

AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE SIXTIES

by Al Auster
and Leonard Quart



A critical survey of key American films of the Sixties — including *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Fail Safe*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, and *Easy Rider* — and the social and political issues they reflected.

The Sixties was a decade in which a number of the deviant but submerged strains of the Fifties took root and became powerful forces in American society. The civil rights movement turned into a militant movement agitating for black power; the mild surge of protest against nuclear arms and the civil defense program turned into the massive but far from monolithic anti-Vietnam war movement; the "beats" transmuted into a nonliterary and nebulous counterculture; and a community-oriented New Left evolved from the writings of a variety of Fifties' intellectuals (e.g., C. Wright Mills, Paul Goodman) and from other political and cultural sources. These forces had a powerful impact on American society, but the last years of the decade saw these movements begin to destroy themselves in a paroxysm of violent "Weathermen" demonstrations, sterile neo-Stalinist and neo-Maoist dogmatism, ghetto conflagrations and racial posturing, and the grotesque caricatures of counterculture values—Manson and Altamont. Also helping to bring these movements to ground were the cunning policies of the Nixon Administration, which manipulated Vietnam troop withdrawals and an end to the draft, at the same time as it used white working class resentment of blacks and anti-poverty programs to support a policy of "benign neglect" toward black needs and aspirations.

Despite ending on such discordant notes, the Sixties did leave a significant and valuable legacy. Among the most permanent of these was a revisionist impulse which stimulated many Americans to look critically at themselves, their history, and social and political institutions. Of course, this did not guarantee that real political and social change would come about, but it did make political and social nonconformity more difficult to repress, and some of the simplistic pieties of the past harder to sustain.

Nowhere had those simplistic pieties been more evident and firmly entrenched than in Hollywood at the

beginning of the Sixties. Nonetheless, such was the effect of this revisionist strain that by the end of the decade even Hollywood had benefited from their influence.

Although the genre conventions of the past still ruled Hollywood, the studio system that sustained and reinforced them was at its nadir. Most startling victim of that descent was MGM whose final demise was symbolized in the 1970 auction of artifacts like Judy Garland's *Wizard of Oz* slippers. Gone forever were the dream factories with their armies of contract actors and actresses, writers, directors, et al., receding into the bottom line of corporate conglomerates like Gulf and Western (Paramount), MCA (Universal), and Warner Communications (Warner Bros.). Indeed, by the end of the decade the studios were no longer interested in making movies, they had assumed merely the marketing and financial end of the process.

Not every change during the Sixties was an unmitigated disaster. Indeed, as a result of relaxing societal sexual standards and court rulings overturning rigid obscenity laws, the sexual taboos long governing Hollywood began to fall by the wayside. Gone was the twin bed and in to replace it came full-frontal nudity. Although this freedom was used by some filmmakers as an excuse for sexual titillation, and even spawned a successful independent cottage industry of hard- and soft-core film pornography, it did permit a widening of the range of permissible film topics, and gave American film the possibility of depicting a realism in human relationships that they previously so sorely lacked.

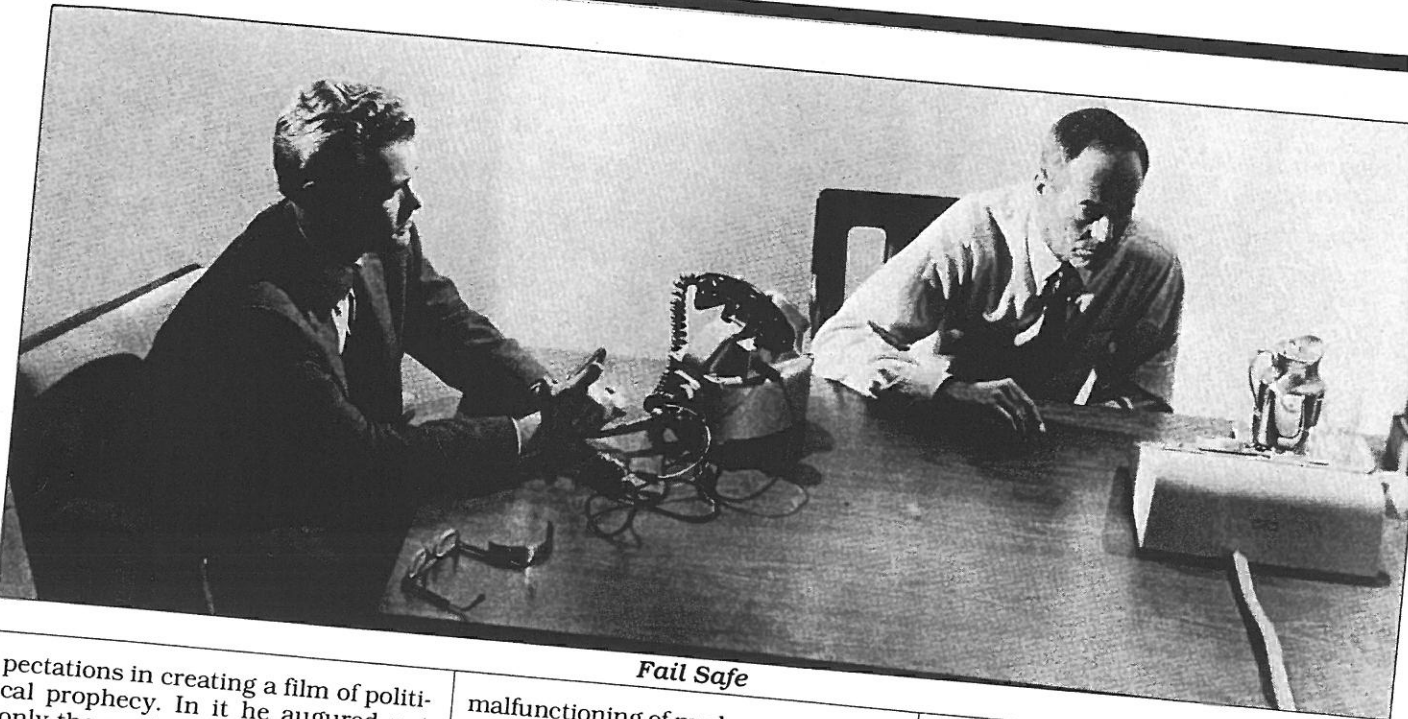
In addition to sex, other Hollywood blind spots were breached by the protest movements of the Sixties, most notably by blacks who could no longer be totally ignored or merely cast in subservient and stereotypical roles. Similarly, the dissenting and deviant lifestyles and political ideas of the young, though they could be exploited and adulterated, nevertheless had to be confronted, especially

