foregrounding of youthful alienation and/or rebellion. *Bonnie and Clyde* is, essentially, the story of two handsome, if rather mixed up, people who seek escape from the limitations of small-town life. Their chosen pursuit, bank robbery, appears to be a means to this end, rather than an end in itself. Neither seems to be in it for the money, little of which appears to be accumulated. They do it for the hell of it, for the freedom, celebrity and sheer style offered by a life of crime. Nods are made in the direction of a 'Robin Hood' agenda. The point is made that Bonnie and Clyde rob the same banks that are foreclosing against poor farmers. They become popular heroes, but more for the fantasy of escape they enact than for any very specific action. Relevance to the youth rebellions of the 1960s is implicit rather than explicit, the upheavals of the 1930s and the Depression a loose surrogate for those of the later decade.

The Graduate draws more directly on the 1960s culture of youthful alienation. The target is not banks and law-enforcement officers, but the consumer-oriented world of 1960s suburbia. Benjamin appears to have it all: looks (more or less), intelligence, youth, physical prowess and a world of family friends bearing connections and employment opportunities. But exactly what is he offered? 'Plastics', recommends Mr Robinson (Murray Hamilton). A career in plastics, the epitome of all that is fake, unnatural and superficial. The world of his parents is presented as a plastic world, as bright, shallow and unreal as the interior of the fish-tank in Benjamin's bedroom, through the glass of which his figure is sometimes framed to underline his alienation. Benjamin eventually breaks free, swapping a one-dimensional sexual relationship

with the middle-aged Mrs Robinson (Anne Bancroft) for 'true romance' with her daughter Elaine (Katherine Ross).

The satirical portrait of conformist suburbia offered by *The Graduate* is in keeping with broader images of 1960s rebellion, although Benjamin Braddock is hardly a fully-fledged hero of the counterculture. For all his escape from the world of his parents, he remains a rather 'straight' individual. His hair is about early Beatles length, a dark bob with a parting: long enough probably to annoy the generation of his parents, but modest by the standards of the late 1960s. He is clean-cut, dressed conservatively in jacket and collar. As such, Benjamin is perhaps not untypical of contemporaries who embraced some of the decade's more radical criticisms of authority. Many came from similar backgrounds, the cosseted university-educated products of the middle classes who had the time and opportunity to 'drop out'. Benjamin is too naïve and otherwise preoccupied to be much like the student 'outside agitator' suspected by his landlord during the pursuit of Elaine in Berkeley. But he could easily shift in that direction. The social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s were diverse, often overlapping but also filled with contradictions. Leftist radicals in the student or anti-Vietnam movement and black leaders of various kinds had important points in common with the 'hippie' movement, for example. They shared some of the same targets. But there were also plenty of divergences. How much would the escaped Benjamin Braddock have in common with the central figures of *Easy Rider*, the paranoid Billy (Dennis Hopper) and the laid-back Wyatt (Peter Fonda)? Not much, perhaps, but who knows what change another two years of the counterculture might effect?

Easy Rider, in a sense, takes up the story where *The Graduate* leaves off. It offers a paean to the freedoms of life on the road, 1960s style, fuelled not so much by gasoline as by marijuana, LSD and the anthems of contemporary music. The film has plot and narrative development, but its appeal is close to that of a musical. Its heart is in the regular and frequent 'numbers' in which Billy and Wyatt cruise across America, especially the open landscapes of the south-west, to the accompaniment of acts such as Steppenwolf, The Byrds and The Band. The presentation of the numbers is a celebration of the counterculture reduced again,



1. The counterculture goes Hollywood: on the road, 1960s-style, in *Easy Rider*, © Columbia Pictures, 1969. Ronald Grant archive

primarily, to a freewheeling spirit of freedom, motion and style. The landscape traversed by Billy and Wyatt is undoubtedly that of the 1960s. The commune in which a group of city kids attempt sincerely, but somewhat desperately, to create a pastoral idyll in semi-desert. The southern small-town café where a group of teenage girls are bursting with attraction to the passing bikers while the adults are all crew-cuts, innuendo and menace; an outpost of the redneck world whose flarings of racial violence were regularly thrust onto television screens across America in the 1960s.

The core of the film celebrates the counterculture, the primary source of its appeal to the youth audience Hollywood belatedly began to court. There is also a more cynical edge, however. Billy and Wyatt are on a binge of freedom, but their lives are not exactly without clutter. Their gas-tanks are stuffed with dollars, the proceeds of a cocaine deal. Wyatt is most of what we might hope for in an attractive ‘hippie’ character: mellow, easy-going and generous. Billy is very different: edgy and hostile, suggesting perhaps the down-side of overindulgence in recreational drugs.

The texture and appeal of *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde* lies to a large extent in their evocations of freedom. Both are clouded, however, by a sense of doom. The protagonist of *The Graduate* achieves a gradual emancipation. Released from one of the last trappings of his suburban inheritance – the rich kid’s red sports car, which runs out of fuel – he and Elaine escape aboard a bus. Bonnie, Clyde, Billy and Wyatt all end up dead, victims of the forces of repression and reaction. Bonnie and Clyde die, balletically, amid a vigilante hail of bullets. Billy and Wyatt are cut down more unceremoniously, arbitrary targets of a redneck shotgun. If the highway is the avenue to freedom in these films, it is also the place of death, of bleeding bodies left on the verge.

It is not hard to read these violent endings in terms of the shifting dynamics of the later 1960s, even if both films were released before the high season of assassination, 1968, which witnessed the killings of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King and the revelation of the massacre at My Lai. The events of the 1960s were filled with currents and eddies, not all of which moved in one direction, but there was a distinct sense of escalating violence, and at times absurdity, in the latter part of the decade. The end of *The Graduate* is largely the stuff of romantic fantasy, although a certain sense of unease lingers over the final images of Benjamin and Elaine on the bus, overlaid by Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘The Sound of Silence’ (‘hello darkness, my old friend’), the song used to underpin the sense of alienation created in the film’s opening sequence. Those of *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde* are examples of an important aspect of the films of the Renaissance: a recognition of dark forces that threaten the more utopian or idealistic aspirations of 1960s social movements. (Another strain of films from the early 1970s marked a violent backlash against the counterculture itself, or that for which it supposed to stand, especially a cycle of right-wing vigilante films such as the *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* series.)

It is possible, at the risk of some simplification, to divide the social context of the Hollywood Renaissance into two main currents. One, as we have seen, celebrates aspects of 1960s rebellion. The other explores or manifests elements of a darker mood in which alienation leads towards fear and disillusion. If the counterculture, ‘flower power’ and 1967’s proclaimed ‘summer of love’ represent one side of the equation, Vietnam

and Watergate are pervasive reference points for the other. The two are not entirely separate, of course, either in the history of the period or in its reflection in Hollywood. Vietnam, especially, was a major catalyst for a host of oppositional currents, a key factor in whatever coherence is found in the various strains of 1960s alienation and radicalism in America. Landmark films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* contain elements of each, appearing almost on the cusp between one mood and the other.

Many films of the Hollywood Renaissance lean more heavily in the direction of cynicism. Exactly how far the influence of the Vietnam war was felt is not easy to determine. Except for the jingoistic drum-beating of *The Green Berets* (1968), a film that argued a case for American involvement, the war itself was rarely confronted directly until the late 1970s. The closest to a substantial Hollywood treatment was *M*A*S*H* (1970), an irreverent black comedy the Korean setting of which was clearly a substitute for Vietnam. The presence of the war is felt in the background of numerous other films, including *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), a portrait of countercultural lifestyles over which hangs the threat of the draft. Traces of Vietnam and its fallout have been identified in various other films of the period, in genres ranging from the western to horror and those featuring the alienated returning veteran. The traditional assumptions and conventions of the western came under critical scrutiny in numerous films, as will be seen in chapter 4. The horrors of films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) have also been associated with the broad climate of the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras.⁵

Watergate, along with some of the previous secret machinations of the Johnson and Nixon regimes, is usually credited with the development of a specific sub-genre in the 1970s: the paranoid conspiracy thriller. Watergate is treated most explicitly in *All the President's Men* (1976), the story of how two journalists pursued a trail that led to the resignation of President Nixon. A sober account that presents its protagonists as dwarfed by the scale of the conspiracy, *All the President's Men* is not, however, the best representative of the Watergate-era sub-genre. Woodward and Bernstein are seen to prevail. Their task might be difficult, but not impossible. Heroic endeavour, largely in the form

of dogged persistence, is sufficient to uncover the conspiracy. Demons are exorcized.⁶ A similar sense of resolution is offered by *Executive Action* (1973), which offers a version of the kind of right-wing conspiracy that might have led to the assassination of JFK.

