

CAPTURING TURMOIL: NEW HOLLYWOOD AS  
POLITICAL DISCOURSE

by

DANA ALSTON

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Dr. Erin Hanna

This thesis is an argumentative close analysis of themes, aesthetics, and political meanings within three New Hollywood films. It emerged out of an interest in the films of the 1960s and 70s and the changes within that era's film industry. Those changes granted young, educated filmmaker opportunities to helm studio-driven projects, weaving material into their narratives that would have been impossible in a system ruled by the Hollywood Production Code. The era also included significant social and political unrest, and the films therein reflect that reality. In this project, I perform content analyses for three films within the New Hollywood movement — *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *Nashville* (1975) — in order to understand how films in the movement used themes of celebrity, violence, and oppression to act as a form of discourse. All three films employ on-screen violence to complicate the audience's initial assumptions of characters, and each film critiques the social and political issues of its time through this violence. For each analysis, I discuss several sequences' mise-en-scène — the arrangement of elements within the entire frame — and connect them to broad socio-political ideas. Conclusions from this analysis identify thematic and narrative trends across the selected filmography.

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## Introduction

### i. Conception and Methods

For this project, I performed content analyses on three significant films within the New Hollywood canon. In doing so, I intend to interpret the filmmakers' choices through a historical lens. My research questions ask, "How did changes in the United States manifest within the aesthetics of New Hollywood films?" and more broadly, "How can fictional films act as historical, social and political records of a time and place?"

My criteria for choosing these films relied on a combination of immediate success, contemporary scholarship, and integration of historical events into each film's plot. *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and *Nashville* were critically acclaimed at the time of their release, resulting in awards and other accolades. Each film also relies on historical context for their narratives; *Nashville*, for example, takes place in the midst of the American Bicentennial. In addition, research of published cinema studies writing indicated the importance of the films as examples of the New Hollywood movement.

While discussing the films' formal elements and themes, I will also contextualize the narratives within the history of the United States. In doing so I will identify the films' critiques of American history and values, and interpret narrative beats as they relate to these critiques. Finally, I will draw connections between the three films and discuss their collective value as social documents of an era marked by unrest, social upheaval, and political cynicism.

In the following sections I outline a short history of the American film industry as it pertains to the New Hollywood movement. This will include condensed summaries of the Motion Picture Production Code and the differences in aesthetic style between eras of the industry.

## **ii. Classical Style and the Production Code**

Few enterprises are as culturally relevant and influential as that of the American film industry. But the industry itself is fairly young. The origins of “Hollywood” as the center of the American movie-making business date to the early 20th century. In the 1910s, a number of filmmakers and small production companies moved to Los Angeles due to the warm climate, reliable sunlight, and large amounts of open land, which assisted in year-long production cycles. By the late 1920s, Hollywood’s formal studio system had been established, helped by the advent of sound-based films. In the 1940s, the largest studios (called the Big Five) produced 400 films a year (Sklar).

With the success of the studio system came the establishment of a classical style of filmmaking. This style emphasized omniscience on the part of the camera, presenting the events of a given film’s narrative within an easily-understood frame of logic. Continuity editing — a style of editing meant to maintain visual consistency — was dominant, and narratives progressed in a linear fashion. In addition, classical Hollywood cinematography created easily understood spaces and presented them to the audience like a stage play. Film Scholar David Bordwell summarizes the characteristics of the classical visual style:

Classical Hollywood cinema possesses a style which is largely invisible and difficult for the average spectator to see. The narrative is delivered

so effortlessly and efficiently to the audience that it appears to have no source. It comes magically off the screen (Bordwell 26).

The Motion Picture Production Code accompanied this style, sometimes called the Hays Code. Named after Will Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the Production Code was a set of industry “moral guidelines” that controlled the content of studio pictures. It prohibited a movie from “lowering the moral standards of those who see it”; in practice this amounted to censorship of curse words, sexual content, realistic violence, depictions of homosexuality, and other content then considered immoral (Leff & Simmons 271). Violations resulted in a film being banned from exhibition, harming any possible profitability.