since they had begun to make up the largest proportion of the movie audience.

An early Sixties film whose deviant style was almost prophetic of the changes to come was John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). The premise upon which *The Manchurian Candidate* is based is the Fifties liberal conceit which suggested that, "If Joe McCarthy were working for the Communists, he couldn't be doing a better job." Thus, in the rather intricate, ironic script by George Axelrod from the novel by Richard Condon, Sgt. Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey) comes back from the Korean War a Medal of Honor winner. The incident for which he was supposed to have been awarded the medal has been fabricated, however, and Shaw is really a brainwashed Communist assassin controlled by his Communist agent mother (Angela Lansbury), who uses him as a weapon to put her McCarthy-like Senator husband (James Gregory) into the White House. *The Manchurian Candidate* allows Frankenheimer to succeed in a neat, liberal balancing act, condemning McCarthy while simultaneously still invoking the spectre of the "Red Menace" and conspiracy.

Within this conventional, somewhat hysterical, thriller framework, Frankenheimer sought to create the ultimate send up of McCarthy (albeit a bit belated since McCarthy was already dead and his power long since curbed) with war heroes, senators and even the *ne plus ultra* of American goodness—Mom—revealed as Communist agents. He also succeeded in creating an illusionary, almost absurdist sense of American politics (where irrationality is the norm) where plots abounded, sensitive souls turned into robot-like assassins, overwrought liberals denounced right-wingers as "fascists," the right-wingers paraded around at costume parties in Abraham Lincoln outfits, and all figures of authority and power are never what they seem to be. Indeed, Frankenheimer may have succeeded beyond his own ex-

Opposite: Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove*



Fail Safe

pectations in creating a film of political prophecy. In it he augured not only the media politics of the Sixties with scene after scene dominated by the almost baleful gleam of the TV screen, but, most chillingly of all, its political assassinations, particularly the oedipal, and vengeful Madison Square Garden shootings of Raymond's parents, linking private pathology with public and political actions.

Another example of Frankheimer's interest in political filmmaking was his *Seven Days in May*. Although lacking the visual virtuosity and political imagination of *The Manchurian Candidate*, it did explore a vital issue: the apocalyptic fear aroused by the thought of nuclear annihilation. In the film a humanistic, liberal President (Frederic March) is pitted against discontented right-wing Army generals planning a coup over the signing of a nuclear treaty with the Soviets. Its vision of the U.S. as some kind of banana republic, however, failed to impress the public.

In contrast, films about nuclear war—which in the words of Susan Sontag struck the audiences' "imagination of disaster," their sense of participation in the fantasy of living through one's own death and the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself—gained wide popularity. It was this quality that certainly contributed to the success of *Fail-Safe* (1964) and *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1964).

Unlike *Dr. Strangelove*, released earlier that year, *Fail-Safe*, adapted from a best-seller by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, saw nuclear disaster as resulting from the probable

malfunctioning of nuclear weaponry's safe-guarding technology, rather than from the actions of paranoid generals. In *Fail-Safe* it is just such a technological breakdown which launches American bombers on a full-scale attack against the Soviet Union.

Hoping to avert a catastrophe, the decent American President (Henry Fonda) negotiates with the Russian Premier over the hot-line. One bomber does get through to bomb Moscow, however, and the American President winds up trading the destruction of New York for the Russian capital. Despite this rather far-fetched conclusion, Sidney Lumet's semi-documentary approach, and his powerful final montage of the destruction of New York and Moscow, fill the screen with terrifying images.

Nevertheless, some of the most memorable moments of the film are the images of Henry Fonda shown in almost total isolation, trying in his characteristically dry, almost laconic tones, to assure the Russians that it was all a mistake, or shedding a tear after hearing the shrill sound of the telephone that signals the bomb exploding in Moscow. In these scenes we get the sense of an unbearable and unspeakable tragedy hanging in the balance, as one man, against terrible and imponderable odds, tries to reason with another, and discovers what a nuclear arms policy has wrought.