The most interesting examples of the conspiracy genre, from the point of view of a 'Renaissance' of more challenging filmmaking, are those in which no such solutions are found. *Executive Action* is notable for the dullness of a very flat, matter-of-fact exposition, an approach perhaps deemed necessary at the time for the imagination of so heinous a crime. *All the President's Men* follows a linear narrative form, methodically charting the gradual uncovering of secret deeds. Some other films of the period offer spirals of intrigue, deceit and misunderstanding. Two prominent examples are *The Conversation* (1974) and *The Parallax View* (1974). *The Conversation*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, focuses on Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), an audio surveillance expert. Caul is the best in his field, yet far from a typical Hollywood hero. Balding and habitually garbed in a cheap plastic mac, Caul lives primarily for his work ('I don't have anything personal; nothing of value'). He is obsessive about his security – that of his workplace, his San Francisco apartment and a self kept equally under lock and key. At work, in a large, impersonal warehouse-type building, he has a strict policy. His concern is for the quality of eavesdropped recording, not what is said ('I don't care what they're talking about. All I want is a nice fat recording'). One case begins to get beneath his defences, however. He starts to wonder what it is all about. Why are the couple whose conversation he seeks to reconstruct from a variety of taped sources seemingly in fear of their lives?

So far, this could be conventional enough. The taciturn expert has a heart after all. The uncommitted suddenly finds commitment. He smells a rat and refuses to turn over the tapes. He gets involved. This is the stuff of potentially mainstream narrative: the transformation of a prickly, awkward and passive individual into active protagonist, hero. Caul remains a grey and unromantic figure, but one who refuses to be used, as he turns investigator rather than mere recording device. But there is a problem. He gets it all wrong. As a technical expert, his work appears to be flawless, legendary in the field. When it comes to interpretation,

he is hopelessly mistaken. The couple are not under threat, but part of a murder conspiracy. The incessant replaying of Caul's recordings on the soundtrack of the film focuses on an initially hidden phrase. 'He'd *kill* us if he got the chance', is how Caul hears it. This is what sparks his conscience. Events prove the emphasis wrong. It should be: 'He'd kill *us* if he got the chance', a protest not of fear but in defence of pre-meditated murder.

Caul's realization comes too late, only after the bloody remains of the act overflow, in horror film imagery, from the toilet bowl of a hotel room. He is left powerless to act, his tapes having been stolen. Worse still, the privacy on which he sets so much store is invaded by the conspirators. His own apartment is bugged. He tears it apart, slowly, obsessively, down to the bare plaster of the walls, in search of the device. The film closes with Caul finding refuge only in a womb-like retreat, playing his saxophone, the camera panning back and forth across the ruined apartment with a mechanical repetitiveness that itself suggests the implacable presence of a security camera recording his every breath.

The Parallax View begins in positive and familiar fashion. A conspiracy of political assassination is suggested, but to be combated by a hero who looks the part, not the least because he is played by Warren Beatty. Joe Frady is a reporter, the profession to be immortalized in *All the President's Men*. Events move him rapidly from scepticism to belief in the existence of the conspiracy. He is doubted initially by his editor, as is the normal fate of such characters. He begins to penetrate the shady Parallax Corporation, posing as the type of character it seeks to recruit: a social misfit. A twist reveals to us that the corporation is on to him. The editor is poisoned, leaving Frady on his own. This produces a dramatic frisson, but no great departure from convention. Heroes are expected to face 'unexpected' setbacks, the greater to highlight their eventual success. Frady continues on his mission, trailing one of the conspirators to a hall where a political rally is being rehearsed. He pursues his quarry into the shadows of the gantries and walkways high above the hall. Shots rings out and the candidate is assassinated.

Does Frady capture the assassin and/or expose the truth? No. The reverse happens. He is mistaken for the killer. We might still expect him to prevail, but as he attempts to escape through a doorway he is

shot dead. Not only does he die, but he is also made to take the fall. He has been set up, thoroughly traduced. Precisely when he thinks he is closer to proof of the conspiracy he is tying himself in its knots. His efforts to expose the truth help to secure the lie. *The Parallax View* closes with the repetition of an image seen after a previous assassination, witnessed by Frady, at the start of the film. The findings of a tribunal of inquiry into the assassination are delivered by a panel of anonymous figures sitting in line beneath a massive wooden façade, from which the camera slowly retreats: a monument to cover-ups, real or imaginary, from the assassination of John F. Kennedy to Watergate. Frady is found to have acted alone. Conspiracy is denied and, by implication, continues. Heroism and democracy are negated, very much against the norms of Hollywood.

From counterculture to Watergate, the events of the 1960s and early 1970s seemed to have a distinct influence on the films of the Hollywood Renaissance. It is never easy to make direct connections, however, or to establish precisely how the traces of historical events or social currents find their way onto the screen. Many films defined as part of the Renaissance might be linked with their social or historical context in a more diffuse manner. The term suggests more than just films 'about' youthful alienation, the counterculture or the impact of Vietnam and Watergate. Other dimensions of these films also need to be explored. Qualifications need to be made even in what appear to be the more obvious cases. *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* appeared in 1974, the year Nixon resigned and two years after the Watergate break-in that led to his downfall. This might be the perfect time-scale for the production of features drawing on the mood created by ongoing events. But it is not that simple. What is the exact provenance of these films? When were they initiated? Did they draw on the history of Watergate and its aftermath, or were they already in the pipeline. Are their links with Watergate real or largely a matter of hindsight?

The full scale of the conspiracy of which Watergate was a part emerged slowly, which would make a strong connection between these films and the specifics of Watergate very hard to demonstrate. Full-blown Watergate conspiracy was not revealed in time to have shaped films made in 1974. The closer we look, the less clear-cut these matters

appear. The idea for *The Conversation* was developed in 1967. Its genesis has a link to Watergate, but an oblique one. The scenario was inspired by an article about a sound expert who was later to be called in to examine the White House tapes during the Watergate investigations.⁷ The film is also strongly indebted to *Blow Up* (1966), directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, an allusive tale in which evidence of murder is inadvertently uncovered by a fashion photographer in 1960s London.

On release, these films might have entered into the discourse of the moment, becoming part of the Watergate-era mood. Brief mention of Nixon's difficulties is inserted at a key and nightmarish moment in *The Conversation*, during a television broadcast Caul uses to drown out the sounds of murder from a neighbouring hotel room. The broader political context is introduced by association. A distinction can be made between where films like these *come from* and what they become *part of*. Some films might qualify as products of 1960s or 1970s movements on both counts. *Easy Rider*, for example, draws on aspects of the counterculture and contributed to a wave of further youth and counterculture oriented filmmaking. Neither *The Conversation* nor *The Parallax View* have their roots in Watergate as such, unlike *All the President's Men*. It is generally harder to make firm connections with specific events than with less clearly defined or amorphous objects such as the counterculture or a general '1960s' radicalization or later 1960s and 1970s paranoia. Numerous events of the 1960s had the potential to undermine traditional concepts of heroic agency. The plot of *The Parallax View*, for example, based on a 1970 novel by Loren Singer, has its roots in the political assassinations of the 1960s, a major aspect of the more general atmosphere of the time. The wider culture of bugging and clandestine operations implied by *The Conversation* was far from limited to Watergate, having been used by Nixon against other political opponents and by the CIA and other agencies against overseas enemies from Cuba to Vietnam.