### **iii. The Decline of the Code and Rise of ‘New Hollywood’**

The MPPDA adopted the code in 1934 and enforced it until 1968. But as the industry evolved, the code gradually fell out of favor. New technologies such as television challenged the film industry to come up with new ways to attract audiences away from their homes, and the MPPDA subsequently became more lax in its judgements. Some films failed to receive approval but still achieved success. For instance, *Some Like It Hot* (1959) was not granted a certificate but became a box office smash. These developments weakened the Code’s authority (Bordwell 45).

By the 1960s, the traditional studio system was in the midst of decline. *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, a Supreme Court case that essentially broke up trusts controlled by major studios, drastically changed the way Hollywood films were produced, distributed, and exhibited. Summarizing the effects of the decision, Journalist

Eric Hodgins wrote that the decision effectively ended the classical system and caused a “horrible decade” in which film studios leaned on spectacle to attract audiences and recoup ballooning budgets. Colorized film was more widely used and technical improvements like 3-D were used to try and retain dwindling audiences. The innovations were only partially successful, and by the 1960s it was clear a fundamental change was needed:

For Hollywood and the American feature film, the 1960s was a decade that ended in the midst of transitions that established no definitive direction for the future. Throughout the 1960s, the industry in the United States continued to struggle with the competition of television and the decline of the domestic audience for theatrical movies (Monaco 3).

Recognizing the need for innovation and risk-taking, as well as an increased popularity in European films with non-traditional stylistic tendencies, studios began hiring young, film school-educated filmmakers. These filmmakers — sometimes referred to as the “Film School Generation” — were given little oversight during production, and their films exhibited distinct aesthetic features as a result. This collective shift toward an emphasis on the auteur within the studio system set the stage for the New Hollywood movement (Monaco 8).

New Hollywood films deviated from classical Hollywood style in several ways. According to scholar Todd Berlinger, these films intentionally hinder narrative linearity and place emphasis on “irresolution;” that is, endings that differ in style and themes from classical Hollywood films. They also reject genre conventions and archetypes, subverting an audience’s expectations through characterization and cinematic technique (Berlinger 51). In this project, I argue that New Hollywood filmmakers used this subversion to communicate socio-political ideas reflective of the national mood. In

addition, the abolishment of the Production Code allowed filmmakers to integrate jarring narrative beats involving violence and sex that were previously censored. The combination of these elements produced films that critiqued current social and political events, thus transforming them into a form of political discourse.

## ***Bonnie and Clyde* and Intersections of Fame, Violence and Sex**

Arthur Penn's film *Bonnie and Clyde* was one of the most controversial films in Hollywood at the time of its release. It was made when the Production Code had limited power over film content, and a few years before the industry banned it entirely. Thus, opportunities to portray explicit material like sex, drugs, and violence increased significantly. Those opportunities allowed a film like *Bonnie and Clyde*, a semi-biographical retelling of crime sprees committed by Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, to come to fruition.

The Sexual Revolution, a period of profound social change in which a new crop of young educated people influenced the status quo in the United States, aligned with the industrial changes. The shift in political and social dynamics was widespread. There is evidence, despite a lack of hard data on the subject, that young people exhibited a greater number of sexual partners after the mid-1960s (Francis 5). Attitudes toward sex, feminism and homosexuality rapidly transformed over the course of the decade. *Bonnie and Clyde* exhibits those transformations onscreen, narratively and aesthetically.

Even in a new industrial and social context, *Bonnie and Clyde*'s path to theaters was fraught with difficulties, and critics were repulsed by its violence. Initial reviews of the film were generally dismissive, even condemnatory (Schneider 474), and they highlighted critics' acute discomfort with the film. Bosley Crowther, then a prominent film critic for the *New York Times*, openly derided the film when it released in 1967:

Such ridiculous, camp-tinctured travesties of the kind of people these desperadoes were and of the way people lived in the dusty Southwest back in those barren years might be passed off as candidly commercial movie comedy, nothing more, if the film weren't reddened with blotches of violence of the most grisly sort. This blending of farce with brutal

killings is as pointless as it is lacking in taste, since it makes no valid commentary upon the already travestied truth. And it leaves an astonished critic wondering just what purpose Mr. Penn and Mr. Beatty think they serve with this strangely antique, sentimental claptrap (Crowther).

Crowther's opinion "started the conversation" among critics regarding the film. Others concurred with his sentiment; *Life* magazine did not even publish a review (Harris 263).