Fail-Safe is a cautionary film about an out-of-control technology which makes men its pawns and disciples. Although it's not a particularly subtle film and either subordinates its characters to its theme or has them indulge in melodramatics, it does have, in Walter Matthau's over-

stated, Dr. Strangelove-like, political science professor, a character who has real political resonance. Lumet is a left-liberal, and he uses Matthau to represent the Sixties cold war intellectuals (Kahn, Teller) who displayed their sense of realpolitik and machismo fantasies by "thinking about the unthinkable." Here was a professor who could talk casually and obsessively about building advanced weaponry, and the possibilities and necessary risks of nuclear war, without any moral or human qualms or constraints about the consequences of these policies.

It is this assault on murderous realpolitik which is one of the prime themes of Stanley Kubrick's sardonic comedy, *Dr. Strangelove*. The director of one critically acclaimed anti-war movie, *Paths of Glory* (1957), Kubrick had long been interested in the problem of nuclear war and its effects. Deciding to do a film about it, he tried to adapt Peter George's novel *Red Alert* (*Hour of Doom* in the U.K.). Each time he attempted to get something down, however, it seemed more and more "ridiculous," and he decided to do a black comedy instead.

Kubrick was able to enlist the comic talents of Peter Sellers who played three roles (the stiff upper-lipped British Group Capt. Mandrake, the balding, literally egg-headed, President Merkin Muffley; and the bizarre, Nazi-refugee scientist Dr. Strangelove). In addition, he blended the talents of George C. Scott as the Gen. Curtis Lemay-like, adolescent, gravelly voiced, platitude spouting, Air Force Chief-of-Staff, Buck Turgidson, and the deadpan of Sterling Hayden's mad, grim, Gen. Jack D. Ripper, the man who instigates the unauthorized bomber

attack.

Complementing this ensemble acting was Kubrick's genius for creating striking images and settings. This gift is sustained from the opening scene where the B-52 is seen copulating with its refueling plane (to the tune of "Try a Little Tenderness"), to the black comic, final scene where the "doomsday machine" has exploded and what results is a void with only mushroom clouds filling it, and on the soundtrack Vera Lynn sings the WW II favorite, "We'll Meet Again." There are also three settings that Kubrick intercuts in the film: the realistic behavior and extremely intricate and richly detailed technology in the B-52 cockpit (providing a deadpan parody of the conventions of WW II films like *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*); the war room in Washington whose flashing lights, big board, and large circular table skirt the line between realism and surrealism; and Burpleson Air Force Base where the psychopathic Gen. Ripper is shot in tight close-ups from a low angle, and where his troops' violent defense of the base against other American troops is powerfully shot in newsreel style. Kubrick also successfully uses sight gags like the "Peace is Our Profession" sign at the air base, and the "Hi There" lettered on the nuclear bomb in the B-52, and ironically juxtaposes popular songs with his often horrendous images.

All of these elements came together in a plot which deals with the destruction of the world by a Soviet-constructed doomsday machine ignited by a nuclear attack launched

by General Jack D. Ripper. The attack is initiated because he fears that the nation's sexual potency is on the brink of being undermined by a Communist-inspired plot to fluoridate our water supply. Terry Southern's antic screenplay serves Kubrick well in satirizing a world of well-meaning but ineffectual liberal politicians, war-mongering generals, espionage-obsessed Russian ambassadors, and nuclear war strategists.

The film went beyond poking fun at the thinking of the Lemays, Herman Kahns and Henry Kissingers on limited nuclear war, and revealed how closely their ideas were linked to the primal instincts of sex and death. For example, the President of the U.S. talks over the hot-line from his crypt-like war room to a drunken Russian Premier Kisseff who only dimly understands the situation; Turgidson gets phone calls from his mistress in the midst of a war room discussion; and Col. Kong (Slim Pickens) sits astride the B-52's nuclear bomb (looking like a monstrous phallus) as it descends to penetrate and destroy the Soviet Union (and the world).

The humanistic tradition, of course, presumes that the forces that kindle the passions of love and death can be held in check by reason. *Dr. Strangelove's* most caustic barbs, however, are reserved not only for the deadly logic of thinking about the unthinkable, but at sweet reason itself. Time after time, when we hear President Muffley's bland, decent conversations with the Russian Premier ("Now Dimitri, you know how we've