Films often reflect something of the time in which they were made or appeared, but they rarely do this in a simple manner, even in so heightened a context as the events of the 1960s and 1970s. Films do not *just* reflect or express the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times. They may do so, to varying extents, but not directly. Hollywood films, especially,

remain the products not just of their culture and society but of a specific industrial regime. The extent to which particular social currents find outlets in Hollywood is strongly shaped by this industrial context. The industrial context of the Hollywood Renaissance was one in which a number of potentially far-reaching changes had taken place, changes that played an important part in helping to determine the kinds of films that were produced.

Crisis and new freedoms: the industrial context of the Hollywood Renaissance

In 1946 weekly cinema attendance in the United States was about 90 million. By 1950 it had plunged to 60 million. In 1960 the figure was 40 million. A low of some 17 million was reached in the early 1970s, after which numbers recovered to about 20 million in 1980 and 27 million in 2000.⁸ The reasons for this catastrophic fall in the number of people going to the cinema have been much debated. Television is often assumed to be the main culprit. But the rise of television was only one aspect of a wider process of social change that undermined and shifted the social and cultural position of cinema. The post-war years saw an economic boom in America. Not everyone was invited to the prosperity party, as studies of continued poverty and inequality revealed, but many Americans were better off than before.

Increased prosperity is not good news for all. Not for the cinema in this case. Cinemagoing is relatively inexpensive and requires no great investment of time or resources. Higher earnings and shorter hours enabled many people to pursue other leisure activities that required both. The 1950s saw a large increase in participation in other activities, especially sport and pursuits centred around the home, as rivals to cinemagoing. Another major factor was a movement of population that was close to epochal in scale. Huge numbers of Americans moved to the suburbs in the 1950s. This had an impact on cinema attendance for a number of reasons. Relatively few cinemas were located in the new suburbs at this time, before the development of the shopping-mall based multiplex of later decades. The most prestigious cinemas

were in the city centres that were losing much of their population to the suburbs. New homes in the suburbs brought their own leisure attractions. These included television, but also other activities such as gardening, do-it-yourself and back-yard barbecues. Added to these developments was the ‘baby-boom’ of the post-war years, which saw a rise in the number of couples with young children and less able to get out to the cinema at night.

Hollywood in the 1950s was faced with large-scale social forces that represented a significant threat to the industry. It was also hit by major blows closer to home. The most significant was the enforced break-up of the vertically-integrated studio system. The dominance of the major studios was secured by their control of the entire film industry, including distribution and exhibition as well as production. This system began to be put in place in the late 1910s and early 1920s. By the 1930s the industry was dominated by the ‘big five’ major studios: Warner Brothers, Loew’s Inc. (which owned MGM), Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox and RKO. Each had substantial holdings in all stages of the business: producing films, distributing them (at home and overseas) and owning cinemas in which to show them. Alongside the ‘big five’ were the so-called ‘little three’ – Universal, Columbia and United Artists – which did not have fully integrated operations but generally worked with the majors.

The production end of the business attracted most of the attention, the glamour and the mythology of Hollywood as the ‘dream factory’. But it was control of distribution and exhibition that was crucial to the way the system worked. Distribution is not a glamorous, ‘sexy’ or even a very visible activity. It is an essential part of the business, however. The major studios had large national and international distribution networks that formed a vital link in the chain. Any production company wanting to get its films seen had to go through this avenue. The overseas distribution networks developed by the majors were particularly important, enabling Hollywood to dominate most of the world’s markets as early as the 1920s.⁹

Exhibition, in the studio era, was seen as the most profitable end of the business. It represented by far the largest investment of the majors. The huge production facilities and star salaries accounted for only about

five per cent of the total, according to figures cited by Douglas Gomery. Distribution accounted for one percent. Something like 94 per cent of investment during the 1930s and 1940s was tied up in ownership of cinemas across America.¹⁰ Even at this level of investment, the 'big five' did not own the majority of cinemas. Tino Balio suggests that of 18,000 cinemas in the United States in 1943, the majors owned or directly controlled only 3,000, little more than 15 per cent.¹¹ What mattered was not sheer numbers, but the kinds of cinemas they owned.

The most important cinemas were the major first-run theatres in the big cities, the movie palaces. They accounted for some 70 per cent of the entire box-office. It was here that the majors gained much of their power. They owned or controlled most of these prestige cinemas. This gave them a large slice of the box-office receipts, but also a form of control that spread more widely. The higher budget pictures produced by the majors would open in the first-run cinemas, where they would be established as the prestige hits other cinema owners needed if they were to make money. The majors were able to dictate the terms on which they made these films available. Independent cinema chains would only be allowed to show the big films if they agreed to take a string of less attractive movies, a system known as 'block booking', which gave the studios an almost guaranteed outlet for even their least desirable products.

The big studios worked together to ensure their own success and to freeze out any potential competition.¹² At the level of exhibition, they competed against one another in the big cities, but not elsewhere. The 'big five' bought cinema chains in different regions of the country, effectively carving it up among themselves. In smaller cinemas across the United States they showed each other's films and gave them preferable treatment over any other products. The result was that a big success for one studio benefited all at the box-office. One of the great myths surrounding the Hollywood of the studio era was that it was a highly competitive business. It was not, really, certainly not among the majors. Neither was it quite the frantic, inspired, crazy world often implied in portraits that focus only on the world of production ruled over by charismatic studio heads. Competition did not even exist to any great extent at the level of production, where the studios often

loaned one another stars or other talents on easy terms not made available to anyone outside this cosy relationship.

What the studio system amounted to was not strictly a monopoly – control by a single entity – but an oligopoly, control by a few. It was an effective system, ensuring largely stable control of the film industry for three decades. It always existed under the shadow of legal threat, however. An earlier attempt to control the film business through near-monopoly organization had been declared illegal under American anti-trust laws against monopoly practices. The Motion Picture Patents Company, created in 1908, was dissolved in 1915 after legal action, although a number of other factors had already rendered it ineffective. Action against the major studios was launched in 1938. Ten years later, after a series of decisions, delays and appeals, the case reached the Supreme Court, which ruled that that studio system was an illegal monopoly.

Various restrictions were imposed, the most significant of which were that the studios were obliged to sell off their cinema chains and the block booking system was outlawed. This removed two key sources of stability for the majors. A place in the exhibition market could no longer be guaranteed for the whole production slate. The enforced sale of cinema chains freed up capital in the short term but it also removed the principal source of collateral against which the studios had gained finance for production, a development that was to have implications for the future shape of Hollywood considered in the next chapter, ‘eventually forcing the studios to find other sources of capital through arrangements (mergers, for example) with better-capitalized, better-diversified companies.’¹³ The timing could hardly have seemed worse. The Supreme Court ruling came just as box-office attendance began to nose-dive. Hollywood was also under pressure from the McCarthyite anti-Communist witch-hunt and from post-war restrictions on the export of films to some overseas markets. Important elements of the system appeared to be unravelling. Two major sets of changes can be identified as a result. Each helped, potentially, to create some space at the industrial level for what was to become known as the Hollywood Renaissance.

The production system changed. Falling audience numbers and the loss of the security provided by ownership of key cinemas made the

old factory-style system no longer viable. It was not worth tying up resources on huge permanent staffs and in-house departments. The majors scaled down their operations, making large numbers of staff redundant and selling resources. Studio space was hired out for independent productions, in which the majors were directly involved to varying extents. Independent production was not entirely new within the studio system. The studios had maintained relationships with a number of independent producers who had provided some of their most successful box-office attractions. The most prominent of these figures was David Selznick, a former executive at MGM, Paramount and RKO, who produced high prestige films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939) after founding his own Selznick International Pictures in 1935.

The difference in the 1950s was that independent production became increasingly the norm rather than the exception. Films were put together on an ad hoc package basis. The necessary ingredients of production were assembled film by film, or in small portfolios. A producer, or increasingly frequently an agent, would take responsibility for the organization of a project. A script would be written or rights secured for the adaptation of a property in another form. A director, stars and other key personnel would be assembled. These would constitute the basic 'package', for which finance would then be raised. This system created potential freedoms, but also its own constraints. The freedoms are of direct relevance to the Hollywood Renaissance. The constraints will be considered at length in the following chapter.