Why is the film held in such high regard today? The most immediate reason is that critical opinions shifted extremely quickly. Joe Morgenstern, *Newsweek's* film writer, published a retraction and reevaluation of his own review after seeing the film twice. The move helped the film limp along at the box office, partially because of the controversy it created among critics (Harris 263).

A 7000-word essay by Pauline Kael published in *The New Yorker* was more influential. It defended the film as a great, misunderstood work of art:

Once something enters mass culture, it travels fast. In the spoofs of the last few years, everything is gross, ridiculous, insane; to make sense would be to risk being square. A brutal new melodrama is called "Point Blank," and it is. So are most of the new movies. This is the context in which "Bonnie and Clyde," an entertaining movie that has some feeling in it, upsets people—people who didn't get upset even by "Mondo Cane." Maybe it's because "Bonnie and Clyde," by making us care about the robber lovers, has put the sting back into death (Kael).

Time has been kind. Now, *Bonnie and Clyde* is celebrated as the birth of New Hollywood. Critics and scholars point to its influence on the industry; it changed "Hollywood and the critical establishments" and sent them into a "generational upheaval," writes critic A.O. Scott (Scott). But more important was its effect on the way violence was portrayed — and written about — in movies. *Bonnie and Clyde* "opened

the floodgates for forms of violence ranging from the sturdily moral to the wholly gratuitous” (French).

Few of these critical opinions, however, critique *Bonnie and Clyde*’s violence as a means for political discourse. The film regularly places instances of themes and subject matter — including sex, crime, celebrity and socioeconomic desperation — that were topical for the time alongside scenes of violence and uncertainty. The effect disorients to its audience. But through the following formal analysis of the film, I will argue that the intention of that effect — to communicate social and political ideas — goes far beyond simple shock. The blood and death on-screen, coupled with sympathetic portrayal of characters far outside the law, acts as a critique of sexuality, celebrity, and myth in the United States. *Bonnie and Clyde* is a social and political document of its era, a phenomenon that would later influence other directors in the New Hollywood movement.

### **i. Objects of Desire**

Director Arthur Penn positions Bonnie as an object of desire, accentuating her red lips and expression in close-up and implied nudity through a medium shot. That medium shot never exposes Bonnie below the upper half of her chest, leaving a majority of her body to the imagination of the audience and thus denying visual gratification. In addition, Penn frames Bonnie on her bed behind her bedframe, positioning the bars of the bedframe as a literal and metaphorical cage. Bonnie Parker is young, attractive, trapped in an unwanted boring life, and — as the film’s opening titles foreshadow — about to embark on a violent crime spree.

The first shot in *Bonnie and Clyde* is an extreme close-up on a pair of lips, colored by red lipstick and hanging slightly open. They turn away from the lens, and Penn follows until the film refocuses on the face of Bonnie Parker as she gazes into a dirty mirror. Parker, played by Faye Dunaway, is the visual focus of the film's first series of shots. Penn places Parker's near-nude body at the center of almost every frame. Held mostly in a medium shot that avoids explicit nudity, Bonnie walks lazily around her room, lays on her bed, and rattles her bedframe aggressively in apparent boredom (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Accentuating Bonnie's beauty and her "trapped" state

This sequence reveals a great deal about Dunaway as an actress and Penn as a director, but it also may be interpreted as the film's thesis statement. The scene explicitly portrays Bonnie as an object of desire. That treatment transforms Bonnie — who will soon become a violent criminal — into a physically desirable protagonist. But

the film does not use sex simply in a titillating manner. Instead, the plot places scenes with erotic tension or content alongside or surrounding scenes involving crime. The film makes the connection between sexual repression (Bonnie rattling the metaphorical cage of her life) and outright violence even more explicit later on, suggesting that “the capacity for criminal violence is, from the onset, a factor of desire” (Hoberman 170).