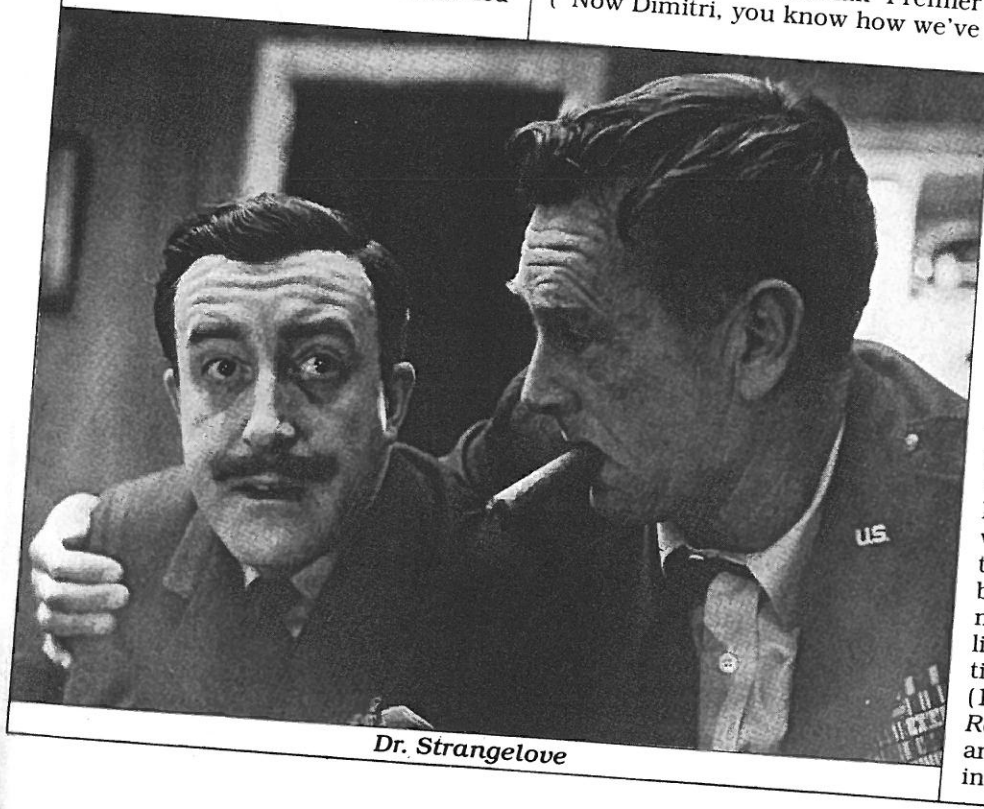
always talked about the possibility something going wrong with the bomb—the bomb, Dimitri, the hydrogen bomb") or his shout as the Russian ambassador wrestles with the Air Force Chief-of-Staff in the war room ("Please gentlemen, you can fight here, this is the war room!"), we are reminded of the limits of reason and its inability to cope with the enormity of the forces it has unleashed.

In fact, Kubrick does not posit any alternative to this insane world whose leaders are either ineffectual, stupid, infantile or obsessional personalities. There is no plea for sanity or belief in social change inherent in the film. There is only the monstrous Dr. Strangelove—the personification of scientific reason gone amok, with his self-propelled Nazi-saluting arm, his belief in the divinity of computers, and his gleeful plans for a post-nuclear holocaust society of subterranean polygamy (the ultimate expression of America's obsession with macho potency and power) who emerges as a brilliant parody of the worst strains in American politics and culture.

In allowing us to take this black comic peek at the apocalypse, Kubrick succeeded more in creating an inoculation against the fear of annihilation than in providing an antidote for it. Kubrick's world is a hopeless one, and as Pauline Kael wrote in her review of *Dr. Strangelove*, "What may have been laughed to death was not war, but some action about it."

Despite this sort of criticism, Kubrick was able to create a film that summed up the anxieties about nuclear disaster which had haunted the Fifties, and almost turned into a reality in the Sixties with the Cuban missile crisis. Moreover, the film was such a break with the shibboleths of the cold war that Lewis Mumford writing in the *New York Times* declared it, "The first break in the cold war trance that has so long held this country in its rigid grip."

In spite of *Fail-Safe's* and *Dr. Strangelove's* often striking illumination of the politics of nuclear war, they failed to ignite any major Hollywood movement committed to evoking and criticizing the political and social scene. Just how far out of step Hollywood was could be seen in films which focused on black life. Despite the civil rights movement there had been no great surge in the direction of making films about blacks or black life in the late Fifties and early Sixties. In films like *Edge of the City* (1957), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and *Raisin in the Sun* (1962), there was an attempt at least to portray blacks in a positive manner—to wrestle with



Dr. Strangelove

"If both the counterculture and the New Left clearly never did triumph or truly alter the nature of American political and social power, they nevertheless did change American consciousness. Likewise, the films that followed had to come to terms with the fact that the old conventions and platitudes no longer were totally dominant over the minds and psyches of the American public."

some real social and economic issues (especially in *Raisin in the Sun*), but all within the context of an optimistic, integrationist philosophy. These were films that implicitly and at moments explicitly endorsed the American dream of equality for all.

In contrast, the fact was that the fantasy of equality and integration was being destroyed no further away from Hollywood than the streets of Watts. Nevertheless, the film industry still clung tenaciously to its sentimental interracial dreams. Nowhere was this more evident than in Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Kramer's liberal credentials were already well-established with his portentous, social problem productions such as the anti-racial prejudice *Home of the Brave* (1949), or *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and the anti-Nazi *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). In the glossy *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), Kramer and script writer William Rose decided to tackle the subject of interracial marriage.

Tackle, however, seems hardly the right word since rarely has there been such a field of straw men and women. To begin with, the black male lead was Sidney Poitier who

had already established himself as a worthy missionary to white folks in films such as *Lilies of the Field* (1963) and *A Patch of Blue* (1965), and in this film was a brilliant doctor—handsome, chaste and charming—who is well on his way to some day winning the Nobel Prize. In fact, he seemed too good a catch for the innocent, simpering daughter (Katherine Houghton) of liberal millionaire presslord Matt Drayton (Spencer Tracy) and his feisty, gallery-owning wife, Christina (Katharine Hepburn).