Potentially, at least, there was more scope for fresh ideas, approaches and innovation in this changed industrial context. Production did not fragment entirely. The studios remained powerful bases for production, with key producing and creative talent often locked in to individual studios through multi-picture agreements. But films were no longer just the product of a few giant machines ruled by a small number of executives. The whole system was potentially more open. Finance still had to be agreed, of course, and could be a major stumbling block, as could access to distribution. But it could be a good deal cheaper to make films in this way. Independent one-off productions might have lost some of the economies of scale available to the production-line

system, but they did not have to carry the overheads of running a large permanent establishment. It took some time for the potential freedoms of this new system to be realized. Until the mid-1960s the studios remained in the grip of an ageing generation, including legendary names such as Jack Warner at Warner Brothers and Darryl F. Zanuck at Twentieth Century Fox, figures who appeared increasingly out of touch with the large baby-boom generation coming of age during the decade, an audience often catered to more effectively by low-budget outfits such as AIP.¹⁴

The system of film production became more fragmented. So did Hollywood's conception of its audience. The films of the studio era had, in general, been targeted at a wide-ranging audience. It is not true to say that they were aimed at a single entirely undifferentiated 'mass' audience. Recent studies have argued, convincingly, that such claims had more to do with the industry's attempt to present itself as a fount of democracy, a strategy designed at least partly to deflect attention from its restrictive industrial practices.¹⁵ The studios, especially at the exhibition end of the business, were conscious of divisions in the audience and targeted films accordingly. A particular distinction was made between films aimed at 'sophisticated' or 'unsophisticated' audiences, a division often made along geographical lines, between major cities and small town or rural locations. Other distinctions were made according to age and gender.¹⁶ The ideal production would succeed in appealing across a range of audience groups, but many were targeted more specifically.

All the films of the studio era shared a certain horizon of possibilities, however, shaped by the confines of the Production Code drawn up in 1930. Films might have been targeted at specific groups more than others, but they were expected to be suitable for viewers of all ages. To gain distribution and exhibition, each film had to carry a seal of approval from the Production Code Administration (PCA), a body created in 1934 by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). This mechanism of self-regulation by the industry was designed to avoid the threat of censorship by others, as suggested in the introduction, ranging from local authorities to the Catholic church's powerful Legion of Decency. The PCA often acted in collusion with

such bodies, however, its primary motivation being to avoid bans or boycotts that might threaten the commercial prospects of individual films or studios.¹⁷ Self-regulation also added another dimension to oligopoly control by the big studios. The ability to award or withhold the seal was a source of considerable power.

This system of regulating the content of Hollywood films came under increasing pressure from the 1950s. Audiences were being lost in droves and Hollywood was keen to stem the flow. Many films continued to be targeted at a broad constituency, potentially that of the idealized 'family audience'. But some were not. Some were targeted at the growing 'youth' audience. Others aimed more challenging or explicit material at an 'adult' market. The films of the Hollywood Renaissance were, in a sense, targeted at a combination of the two: relatively youthful viewers thought to be receptive to a harsher and more questioning portrayal of aspects of American culture and society. The audience for Hollywood films was generally becoming younger, more educated and in some cases more radical in its views than that typical of the studio era. If some films of the 1960s and 1970s foregrounded aspects of the youthful counterculture, in other words, this was not simply a reflection of social context. It was also part of a deliberate audience-targeting strategy. The Production Code system began to creak under a variety of strains.

The break-up of the vertically integrated studio system threatened to erode the power of the PCA, which was based on studio control of the entire process of distribution and exhibition. A less centralized industrial landscape could dilute or evade its power. *The Moon is Blue* (1953), a comedy about sex and seduction directed by Otto Preminger, was released by United Artists despite being refused a seal of approval. The code specifically prohibited the use of seduction as a subject for comedy.¹⁸ The film was banned in some places but picked up for successful exhibition by two big cinema chains.¹⁹ The same company and director repeated the procedure with *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), a story of drug addiction, another forbidden topic. Both films were profitable, partly as a result of the controversies they sparked. Controversial films held the lure of pleasures forbidden in other media, especially television. This was a significant element of their appeal to the industry at the time.

The success of *The Man with the Golden Arm* led to a revision of the Production Code in 1956. 'Responsible' treatments of drug addiction, prostitution and inter-racial sexual relationships were permitted.²⁰ Other barriers gradually fell in the late 1950s and during the 1960s, including restrictions on representations of 'illicit' sex, particularly the suggestion that adultery or sex outside marriage could be attractive. The Production Code was further revised and shortened in 1966 before being abandoned entirely in 1968 in favour of a ratings system. The ratings system institutionalized the process of targeting films at particular audience groups. A formal system of classification was used to determine the suitability of films for one age group or another. The bounds of possible expression were widened, although at the risk of restrictions on the permitted audience.

The principal motivation for the development of the ratings system was commercial, the box-office potential of more 'adult' material having been demonstrated by the success of a number of foreign and American independent features that pushed at the boundaries of the permissible during the 1960s. Extending the limits of what could be represented in the mainstream also enabled the studios to compete with the sex film industry, a low-budget sector that boomed for five years from 1968, with films such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) outperforming many big-budget studio productions. Tighter local regulation of the kinds of films that could be shown in 'legitimate' theatres was introduced as a result of Supreme Court decisions in 1973, a development that left the more mainstream 'adult' market in the hands of Hollywood.²¹ The success of the studios in adapting to changed circumstances was, again, partly the result of learning from more marginal and independent competitors, including in this case, Jon Lewis suggests, 'how to market a product and how to use artistic freedom as a means toward better identifying that product in advance of release'. This lesson was to prove central to the New Hollywood of the corporate blockbuster explored in the next chapter.²² The ratings system, created and administered by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the successor to the MPPDA, also reasserted studio control over entry into the marketplace, an MPAA rating, like the previous PCA seal, being required for success in the commercial mainstream.²³

The breakdown and eventual replacement of the Production Code was a development of great significance to the establishment of the Hollywood Renaissance. Few of the films associated with the Renaissance could have existed within the confines of the regime policed by the PCA in the forms that made them so striking, precisely as something new and innovative. Drug-taking could not be shown at all, let alone celebrated as part of the counterculture. The sexual 'liberation' of the 1960s could not have found its way to the screen unless soundly condemned, and even then without any nudity or unpunished enjoyment. Neither could the explicit violence of certain key films, or the depiction of criminals as heroic, justified or victims of oppression.

Few if any of the films examined so far in this chapter could have reached the screen in such circumstances. The violence in a film such as *Bonnie and Clyde* could have been toned down, made more implicit, but that would change fundamentally the nature of the film. Much of its impact lies in its sudden mood swings between explicit violence, lyricism, comedy and drama. Remove one element from the mix and the effect would be lost. *The Graduate* is not exactly a celebration of adultery, given the angst generated by Benjamin's relationship with Mrs Robinson, but it tackles the subject with a wit and style foreign to the allowable world of the PCA. *Easy Rider*... Well, it hardly needs saying that the film could barely even have reached the drawing board.

If many films of the Hollywood Renaissance explore areas beyond the confines of the Production Code, this is also true in less specific ways. Sex, violence and drug-taking were among a host of particular issues carefully controlled by the PCA. More generally, the Code sought (not always successfully) to impose a kind of moral certainty on Hollywood films. Dubious activities or characters could be depicted, but should always be clearly labelled as such. The more interesting products of the Hollywood Renaissance often undermine this requirement. Moral ambiguity and complexity are two of the primary virtues of many of these films, marking them out from the usual melodramatic Hollywood fare based on more simplistic oppositions between 'good' and 'evil'. *Taxi Driver* (1976), directed by Martin Scorsese, is a good example.