In fact, the film forges that connection from the moment Clyde, played by Warren Beatty, merely mentions armed robbery. The pair meet when Bonnie — still nude but obscured by the screen of her bedroom window — spies Clyde attempting to steal her mother’s car. Their attraction to one another is immediate; the two barely exchange names before heading downtown to buy a soda together. Their courtship’s credibility relies on a combination of a number of formal elements, all of which contribute to a romanticized, nostalgic environment surrounding the two characters. The scene’s color palette, made mostly of sepia-toned reds, yellows, and browns, establishes the Depression-era setting and simultaneously creates a revisionist visual history of the era. The color scheme surrounds the sequences with a dreamlike haze, forcing the audience to view the titular characters through the lens of a romanticized history. The style is noticeably manufactured, but in ways that draw people in. This is a fictional account, an obvious fantasy, yet the historical detail sprinkled into the plot help us attach to the film. And sexual desire sits at the forefront of that fantasy.

Even upon the two first meeting one another, the eroticism between Bonnie and Clyde is palpable. Penn films the simple act of drinking a soda in a sexualized manner: Bonnie’s bottle hangs on her lips, and as she mouths the opening it becomes a glass phallic symbol. “What’s it like, armed robbery?” she asks, and Penn makes sure to

capture her eyeing Clyde with sly arousal in close-up. When Clyde does produce a gun, Bonnie fondles the barrel, and the shot in which she does so positions the gun nearly between Clyde's legs and facing downward. The combination of these shots transforms an otherwise unremarkable weapon of violence into an implicit sexual object. Once Clyde uses the gun to hold up a small shop, commencing their life in crime, and the couple dives into a stolen car to escape, Bonnie is not able to contain her arousal. She throws herself at Clyde, and the two newly minted lovers speed away to a frolicking banjo-based soundtrack. Though Clyde has not outwardly used violence to kill or maim yet, the scene goes to great lengths to establish the connection between crime and sex using basic film language (Figure 2). The thought of holding up a store, of acting outside the law, turns both of them on.



Figure 2: Connecting crime to sexual arousal

Clyde's own impotence and sexual frustration complicates and contributes to that relationship. At several points throughout the film, Bonnie initiates sex, but Clyde is either unable to reciprocate or outright refuses to do so. Directly after the two drive away from their first crime, Clyde forces Bonnie away from him, and the two share uncomfortable tension as the former reveals his impotence. "I'm just gonna tell you straight off," he says. "I'm not much of a lover boy. It ain't your fault." Bonnie's reaction is devastating: "Boy. Your advertising's just dandy. Folks would never guess you don't have anything to sell." A few scenes later, after the couple's criminal behavior has gained some notoriety, the two lay in bed together sleeping. Bonnie, sensing the opportunity for sex, leans over and tries to silently wake Clyde. The scene, most of it shot in a long take, moves from Bonnie's dejected expression (after Clyde stays sound asleep) to an extreme close-up on Clyde's eye, which opens. He is awake the entire time, terrified of disappointing his lover.

This scene, and Clyde's impotence, are important for a number of reasons. First, it makes the character far more complex than just a good-looking criminal. Clyde's impotence is a criminal failing of his masculinity, a flaw that makes him noticeably human than archetypical Hollywood heroes. In addition, the portrayal of sex, both in a visually gratifying way and portrayal of its potential frustrations, was groundbreaking and indicative of the film's era. Bonnie and Clyde, the characters, are not only objects of desire. They are *flawed* objects of desire. The thematic relevance of those flaws is hard to overstate. Clyde only achieves sexual arousal during violent acts; it is what drives him to hold up that first store and drive away with Bonnie in the first ten minutes. By placing those two acts alongside one another, it draws a connection between the couple's sexual repression — characterized by Bonnie's unrealized desires — and the violence they commit. J. Hoberman identifies that repression as “a drive” for both characters' actions. “Sex is shown alternately as a substitute for, or stimulant to, sexual relations,” he writes. “But [the film's] real originality lays in the realization that the lust for celebrity in [society] might be a drive as potent as sex” (Hoberman 2003).

## **ii. Authority and Celebrity**

The Saturday morning after *Bonnie and Clyde's* premiere, Arthur Penn attended a press conference and fielded questions “about the picture's comedy, violence, anti-heroism, and ‘relevance’:

“The film's approach, he explained, was that, at a time when ‘very rural people were suffering the terrors of a depression...Bonnie and Clyde became folk heroes, violators of the status quo. And in that context, one finds oneself confronted with the terrible irony that we root for somebody who, in the course of a good cause, is called upon to commit acts of violence which repel us’” (Harris 337).