Although there are objections to the marriage, ranging from the bigoted snobbishness of one of Christina's art gallery employees to the comic protests of the Drayton's black maid ("Civil rights is one thing, but this here's another!"), they are brushed aside. Less easily swept away are the more serious doubts expressed by Matt Drayton about the social problems the young couple will be facing. Even his reasonable concerns are effectively bypassed by Beah Richard's (Poitier's mother in the film) suggestion that it isn't race that is preventing the marriage, but the fact that he and her husband (who also opposes the match) have forgotten what it was like to be

young. Although the issue of the generation gap feels totally bogus and banal, especially in a film ostensibly dealing with the complex issue of intermarriage (not to mention the total blindness and irrelevance of the film's liberal, integrationist impulses to the rage and despair of the black community), it nevertheless superficially touched on something significant—the growing polarization between generations. It was that polarization resulting from the Vietnam War and the rise of the New Left and counterculture which intensified in late Sixties America.

The coming of the young into American politics had already been celebrated in the rhetorical prose of authors like Norman Mailer who saw them as, "those mad middle class children with their lobotomies from sin... their innocence, their lust for the apocalypse." They had still not forged their image in film, however, nor would they until Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

Bonnie and Clyde not only shifted the focus of film to the young, it also defined a unique Sixties cinema and sensibility in ways that *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Dr. Strangelove* had only hinted at. Perhaps the best indicator of how far it went in accomplishing this was the vehemence of the attacks on it by the critical establishment, led by *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther. Nevertheless, audiences flocked to it, copied its clothing styles, and made it one of the year's top grossers.

Vindicating the judgment of audiences over film critics is only one of the film's minor achievements. Its most significant successes were in introducing the ideas and techniques of the French "New Wave" into the Hollywood mainstream, and in firmly fixing the gaze of American filmmakers on the lives and styles of the alienated and discontented.

Written by two young *Esquire* writers, David Newman and Robert Benton, it was originally seen by them as a possible project for either François Truffaut or Jean-Luc Godard—a hope based on their ap-



Guess Who's Coming to Dinner



Bonnie and Clyde

preciation of the French "New Wave's" understanding of the poetry and mythic nature of the American genre film. Neither director was available, though, and the film was ultimately produced by Warren Beatty and directed by Arthur Penn.

Penn had also been influenced by the "New Wave," so little was really lost by the change, and he was able to incorporate many of its techniques into the film. Thus, along with free intercutting of time and space, the use of slow and accelerated motion, he also used vignettes ending in visual and verbal puns, à la Godard, and the alternating of comic and violent moments appropos Truffaut.

These techniques updated a story that Hollywood had done before, by Fritz Lang (*You Only Live Once*, 1937) and Nicholas Ray (*They Drive by Night*, 1949). Yet this classic tale of two youthful outsiders who take to a life of crime in an unjust society held a powerful attraction for an audience which also felt outside the channels of power and unable to influence social and political change.

This restless quality is caught right from the opening Depression era scene in which the beautiful but bored Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) sees the handsome, toothpick-chewing Clyde (Warren Beatty) attempting to steal her mother's car, and, caught up with his bravado, becomes involved in a life of crime. It is a life that takes them on a number of botched and bumbling robbery attempts, and

after the addition of Clyde's crude, guffawing brother Buck (Gene Hackman), his bovine, pathetic wife Blanche (Estelle Parsons), and a nose-picking, hero-worshipping rube driver named C.W. Moss (Michael Pollard), they go on a bank-robbing rampage that makes them celebrated and notorious.

Despite their violent and criminal acts, Penn never allows the audience to lose sympathy for Bonnie and Clyde. On one hand, they are seen as outlaw-rebels (though never social victims) against an unjust social order of banks, police, et al., that brought on the Depression, and on the other, as innocent, awkward clowns (e.g., Clyde is shocked when one of his victims tries to kill him with a cleaver). Penn also attempts to reinforce our positive feelings for them through his use of a shallow Freudianism—Clyde is sexually impotent, which supposedly provides the character with a measure of vulnerability, and gives his gun a crude, symbolic significance.

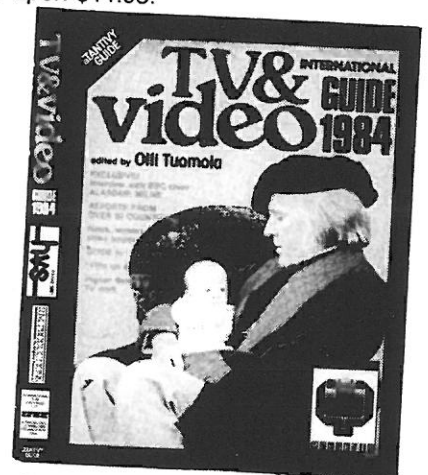
In depicting Bonnie and Clyde as ordinary folk, seeking to be immortalized, Penn sometimes catches the pathos underneath their posturing and bravado. The slow, inarticulate Clyde and the slatternly, poet manqué Bonnie, constantly looking at herself in a blurred mirror, are nothing more than a sharecropper and waitress who hunger for the American dream of glamor and success. Even while Bonnie dresses in expensive clothes

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"The Sixties did leave a significant and valuable legacy. Among the most permanent of these was a revisionist impulse which stimulated many Americans to look critically at themselves, their history, and social and political institutions."

and obsesses about her image and making the headlines, she longs for home and mother. Although the scene where Bonnie returns to the family picnic is overly stylized and filled with soft-focused, sentimentalized, pastoral imagery (e.g., a too picturesquely weathered and stark-looking farmwoman mother), it still succeeds in evoking a bit of the social world they came from.