Taxi Driver would have failed the tests of the PCA on innumerable grounds, ranging from its portrait of an adolescent prostitute played by Jodie Foster to its violent bloodbath climax. More pervasive, though, and ultimately more disturbing, is its refusal to take a clear stand towards the central character Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro). What are we supposed to make of this figure, his obsessions and his final outburst of bloody mayhem? Bickle is clearly not a well-adjusted man, but why exactly? He claims to have received an honourable discharge from the Marines in 1973, which would make him a veteran of the war in Vietnam. This is not made explicit, however. There are no Vietnam flashbacks or references to the conflict in his voice-over commentary. These might have provided a clear frame of reference for his behaviour, but they are absent.

Are we meant to identify with Bickle? Clearly not in some cases. His naiveté is at times excruciating to witness, particularly when he takes the 'angelic' woman he idolizes from afar, Betsy (Cybil Shepherd), to a pornographic film show. At the end of the climactic shoot-out, the camera offers a detached perspective, a direct overhead shot that provides a god-like objectivity and retreats portentously from the scene. The camera performs similarly detached movements on several other occasions. In one case, Bickle is on the phone to Betsy, trying to renew contact after their disastrous date. The camera tracks away sideways. We can hear Bickle's voice still on the phone, but the camera abandons him, coming to rest at the end of a passageway to the street. Bickle eventually catches up, finishing his call and walking into view and away from the camera, but the intervening moments are strange and disorienting. A similar movement occurs earlier in the film when Bickle first visits the taxi company. Camera and character part company before he walks out of the underground garage. Bickle moves out of frame to the right as the camera executes a slow pan to the left, across the garage, the two being reunited as Bickle reaches the entrance. The effect, again, is quietly disorienting.

At other times, however, we are invited to occupy a position closer to Bickle's subjectivity. One memorable shot tilts down into a fizzing glass in which a tablet is dissolving. The movement continues until the interior of the glass fills the screen. All sounds are excluded except the

fizzing noise, an apt metaphor for the character's disconnected and volatile psychological state; a state we are thus invited to share, if only vicariously. Intense proximity or unsettling withdrawal. The power of *Taxi Driver* resides to a large extent in these shifts of perspective. The viewer is not offered a single stable relationship with the character, or a clear point of judgement.

Does Travis Bickle end up a hero, as the newspaper cuttings on his wall suggest? His final acts of violence are only loosely motivated. Why exactly does he plan to assassinate the political candidate Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris). Just because he is rejected by a woman who works for him? Thwarted by the presence of security agents, his violence is redirected towards a pimp and his associates. He has sought to rescue Iris (Foster) from the pimp's clutches, but the action towards which he is propelled seems disproportionate. Some have criticized the film for apparent incoherence, but this is the source of much of its power. Travis, and the viewer, is denied the final redemptive death that might be expected in the shoot-out. Instead he survives, lauded in the press because one of his victims turns out to be a minor Mafia figure and because Iris is returned home to the dubious comforts of the family she had escaped. The film's coda, a brief scene in which Bickle remains distanced in a final encounter with Betsy, leaves open many of the questions raised by the film. Has Bickle changed? Has something significant happened to his character, or was it all an arbitrary series of events that leave, him much the same as before? No ready answers are available.

Broad changes at the levels of both the production and consumption of films helped to create *space* for the Hollywood Renaissance. It is still not clear that these changes alone would have permitted the particular outbreak of innovation witnessed by the late 1960s and early 1970s. The bounds of possibility were widened, but possibility is not the same as actuality. One additional element needs to be considered if we are to understand what happened. The decisive factor in ensuring that this potential was realized to some extent was the financial crisis in which the major studios found themselves in the mid-to-late 1960s.

Hollywood had tried to respond to falling audiences by targeting films at a variety of smaller and more specialized audiences, including

the 'adult' market. But it also resorted to a very different tactic. Huge resources were spent on lavish productions intended for a much bigger audience, a tendency to which we will return in the next chapter. The success of *The Sound of Music* (1965) appeared to vindicate this strategy. Made on a budget of \$8 million it earned \$72 million in the United States and Canada alone.²⁴ The lesson taught was to be a dangerous one. The majors, and especially Twentieth Century Fox, poured money into a series of musical extravaganzas designed to replicate the earnings of *The Sound of Music*, including *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), *Star!* (1968) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969), none of which earned more than a fraction of its cost at the domestic box office.²⁵ Fox was plunged into near collapse. Too much money was being gambled on borrowed money. Too many films were being made. Three new companies had entered into the business, including the broadcasters CBS and ABC. Increased competition pushed budgets higher. Expansion was driven partly by the new source of profits found in the sale of blockbuster films to television. The television bonanza came to a temporary halt in 1968, however. The networks had met their needs for the coming three years and also preferred to invest in their own productions.²⁶

The combination of these factors created a serious economic crisis from 1969 to 1971. The industry went through a period of retrenchment and restructuring. Spending was curtailed, temporarily at least. All of this was to the enormous benefit of what was to become the Hollywood Renaissance. The success of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider* could not have come at a better moment. Lower budget productions with a contemporary edge were shown to be far less risky in this context than unwieldy spectacles that seemed to belong to another era.

A number of industrial factors combined to make possible the Hollywood Renaissance. A specific set of industrial circumstances enabled aspects of the social and historical context to find expression in Hollywood. To understand the particular manner in which the flavour of the period was sometimes translated onto the cinema screen in these circumstances we also have to look elsewhere. The Hollywood Renaissance was also shaped by the influence of the stylistic experiments of a new generation of filmmakers outside Hollywood.

An American 'New Wave'? The stylistic context of the Hollywood Renaissance

The fizzing glass of water in *Taxi Driver* is an expression of Travis Bickle's state of mind, itself perhaps some unspecified product of its time. It is also a direct borrowing from a film by one of the key figures of the French New Wave, *deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (*two or three things I know about her...*, 1966), directed by Jean-Luc Godard. In *deux ou trois choses* the camera descends to the surface of a cup of coffee during a lengthy disquisition by one of the characters. The films of the Hollywood Renaissance abound with such borrowings.²⁷

The jump cuts in the opening of *Bonnie and Clyde* are strongly indebted to the French movement, especially Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1959), probably the single most influential film of the New Wave. *A Bout de Souffle*, itself inspired by the Hollywood B-movie and dedicated to the low-budget Monogram studio, is filled with departures from classical editing regimes. Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, it opens with a series of close and medium shots in which no establishing shot is provided. Later, the shooting of a motorcycle cop by the central character Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) is rendered in a few rapid and highly compressed shots that flout the 180 degree rule. An initial series of shots establishes that the officer approaches Michel's stationary car from the left. Michel reaches inside the vehicle for a gun, conforming initially to this spatial relationship. Cut to a closely framed pan down across the side of his face, now facing in the opposite direction. Another close-up pan takes us to the right, across his hand holding the gun. Cut rapidly to another close pan along the length of the gun, from chamber to barrel. In each of these shots the gun is pointed out of frame to the right. A shot is heard, although not actually seen, as we cut to the cop already falling dead. He seems to fall as if shot from *his* right, which would violate the relationship established the previous group of shots, although the brevity of the image and a general lack of directional clarity makes this uncertain. We then cut to Michel already fleeing on foot across a field.

The sequence is telegraphic and disorienting, reflecting the arbitrary nature of the killing. A similar effect is created, to a lesser extent, in a



2. Reflection in a broken lens: an overt reference to *A Bout de Souffle* in *Bonnie and Clyde*, © Warner Bros., 1967. Ronald Grant archive

series of shots and reverse shots that underpins the shock of the first moment of graphic violence in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the shooting in the face of a bank clerk who jumps onto the running board of the getaway car.²⁸ Another reference to *A Bout de Souffle* appears in the single-lens broken sunglasses worn by Clyde Barrow at the film's climax, mirroring an identical image of Michel. It comes as no surprise to learn that two key figures of the French New Wave, Godard and Francois Truffaut, were at one point invited to direct *Bonnie and Clyde*, or that several of Truffaut's suggestions were incorporated into the screenplay.

