

JONATHAN KIRSHNER, *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012), 280 pp.

The 1970s are a truly legendary time in US history. Hardly any other period is so richly filled with the political and social changes that are crucial to the formation of both the era of the seventies and the country of the USA. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the women's movement, the sexual revolution, the economic crisis, and of course the US involvement in the Vietnam War as well as the unsuccessful Nixon presidency turned American social norms upside down. The emergence of the new socio-political turns had a dramatic impact on the cultural forms created during the era, particularly on cinema. This is the subject that Jonathan Kirshner's *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* brings to our attention. The book intelligently combines social and political history of the period with an analysis of the films created during the time and, in doing so, displays the relation between the two, arguing that the cinema of the 1970s was greatly influenced by the socio-political changes that were taking place in the US.

Kirshner divides his account into eight parts, each of which in a relative chronology peels off the shell from the decade, revealing the innovations, tendencies, and themes characteristic of the seventies cinema. At the beginning of the book, however, the author clarifies that the seventies film was born in 1967 and lasted till 1976; therefore, the films he analyzes in the course of the book were created and released during that decade. The first chapter, "Before the Flood," provides a historical overview of the time that preceded 1967. The author singles out three conditions that confined Hollywood: first, state censorship; second, the Great Depression that influenced the film production economically as Americans could not afford going to the movies; third, McCarthyism, i.e., the censorship provoked by Senator McCarthy who claimed that nobody and nothing should have put the values of the USA into question, including films. The chapter proceeds with a general overview of the decade when cinema was finally free from censorship, briefly noting the key socio-political events that took place and claiming that they found their reflection in the

films. The greater examination is, however, scrupulously provided in the following seven chapters.

Thus, in his second chapter, "Talkin' 'bout My Generation," Kirshner draws parallels between the French New Wave and the New Hollywood, arguing that the latter was greatly influenced by the works of such young but talented directors as Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer, and Truffaut who strived to make their films as close to reality as possible; thus, in terms of techniques, they sought to use "source lighting," and favored "naturalistic styles of acting"; whereas, in terms of plot they preferred to base their works on "personal stories," "experiment[ed] with the possibilities of the form," excluded "traditional heroes," and almost never finished their films with "a happy ending" (28-29). All these aspects can be found in Arthur Penn's *Mickey One* (1965), John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966), Martin Scorsese's *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967), Paul Mazursky's *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969), and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Rain People* (1969). The films Kirshner chooses to analyze in greater detail in this section are John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967) that raises the issue of "betrayal" and showcases the connections between "sexuality, morality, and America" (40); Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) that is famous for its "real and honest" depiction of "violence" (the theme is central in the film and can be treated as the director's reaction towards Kennedy's assassination and the US intervention in Vietnam) (43); and Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967)—the film that deals with the "generational conflict" (45) that existed between elder conservative parents and young liberal children. Additionally, part of the chapter is devoted to an examination of music, namely rock and roll songs created by Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones that managed to summarize everything that was important in the 1960s: "civil rights, sexual freedom, drug use, and the generational questioning of traditional norms and values" (34).

The next chapter, "1968, Nixon, and the Inward Turn," as it can be easily grasped from the title, investigates the influence of the cruel political reality, namely the Nixon presidency and the US partaking in the Vietnam conflict, on film. The author discusses Haskell Wexler's openly political *Medium Cool* (1968) that focuses on, among other issues, "race,

poverty, and violence" (56), accentuating the latter as the key characteristic of the USA; Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) uncovers the themes of "a generational sensibility" (64) alongside with "gender" (66), whereas his later *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1971) is soaked with "despair, decay, and faded dreams" (71). "The Personal Is Political" or the fourth chapter of *Hollywood's Last Golden Age* forces into our view the consequences of the women's movement and the sexual revolution as they were represented in the seventies film. In connection with these issues, Kirshner lingers his attention on Mazursky's *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*—a groundbreaking film that illustrates the sexual liberties reigning in the society in the 1970s. The author further provides historical facts concerning the changes in relations between men and women, aptly incorporating them into his analysis of Nichols's *Carnal Knowledge* (1971) that, as Kirshner claims, turns out to be "more sympathetic to its female than to its male characters" (91), and Alan J. Pakula's *Klute* (1971) that considers sexuality a prism through which the characters are to be analyzed. More than that, Pakula depicts prostitution unconventionally, i.e., without "glamoriz[ing]" it, as well as stresses the sameness between models and prostitutes from a moral viewpoint (95-96). Kirshner draws on film noir (*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Criss Cross*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Out of the Past*, etc.) together with such films as Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, and Mazursky's *Blume in Love* that explicitly or implicitly are "misogynic" (84, 98-99). These films reveal that apart from the war the US got involved in thousands of kilometers away, there was a domestic war inside every house in the country: the war against sexism and for equal rights between men and women, husbands and wives.

Kirshner continues meditating upon the US political situation of the period page by page historicizing the Vietnam War and the role America played in it. In his fifth chapter, "Crumbling Cities and Revisionist History," the author underscores the importance of the so-called "revisionist" (110) film that is noteworthy in the analysis of the seventies cinema. Following from this, the revisionist Westerns like Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), as well as such "anti-Westerns" (112, 117) as Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Peckinpah's

*Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) are carefully scrutinized. The second half of the chapter touches upon the topic of "urban combat zones" arguing that the action of many films that were released around 1971 took place in heavily criminalized big cities of America. The films of the period vividly present the problems of murder (Alan Arkin's *Little Murders*), drug addiction (Jerry Schatzberg's *The Panic in Needle Park* and Ivan Passer's *Born to Win*), dangerous streets (John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*), thrive for money (Joseph Sargent's *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*), violence and corruption (Peter Yates' *Bullitt*, Stuart Rosenberg's *Laughing Policeman*, and Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*).

"Privacy, Paranoia, Disillusion, and Betrayal," the sixth chapter in the book, continues providing facts about the Nixon presidency and his administration as well as the growing mistrust of US citizens in the government and people in general. To display how directors reacted to the social confusion, Kirshner focuses here on Michael Ritchie's *The Candidate*, Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail* (1973), Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), and Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976).

The last chapters of the book, "White Knights in Existential Despair" and "Businessmen Drink My Wine," concentrate on the time period when the Vietnam War and the Nixon presidency were finally over. The three films that are discussed in the seventh chapter in extensive detail are Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), and Penn's *Night Moves* (1975). The final eighth chapter provides a long analysis of three films as well. The first two, namely Altman's *Nashville* (1975) and Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976) reveal the core issues that existed in America in the mid 1970s, i.e., political problems and economic unbalance, respectively; while the third film, Ashby's *Shampoo* (1975), succeeds in "holding up a mirror to the American left, whose indifference and self-indulgences let Nixon happen" (210). Lastly, Kirshner mentions the fading of rock and roll and the consequential split up of the Beatles and provides a brief overview of the three films created after the seventies era—*Jaws*, *Rocky*, and *Star Wars*—singling out some differences between the New Hollywood films and the films of the post-New Hollywood era.

All in all, Kirshner's *Hollywood's Last Golden Age*, as the subtitle claims, does indeed cover the major socio-political issues and, most importantly, the way they influenced and/or were reflected in the films released between 1967 and 1976. The book's strength lies in the author's extensive and thorough historical and visual analysis of the classic films. Its

only weakness is Kirshner's at times chaotic narration and repetition of certain issues from chapter to chapter. Nevertheless, the book is a remarkable achievement and is recommended to those who are interested in film history and visual analysis.

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