What is most striking in the film is not the pathetic ordinariness of the characters or their psychological and social reality, but their mythic quality. It's a quality conveyed both by the glamor of stars like Beatty and Dunaway, and Penn's camera, which captures in long shot and close-up the outlaws' vitality, spontaneity and style. In addition, their actions are framed by painterly, beautifully composed and melancholy images of sweeping wheat fields, prairies and Walker Evans-like small towns. It is all topped off by their slow motion death, dressed in white (supposed innocence?), twitching like rag dolls in a montage of violence. Their death is both balletic-mythic, the tragic death of a heroic duo, and concrete—for the bullets are real and leave them truly dead. It's a sensual and exciting scene, but their death leaves one

strangely unmoved.

The myth of Bonnie and Clyde works for Penn in esthetic terms—the beauty of alienation and outlawry—and does capture something of how integral violence and the unfettered assertion of self and will was to both American mythology and the Sixties. It's when Penn wants his outlaws to be seen as romantic rebels against an unjust social order—Clyde returning stolen money to a poor farmer or the gang being embraced at a migrant camp (right out of *The Grapes of Wrath*) as people's heroes—that the film becomes most simplistic and even dangerous. It's clear that Penn wants Bonnie and Clyde to stand as symbols for the rebellious and high-spirited youth of the Sixties, while the banks, Deputy Sheriff Homes and Pa Moss represent a cold, rigid, destructive and duplicitous adult world. There are also suggestions in the exaggerated use of police firepower (e.g., a bloody shootout where the police use an armored car) of the American military's penchant for overkill in Vietnam, as well as the homicidal violence of the forces of law and order.

In spite of the fact that Clyde often talks about protecting poor folk, their social consciousness never seems

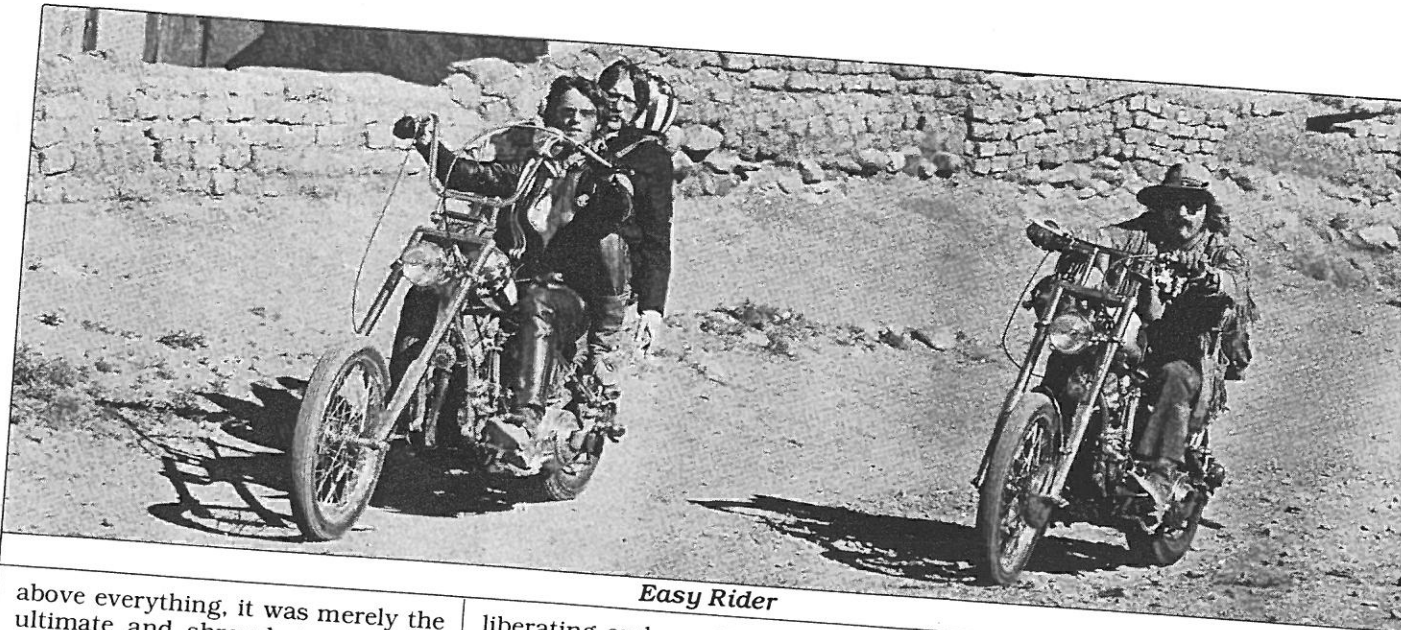
more than a contrivance of Penn's. The only community Bonnie and Clyde are members of is the criminal one. Although the film might not have had any more pernicious influence than getting somebody to buy a snap-brim hat, it did give symbolic sanction to certain nihilistic values and strains that permeated both the "counterculture" and the New Left, and it did feed the contempt many of the young had for the adult world and its work ethic. More significantly, by affirming criminality as a viable means of social, political, and cultural protest, it fed the growing contempt that many of the young felt for more orthodox forms of political organization and action, and ominously romanticized sociopathic violence by confusing it with acts of social rebellion.