Taxi Driver owes a number of debts to the films of Robert Bresson, one of the subjects of a study by the screenwriter, Paul Schrader. The voice-over narration from a diary kept by Bickle is based on *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*, 1950). His diet of bread soaked in brandy and the fear that he has cancer are more specific references to *Journal*, the protagonist of which subsists on a diet of

bread soaked in wine because of his cancer.²⁹ Martin Scorsese has acknowledged the extent to which his work has been influenced by the films of Godard, Truffaut and Alain Resnais. Early in *Mean Streets* (1973), he uses three rapid shots, cutting in progressively closer towards the central character, Charlie (Harvey Keitel), a striking device lifted from Truffaut's *Tirez sur le Pianiste* (*Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960) and which Scorsese once said was in every film he had made.³⁰

Other Truffaut films have been credited with influencing the use of a number of techniques in Hollywood Renaissance-era films. The lyrical bicycling interlude and freeze-frame ending of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) bear the mark, respectively, of *Jules et Jim* (*Jules and Jim*, 1961) and *Le Quatre Cent Coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959). *Jules et Jim* has also been seen as one source of the prevalent use of slow motion in Hollywood films of the period, along with Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (1954), the latter an influence particularly on the use of slow motion in violent sequences. The combination of slow and normal speed footage used to achieve maximum impact in the climactic massacre of *Bonnie and Clyde* was directly inspired by *The Seven Samurai*. The list goes on. As Robert Ray suggests, the final shoot-out in the snow in *Shoot the Piano Player*, 'with its absence of establishing shots, frequent 180° crossings, long shots, and fizzy off-center compositions' is translated into the climax of the unconventional western *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971), directed by Robert Altman. 'The 360° pans of *Breathless* and *Weekend* (1967) (both accompanied by Mozart) were repeated in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) (accompanied by Chopin).'³¹ And so on.

What should we make of all this? Are these just superficial borrowings, the trappings of what might be considered hip and trendy at the time, to please the filmmakers themselves and the relatively small number of viewers likely to pick up the references? Or is something more serious at stake? Something of each, perhaps. Departures from the conventions of dominant or 'classical' Hollywood style do carry a serious and radical potential. Style is no innocent matter. The conventions of continuity editing generally serve to focus attention on the story, or narrative, rather than on technique. The implications of this are considerable. The impression given is that the world in front of the camera unfolds naturally and effortlessly. We are given what usually appears to be

immediate access to the fictional world of the film. The fact that all of this has been carefully fabricated, down to every last camera position and cut, is obscured.

Paying close attention to the devices of the classical style takes a great deal of effort and is difficult to sustain for any lengthy period of time. So familiar have these devices become that they are usually taken for granted, rendered all-but invisible. But why should this matter? The point is that a particular view of the world is constructed, as in any artistic or cultural product. The world represented by a Hollywood film is not neutrally recorded. Instead, it is actively created. Not only created, but created according to particular assumptions that have social, political and ideological implications. The conventions of continuity editing, for example, tend to imply a world that is ordered and comprehensible. They offer the viewer in most cases a 'safe' and comfortable position from which to understand the world presented on screen. This is why departures from these conventions can be so effective. They create a sense of discomfort and uncertainty.

Continuity editing creates a coherent impression of space and time, and the connections between one and the other. Jump cuts and breaches of the 180 degree convention upset these coherencies. Initially unexplained or abrupt flashback insertions can have a similar effect. Their use in Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) is credited with sparking a Hollywood trend starting with *The Pawnbroker* (1965). Flash-forwards are even more unconventional, used to create spiky and unsettling scene transitions in *Easy Rider* and *Petulia* (1968). Such devices make spatial and temporal relationships uncertain.

Another technique found in some American films in the Renaissance period is the use of zoom lenses, instead of cuts or tracking shots, to move through space. This is a device drawn partly from 1960s documentary filmmaking (and from television), to create an impression of spontaneity in front of the camera; a sense of reacting to, rather than carefully staging, events. It can also be used expressively. An unexpected zoom is used in *The Graduate* to underpin the moment when the relationship between Benjamin and Mrs Robinson is irrevocably ended. Two separate close-ups of their faces, linked by an eye-line match, imply an initial spatial proximity. A zoom back from Mrs Robinson to

include Benjamin in the frame suddenly opens up a gulf between the pair, the change of focal length creating a shift in perspective that makes literal the reduction of the former to a diminutive figure in the background. Departures from dominant conventions might not be recognized explicitly. Most filmgoers are unlikely to be able to identify a breach of the 180 degree rule as such, to describe what exactly is different. But they may be aware that something seems 'not quite right'. The familiarity of the dominant conventions is such that they become notable primarily in the breach.

Two major outcomes are possible from such breaches of convention. One is simply a feeling of disorientation, which can be exploited to potent effect. The viewer of *Bonnie and Clyde* does not need to know anything about continuity editing or jump cuts to be given an impression of edginess and impatience by the opening images. The same is true of *A Bout de Souffle*, which repeatedly uses jump cuts to create a sense of unease and of the provisional nature of the lifestyle of its protagonist. Even fairly minor departures from the dominant conventions can be sufficient to give a film, or a group of films, a sense of freshness and innovation, a major ingredient in any films deserving to be labelled as part of a 'New Wave' or 'Renaissance'.

Non-conventional techniques can also have more radical effects, shattering the carefully fabricated illusion that the fictional world merely unfolds in front of the camera. Explicit attention might be drawn to the process of construction usually concealed by the classical style. This might be the case in the shooting of the motorcycle cop in *A Bout de Souffle*. Godard appears to be playing with, even mocking, continuity conventions, as if deliberately to bring them to our attention. The same could be true of the unconventional camera movements in *Taxi Driver*. We become more aware of the existence of the camera when it does something unusual or unexpected. A camera focused on the central character from a familiar angle and distance is likely to recede from our attention. One that takes up a strange position, or wanders off on its own, seemingly detached from the action, is more likely to be noticed.

Drawing attention to the way a film is constructed makes us aware of its status *as* a construct. Film viewers are perfectly aware, on one

level, that films are constructs. We do not very often mistake the film for 'reality'. We are encouraged to do this, on another level, however, during the process of viewing. Classical conventions *invite us*, much of the time, to surrender to the pleasurable illusion that we are merely witnesses at the scene, rather than that the scene has been fabricated for us. The abandonment of familiar conventions can be a denial of this pleasure, with potentially political implications. If we become consciously aware of the constructed status of the image we might also become aware of the *basis* on which it has been constructed. To undermine dominant conventions can be to question dominant ideologies.

The dividing line between these two effects is important, but not always easy to establish. On one side, departures from classical conventions can be seen as expressive devices. They break the 'rules', but in a manner that is contained. They are 'motivated' by matters of character or narrative. As such, they remain within the influential definition of the classical style given by David Bordwell.³² For Bordwell, a defining characteristic of the classical style is that matters of style are subordinated to narrative. Stylistic flourishes or unconventional imagery serve narrative purposes rather than existing for their own sake. The opening images of *Bonnie and Clyde* give expression to the mood of character. The errant camera of *Taxi Driver* expresses something of Travis Bickle's disconnection (and, conversely, the use of classical reverse angles and two-shots in one sequence involving Travis and Betsy might emphasize the extent to which, on this occasion, he is trying hard to act 'normal'³³). A sustained period of 'experimental' techniques – including rapid discontinuous montage editing, the use of a distorting 'fish-eye' lens, unstable 'subjective' camera-work and non-realistically motivated sound effects – is used in *Easy Rider* to convey the impressions of an acid trip.

Films of this period sometimes offer a seemingly contradictory mix of the 'expressive', a heightened use of stylistic devices to convey subjective experience, and the 'realistic', with its claims to objectivity. Similarly unconventional shooting and editing styles can in some cases fall into either or both categories. Departures from continuity editing can be expressive, in a stylized manner. They can also suggest, along with hand-held camerawork, the immediacy of unplanned or *verité* footage, shot on

the hoof, to give an impression of freshness and spontaneity, distinct from the carefully-staged effect that might result from use of the full panoply of expensive studio apparatus. Lessons were learned from the work of documentary filmmakers such as Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and David and Albert Maysles, who used cheap, lightweight hand-held equipment to capture a flavour of contemporary reality on the streets. Elements of this style contribute to the edgy quality of films such as *The French Connection* (1971) and *Mean Streets*, the latter a particularly effective blend of *vérité* and expressive techniques. A similar combination is found in some films of both the French New Wave and the Hollywood Renaissance. At what point, though, do any of these devices translate into a less easily contained break from the classical style? A distinction has often been made between their use in Hollywood and in the New Wave or other products of the European 'art' cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. The fizzing glass shot from *Taxi Driver* offers one useful point of comparison.