These objections aside, *Bonnie and Clyde* was still the landmark film of the Sixties. Along with revitalizing the formal dimensions of the Hollywood film, the attention it focused on the young and the alienated gave some Hollywood luster to the Sixties revisionist impulse which saw American history and society from the bottom up. Once launched on this road the easy shibboleths about America that had been Hollywood's stock in trade since WW II became harder and harder to sustain. While many of these notions were transformed into a kind of bankable and facile pessimism to go along with superstar directors and actors, they nevertheless did illuminate an America no longer as sure of itself and its values as had once been the case.

Nowhere is the crumbling of these values more clearly illustrated than in Mike Nichols' apotheosis of the young, *The Graduate* (1967), an extremely commercially successful film whose most compelling moment is the post-nuptial abduction of the beautiful Elaine Robinson (Katharine Ross) by the romantically obsessed Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman). Not only did this scene break with a whole genre past that upheld the sanctities of the marriage vow



The Graduate



Easy Rider

above everything, it was merely the ultimate and shrewdest assault (it gave Hollywood a breakthrough into the 18-25 market) in a whole series of attacks on the values of the affluent, upper middle-class America.

The embodiment of this challenge in *The Graduate* is the return of the bright and inexperienced Benjamin Braddock to the emptiness and sterility of his parent's Southern California world of swimming pools and economic security. Out of a sheer sense of ennui and alienation, Ben begins a sexually satisfying but emotionally starved affair with the bored, frustrated wife of his father's law partner, Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft). In contrast to the deadness of his affair with Mrs. Robinson is the spontaneity and openness he finds with her daughter Elaine, despite her mother's violent objection to their relationship. Benjamin and Elaine share a commitment to see the world with honesty and clarity—to recognize both their loneliness and estrangement from the parental world. Nichols skillfully evokes empathy in the youth audience for Benjamin's truth seeking and rejection of the plastic, unfeeling adult universe.

Combining the New Wave techniques of jump cuts, extreme close-ups, and telephoto lens shots (though one senses Nichols' eclectic, stylistic borrowings from Antonioni, Fellini and Godard) with the music of youth culture heroes, Simon and Garfunkel, Mike Nichols was able to create a world of youth surrounded by stereotyped adults who were either predators or fools. Predictably, the gilded surfaces of the adults covered empty lives, dead marriages and emotionally wasted people all echoing, in the words of Simon and Garfunkel, to the "sounds of silence."

In such a void the mere act of honestly being in love is seen as

liberating and capable of shattering old verities, even the supposed eternal links of "I do's." Therefore, Mrs. Robinson's shriek at the runaway Elaine, that it's "too late," can be met with the reply, "not for me." Nonetheless, this hardly guarantees a "they lived happily ever after" fade-out; the film ends with the couple's blank and ambiguous stares as they leave the scene of the wedding in the back of a city bus.

Regardless of this final seed of doubt about the future, *The Graduate* still remains a hymn to the young. Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, it grants all vitality, spontaneity and life to the young, also adding to that list all honesty, hope and idealism. But in contrast to the origins of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s revolt, which was loosely and vaguely tied to the Depression, the reasons for Ben's alienation are projected into the sterility of a modern middle-class affluence. Taken together, both films affirmed the discontent of the young, and, in the case of *The Graduate*, underlined that dissatisfaction by locating it precisely at the moment when the American Dream seemed at its peak of material fulfillment, thus creating a paradigm for the type of Sixties film which attempted to subvert the values that had dominated American film since the Forties. Not only was the language and sexual detail a bit franker in *The Graduate*, but the insistence on a moral perspective which unambiguously repudiated social convention and taboos was relatively new to Hollywood. Indeed, with its oblique references to Sixties radicalism when its locale is shifted from Southern California to Berkeley (where a harried Benjamin follows Elaine), and a comic landlord who dislikes outside agitators is brought briefly into the film, *The Graduate* gave hints that there might be even

more to Benjamin's anguish than alienation from the values of the upper middle-class and a case of existential angst. But *The Graduate* was based on a Fifties novel by Charles Webb and the film's few Sixties allusions did little to update the novel and truly illuminate the sources of student rebellion and alienation in the Sixties.

The most socially significant and commercially successful of these cinematic attempts at capturing the rebellious and alternative lifestyles of the Sixties was undoubtedly *Easy Rider*. Initially conceived as a kind of American International Pictures-type exploitation quickie about the hippie scene like the *Wild Angels* (1966) and *The Trip* (1967), it had to be finished with independent financing by its star Peter Fonda. Its subsequent box office success compared to its initial investment would make it the model for what became known as the New American Cinema; that is, independently financed, low budget films, made by non-studio trained directors, who combined highly personal or politically radical stories that broke with conventional Hollywood narrative techniques while borrowing heavily from the "New Wave," *cinéma vérité*, and avant-garde films. Offshoots of this tendency were films like *Hi Mom*, *Greetings*, *Putney Swope*, *Coming Apart*, *Wild 90 and Ice*, and other films of the early Seventies.