Scorsese uses this device to capture a sense of Bickle's subjective state. The sequence is brief and to the point, lasting in total only about 20 seconds, the effervescent surface filling the screen for only about a quarter of that time. Godard's original is similar in some respects but also radically different. The coffee cup sequence in *deux ou trois choses* also takes us into the interior state of a protagonist. Immersion in the cup, like that of the glass, shuts out the ambient sounds of the café. It lasts a good deal longer, however, and is used as the basis for a weighty meditation. The sequence extends for more than two minutes, much of which is spent in extreme close-up on the black surface of the coffee. Voice-over narration is the stuff of heady French existentialism, one line of which even seems relevant to the theme and style of *Taxi Driver*. 'I cannot escape crushing objectivity or isolating subjectivity', muses the character, a pair of oppositions akin to the perspectives the viewer is offered on Travis Bickle.

The Godard character's thoughts range across the impossibility of revolution, the threat of war, the uncertainty of capitalism and the retreat of the working class; science, the proximity of the future, and the creation; the limits of language, death, vagueness and a rebirth of consciousness. The surface of the coffee seems a perfect backdrop for

such intellectual pondering. At first it swirls, blackly, clouded patterns suggesting the shape of galaxies forming in the void. Something closer to stasis sets in as the last bubbles of froth break on the surface. An even closer shot begins in silence and further abstraction, heaving blackness and the glint of reflecting lights. Whatever we make of this – profundity or pretentiousness? – it is a far greater intrusion into conventional narrative filmmaking that anything found in *Taxi Driver* or any other films of the Hollywood Renaissance. The device is not a passing expressive moment but a major interruption, increasingly typical of the films of a director working towards a radical deconstruction of Hollywood-style conventions *and* capitalist ideology.

Similar distinctions might be made in the narrative dimension. Some films of the Hollywood Renaissance do depart, to an extent, from mainstream narrative conventions. The narrative of *Taxi Driver* fails to establish any clear-cut motivation for Travis Bickle's action. The reticence of Harry Caul in *The Conversation* is motivated to some extent by a previous operation in which he was the unwitting cause of death. His utter failure of comprehension is devastating, however, particularly because the viewer (or, in this case, auditor) is made to share the misunderstanding. The placing of the emphasis on the key line ('He'd kill us if he got the chance') changes in the moment of final revelation, suggesting retrospectively that the version we have heard several times during the film was filtered not just through Caul's audio equipment but also through his own subjective interpretation. Broader motivation and explanation is in short supply in *The Parallax View*, which never gives us a clear sense of what the Parallax Corporation is, where it comes from and what agenda it might have.

These are interesting departures from the Hollywood routine, but they are also limited in scope and contained by other frameworks. Like many Hollywood Renaissance films, these examples remain largely within the bounds of familiar generic structures. *Taxi Driver* can be read as an example of 1970s film noir. *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* are versions of the detective thriller. Generic frameworks offer considerable scope for innovation, sometimes radical, as will be seen in chapter 4. But they also impose limitations on, and motivations for, less than conventional narratives. The truth does emerge in *The*

Conversation, even if it is only grasped belatedly by the central character. Truth is also uncovered in *The Parallax View*, albeit limited and at the cost of Frady's life. The gloomy or inconclusive endings of these films are themselves motivated to some extent by the conventions of the emerging form of the conspiracy-thriller. As with departures from conventional editing regimes, the unconventional touches in the narrative structures of some Hollywood Renaissance films appear rather modest when compared with more radical instances from European 'art' films. We gain a reasonably clear sense of who committed the murder, and probably why, in *The Conversation*. Almost all of this is withheld in *Blow Up*, the film on which it is partly based.³⁴ No Hollywood products approach the elliptical style and narrative enigma of the likes of Alain Resnais' *La Dernière Année à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961).

The Hollywood Renaissance witnessed a number of stylistic innovations. This is most apparent when comparison is made with the dominant tendencies of the commercial mainstream, rather than the European 'art' cinema. These did not amount to anything like a wholesale abandonment of the 'classical' style, even in the more radical or interesting products of the period. Large parts of films such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* and *Taxi Driver* conform to familiar conventions such as those of continuity editing and narrative motivation, providing a ground against which elements of innovation can be measured. Hollywood demonstrated its ability to absorb stylistic elements from other cinemas without being significantly transformed. It had done this before. Aspects of styles as radically different from classical Hollywood as Soviet montage and German expressionism were taken on board during the studio era. The montage sequence became an effective way of compressing a series of events into a brief sequence contained within a conventional narrative. Expressionistic canted-camera angles and lighting were absorbed by the horror film and film noir.³⁵

Classical Hollywood style contains a considerable degree of flexibility. It can embrace a wide range of devices, provided that they are given a distinct rationale, usually in terms of character, genre and/or other aspects of narrative. This does not mean that departures from the norm are devoid of any power to disturb or unsettle, merely that these are unlikely

to upset the entire edifice. They may appear bold and innovative at one moment. Soon, however, they can become just another part of the repertoire.

Freshness and innovation within a framework of more conventional forms and structures might be the best way to characterize the formal dimension of most products of the Hollywood Renaissance. The same goes for their subject matter. A flavour of the times is captured in many, often with an implicitly critical note. The films of the Renaissance tend to question the bland reassurances offered by many Hollywood products. Some are openly critical of dominant myths and ideologies. This is the case especially with anti-westerns such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), which will be considered in chapter 4. Many Renaissance films remain within the compass of dominant mythologies, however, even if they are given a new twist.

Bonnie and Clyde and *Easy Rider* are, to a significant extent, updatings of the old mythology of the frontier. Journeys into open spaces, now on the road, continue to supply the possibility of romantic escape from the confines of 'civilization'. The fate met by such figures is more grim than that of the protagonist of the classical western, but the latter is also portrayed as ultimately doomed in some cases, gaining only temporary respite from the inexorable movement of 'progress'. The Hollywood hero has typically been represented as the rebellious individual standing out against institutional forces of one kind or another. The subversive potential of films such as *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* is to deny any possibility of success to the hero, or even the compensation of heroic doom. Even here, however, the diagnosis is entirely negative. No alternative is offered. Diagnosis is not accompanied by any prescription for change. To do so would be to make the political implications explicit rather than merely implicit and muddled by genre conventions.

Explicit political comment of any radical nature is extremely rare in Hollywood. This is not just a matter of the political leanings of those in power in the industry. Political controversy is generally avoided because of its divisive potential. Hollywood prefers to smooth over its conflicts. Room is often left for a variety of readings, in order to appeal

to the largest possible audience. This is less true of some films associated with the Hollywood Renaissance, which were aimed at audiences that might be more open than usual to relatively radical perspectives. Few take up the more explicitly political aspects of 1960s social movements, however. Films such as *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), based on student rebellion at Columbia University, and *Medium Cool* (1969), which culminates amid the Chicago riots of 1968, are exceptions, to some extent. The complacency of a detached television news cameraman in the latter is challenged by some of those with whom he comes into contact, a challenge offered also to the audience in scenes in which their objections are played direct to camera.

Major issues of class, wealth, inequality and structural racism are generally absent from the picture in the films of the Renaissance, however. Where potentially radical issues are raised they are usually subordinated to a focus on the dynamics of the relationships between individuals, a respect in which these films often differ little from the rest of Hollywood cinema. *Medium Cool* is, again, something of an exception, demonstrating the ability of some films of the period to depart from the glossy Hollywood norm. The potential sentimentality of a relationship developed between the protagonist and a woman with a teenage son is avoided by the use of a detached documentary-style and a downbeat ending.