Crucial to *Easy Rider*'s enormous commercial success and significance was its ability to capture on a visceral level certain prime themes and concepts of the counterculture and the Sixties: mysticism, freedom, "the land," drugs, and communes. Beginning as a reverse road film in which a pair of hippie motorcyclists—the supercool, detached Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and the tense, angry and

comic Billy (Dennis Hopper)—sell a kilo of dope to an L.A. hip capitalist and then head east for Mardi Gras in what seems like a search for freedom, *Easy Rider* became a laid-back *bildungsroman* of America as the duo visit old-time ranchers and hippie communes, spend time in jail, brothels, and take acid trips. The trip is enhanced by the film's exciting use of landscape, space, movement, and sound (especially the contemporary rock music of Jimi Hendrix, The Byrds, Steppenwolf and others).

Unfortunately, the film was often painfully inarticulate, shallow, and pretentious when it tried to deal with ideas. Most of these took the form of particularly banal and sententious pronouncements by the hippie saint Wyatt, who gives a benediction to the commune ("They're gonna make it"), or pays pious reverence to the life-style of a toothless old rancher—a hip, beardless Gabby Hayes type ("doing his own thing, in his own time.")

Nevertheless, in its depiction of Us against Them, the free, longhairs versus the vicious, redneck straights, the film did strike a powerful social and emotional chord. Moreover, in the process it gave up its penchant for indulging in ersatz and sentimental beatitudes, and connected to the disillusionment felt by many (especially the young) about the America of the Sixties. Its most poignant expression came in the comment of an articulate, amiable, alcoholic lawyer, George Hanson (Jack Nicholson), who joins the two on their quest. After being attacked by local goons, he makes the point that, "This used to be a helluva country. I can't understand what's going on."

Hanson's remark sets the tone of the second half of the film which is pervaded with as much of a sense of doom, failure and despair as the opening was with space, light, and movement. Indeed, Wyatt's and Billy's own violent fate is prefigured in George's murder by a group of rednecks. Although they do make it to Mardi Gras, and take an overwroughtly filmed acid trip—(fisheye lens, overexposed images, and overlapping dialogue)—with some prostitutes in a cemetery, their pathetic destiny seems so sealed that we get hints of it in flashforwards and Wyatt's final pronouncement that, "We blew it." It's a climax that not only acts as a judgment on their personal quest, but seems to extend to the American Experience as a whole.

Such was the outrage of some critics at this judgment that an elite cultural custodian like Diana Trilling (who hadn't raised more than an eye-



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brow at films since her tenure as a reviewer for *The Nation* in the Forties and Fifties) was moved to call the film "devious." She was also particularly peeved by the use and appropriateness of Wyatt and Billy as symbols of our social and cultural condition. She complained that, "Wyatt and Billy lack the energy to create anything, comment on anything, feel anything, except the mute, often pot-induced pleasure of each other's company."

Though one may quarrel with the presumptuousness of having two dope-dealing drifters stand as symbols of freedom and make judgments on something as vast as the "American experience," there is little doubt that *Easy Rider* captured that sense of foreboding and doom which dominated many of the films of the late Sixties, and heralded those of the Seventies. In fact, the fate of Wyatt and Billy seemed a reflection of what had been the fate of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Robert Kennedy, and some felt could be the lot of anyone whose dissent and protest truly threatened the power structure in America.

Of course, Billy and Wyatt were far from political protestors or reformers, but in their dim, self-destructive way they were searching for some vague alternative to the dominant culture. *Easy Rider* is a tongue-tied film which succeeds in evoking the mood of a decade, and, in its mixture of intellectual simple-mindedness, striking imagery and editing, and conscious and unconscious intuition into the decade's confusion and alienation, it was one of the most

representative of late Sixties films. In fact, Wyatt's despairing comment grants unintentional pop cultural symmetry to a decade which began with the unequivocal optimism embodied in lyrics of songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and ended with the pessimism of a line like "We blew it."

If both the counterculture and the New Left clearly never did triumph or truly alter the nature of American political and social power, they nevertheless did change American consciousness. Likewise, if the films that followed did not sustain a coherent and continuous critical perspective on the nature of American reality, they still had to come to terms with the fact that the old conventions and platitudes no longer were totally dominant over the minds and psyches of the American public. Thus, just as Judy Garland's ruby red slippers disappeared into history, so did a movie world in which harmony, reconciliation and predictability gave way to ambiguity, discord and uncertainty.

This article is excerpted from a chapter in *American Film and American Society Since 1945* by Al Auster and Leonard Quart, to be published in London by MacMillan this Summer.

GODS OF METAL

A film by Robert Richter for the Maryknolls
A moving look at the nuclear arms race and the people around the country who are trying to stop it. The film explores the economic and social effects of the arms build-up, and shows concrete actions by groups and individuals to stop it, concluding with the wave of demonstrations around the world in the spring of 1982.
Nominated for the Academy Award, Best Documentary Short, 1982
27 minutes 1982 Rental: \$50 Purchase: \$325

THE UNQUIET DEATH OF JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG

A film by Alvin Goldstein
Providing an excellent background on the first Cold War, *UNQUIET DEATH* examines the many questions still surrounding the "Atom Spies" case. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Rosenbergs' execution.
90 minutes 1975 Classroom rental: \$100
Purchase \$1250

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