Far from all the films produced in Hollywood in the period from the late 1960s to the mid-to-late 1970s exhibit the characteristics of the films considered in this chapter. The Hollywood Renaissance is merely one tendency within a period in which the box office continued to be dominated by more conventional fare. *The Graduate* was the biggest hit, heading the box-office chart for 1968 (after being released in the latter part of 1967). *Easy Rider* was a major success, but relative to its low budget as much as in absolute terms. It came 11th in 1969, a year in which the top-grossing film was *The Love Bug*. *M*A*S*H* was the third most successful film of 1970, when top place was taken by *Patton*. Other number-one hits of the period included *Love Story* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1973), *The Sting* (1974), *Jaws* (1975), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977); mostly films with few radical pretensions.³⁶ Precisely where the

boundaries of the Renaissance lie remains a matter for debate. Many more titles could be added to those cited in this chapter. They would still constitute only a small proportion of the output of the decade. These films have gained disproportionate attention, which should not be surprising. Relatively small groups of films that stand out from the mainstream have always tended to attract more critical attention than might strictly be merited in terms of their broader significance. The films of the Renaissance are not unique in this respect. Nor are they the first films to have offered some of the qualities considered above.

Youth rebellion was a popular topic for a number of films in the 1950s. Doubt, cynicism and bleak endings characterize many examples of film noir produced in the 1950s and 1940s, as well as some gangster films of the 1930s. They have also been found in a number of films produced since the 'end' of the Renaissance, usually dated quite specifically to 1979. Unconventional stylistic devices were incorporated into some of these films, especially film noir. *Verité* style, using an earlier generation of lightweight equipment, is used in a number of post-war thrillers. Some of the stylistic borrowings of the films considered in this chapter are in fact taken from products of studio-era Hollywood, if often from the work of mavericks within the system. The direct overhead shot in *Taxi Driver* owes a clear debt to Hitchcock. The giant lips of Faye Dunaway are reminiscent of those of Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) uttering his dying 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane* (1941), an enormous influence on many filmmakers coming to prominence in the Renaissance period. Many borrowed freely, not just from the French New Wave. If montage techniques, shorn of the dialectical intent of the Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, could be made over into narrative flourishes in the studio era, *Bonnie and Clyde* could also have its bespectacled bank clerk shot in the face in a manner reminiscent of the death of a woman in the famed Odessa Steps sequence of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

An upsurge of more-complex-than-usual Hollywood filmmaking was also noted by numerous commentators in 1999 and 2000, including examples such as *American Beauty* (1999), *Magnolia* (1999) and *American Psycho* (2000). Why, then, should what has become known as the 'Hollywood Renaissance' be marked by so grand a term? Perhaps it

should not. Whether, on balance, novelty outweighed convention sufficiently to justify the term, or to suggest a common basis for the assessment of a range of very different products, is uncertain. As a body of work, these films have come to be defined from two directions. Initially, they were marked out according to differences from the norms of the studio era. That, at the height of the movement, seemed the most relevant criterion. More recently, and increasingly, the Hollywood Renaissance has been defined by its difference from the version of New Hollywood that has largely replaced it and that was beginning to take shape at the time.

Worthy of the term or not, the Hollywood Renaissance was the outcome of a conjunction of forces: social, industrial and stylistic. It was in many ways the product of a period of transition. The 'Old' Hollywood was struggling. New industrial frameworks were still finding their optimum form. A measure of freedom was available in the interim. Today, the Hollywood Renaissance has become the stuff primarily of fond nostalgia, which may not be surprising given some of the characteristics of what has since become the dominant version of New Hollywood: the era of the corporate blockbuster, the subject of the next chapter.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 'Theses on the philosophy of Hollywood history', 6
- 2 For an outline, and critique, of this argument, see Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, 'Hollywood for the 21st century: global competition for critical mass in image markets', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 16, 1992
- 3 Thomas Doherty, *Pre-code Hollywood*
- 4 See, for example, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*

Chapter One

- 1 *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'N' Drugs 'N' Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, 17
- 2 Damon Wise, 'Hollywood plays the smart card', *Screen*, 8, 16 January 2000
- 3 Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood*
- 4 For an overview see William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*
- 5 See, for example, Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, chapters 5 and 6, and Sumiko Higashi, 'Night of the Living Dead: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era'
- 6 As is the demon in *The Exorcist* (1973), which might not by mere coincidence have been set in the Washington of the early 1970s
- 7 Peter Cowie, *Coppola*, 81
- 8 The first of these statistics are from Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood*, 13; the figures for 1980 and 2000 are based on my calculations taken from annual admissions statistics in the Motion Picture Association of America *2000 US Economic Review*

- 9 Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*
- 10 Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 8–14
- 11 ‘A Mature Oligopoly’, 255
- 12 The detail below comes mostly from Balio, ‘A Mature Oligopoly’
- 13 Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry*, 57
- 14 Biskind, *Easy Riders*, 18, 20
- 15 Richard Maltby, ‘Sticks, Hicks and Flaps’
- 16 Maltby, ‘Sticks, Hicks and Flaps’, 25
- 17 Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core*, 101
- 18 For the list of banned subjects see Frank Miller, *Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin and Violence on Screen*
- 19 Miller, *Censored Hollywood*, 162
- 20 Miller, *Censored Hollywood*, 168
- 21 Jon Lewis, ‘Money Matters: Hollywood in the Corporate Era’, 91–2
- 22 ‘Money Matters’, 93
- 23 Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core*, 150
- 24 Richard Maltby, “‘Nobody knows everything’”: Post-classical historiographies and consolidated entertainment’, 31
- 25 *Doctor Dolittle* budget \$18 million, gross \$9.05 million; *Star!* budget \$14 million, gross \$4 million; *Hello, Dolly!* budget \$26.4 million, gross \$9 million (Internet Movie Database)
- 26 John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office*, 173; Maltby, “‘Nobody knows everything’”, 32
- 27 Summaries of some of these borrowings are given in Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980*, 269–95, and David Bordwell and Janet Staiger, ‘Historical implications of the classical Hollywood cinema’, in Bordwell, Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*
- 28 Close inspection suggests that strictly speaking there is no departure from the 180 degree rule, although as Ray suggests the cutting does create a sense of unease
- 29 Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood*, 210
- 30 Pye and Myles, *The Movie Brats*, 192
- 31 *A Certain Tendency*, 288

- 32 'The classical Hollywood style, 1917–60', in Bordwell, Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*
- 33 Amy Taubin, *Taxi Driver*, 46
- 34 A contrast made by Bordwell and Staiger, 'Historical implications of the classical Hollywood cinema', in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 375–7, although they err in suggesting that the protagonist of *Blow Up* has no access to other than the photograph of the murder: he does actually see the body at one point
- 35 See Bordwell, 'The classical Hollywood style, 1917–60', in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 72–4
- 36 Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, 5, citing figures from Eddie Dorman Kay, *Box-Office Champs: The Most Popular Movies of the Last 50 Years*

Chapter 2

- 1 'Theses on the philosophy of Hollywood history', 11
- 2 Brian Fuson, "'Scream 3" kills theaters record', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4–6 February 2000
- 3 Figures from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), as reported in 'Movie Box-Office Gross and Attendance', Grolier, Inc. web site, March 2000, and in the MPPA's *2000 US Economic Review*, slide 5
- 4 'Top 20 Films of All-Time (adjusted for inflation)', Grolier Inc., March 2000
- 5 MPPA, *2000 US Economic Review*, and Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 181
- 6 Different figures are cited by different commentators, the differences depending probably on exactly how the output of the majors and other companies with links to the majors are defined. Richard Maltby puts the total in 1975 at 120 ('Nobody knows everything', 32), while David Cook suggests an average as low as 100 a year by the end of the decade (*Lost Illusions: America in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979*, 349)
- 7 Peter Bart, *The Gross*, 31
- 8 See Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise*, 179–211
- 9 Previous exceptions to the rule were *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Duel*

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