Penn's assessment brings forth a number of themes that make *Bonnie and Clyde* a reflection of the era in which it was made. In the film, the characters of Bonnie and Clyde slowly gain notoriety and fame through their crimes, until their deadly fate is impossible to avoid. The narrative and cinematic direction gradually increase the violence until its ugliness is unavoidable, all while drawing a connection between that violence and the couple's status as folk heroes. In doing so, it presents a morally ambiguous portrait of an archetype — the sympathetic criminal — that previously was unknown to mainstream Hollywood due to the Production Code of the industry's Golden Age. The film also positions classic sources of authority (mostly law enforcement) as enemies of its protagonists. Through various negative portrayals of characters “inside” the law, *Bonnie and Clyde* becomes a portrait of anti-authoritarianism in addition to its critique on the moral complexities of fame. Collectively, these two themes exemplify both what Hollywood had become in 1967, and hinted at how these themes would eventually evolve in subsequent years. Most importantly, they solidify *Bonnie and Clyde* as a valuable political and social contribution to the national zeitgeist.

In order to capture that moral ambiguity, the film works early on to establish the two characters' adventures as noticeably lighthearted. I have analyzed the ways in which Penn builds early scenes around their erotic tension through his shooting style and cinematography. The way the Penn frames their escape with bluegrass music, however, is far more important to that first sequence. As the car speeds away from the small town, the soundtrack undercuts their deed, transforming it into a lighthearted

misadventure. Robbing a small store is not a criminal act in the first ten minutes of the film. Instead, it is simply a small episode in a comedy.

When Bonnie and Clyde first hold up a bank, the result is intentionally humorous. Penn shoots the lead-up to the robbery with a heavy reliance on shadows, denying his audience a “clean” look at the two protagonists despite shooting them in tight close-ups. As the couple drives to the bank in their stolen car, their nervousness is palpable. Clyde walks through their plan while Bonnie stares straight ahead, seemingly contemplating the immoral act to which she is about to contribute. When they finally stop alongside the bank, Clyde has to be goaded into exiting the vehicle. “What are you waiting for?” Bonnie asks. The line, shot slightly in profile, accentuates the sting of inexperience both of them feel, especially as Clyde hesitates before exiting. They are about to cross the threshold into full criminality, and neither one of them is fully prepared.

That inexperience comes to a head when Clyde, his gun nervously shaking as he points it at a calm bank teller, discovers that the “bank” failed three weeks ago; he is “robbing” a practically derelict building. The camera switches perspectives, matching Clyde’s gaze as he looks left and right at the noticeably unmaintained walls and furniture. Penn shoots this sequence partially using a handheld camera. The effect is twofold. The audience connects to Clyde’s nerves; he seemingly cannot focus completely on what is in front of him. But the inherent comedy of the situation isn’t immediately clear as a result of the shooting style, which emphasizes the tension, danger and heightened realism of the bank robbery. Clyde forces the teller outside to tell Bonnie himself. Bonnie cannot contain her laughter, and suddenly the tension from

the previous sequence is completely diffused. “We got a dollar ninety-eight, and you’re laughing,” Clyde chuckles over a country soundtrack that is once again upbeat and nearly frolicking (Figure 4). This sequence is significant mostly because it identifies relatable flaws in its two protagonists through cinematic technique and film language and uses those flaws to establish its initially comedic tone. They are not swashbuckling criminals on the run; they are flawed, inexperienced and nervous people.

Bonnie and Clyde rarely even speak as to *why* they commit the crimes that they do. But as later scenes demonstrate, they soon grow accustomed to the attention their actions bring them, and eventually actively seek fame. Soon after their first robbery, the couple take an opportunity to position themselves as Robin Hood-like heroes, assisting a by-standing man in shooting out a foreclosure notice outside his now-empty home. Later, in the midst of a different robbery, Clyde deliberately leaves behind money that belongs to an innocent bystander. Scholar Leland Tracy identifies the underlying morality that Clyde attempts to exude in this moment:

The message is clear: in the world that Penn is depicting the banks are the bad guys, and so stealing from them is not really wrong. If Clyde Barrow’s motivations were purely monetary, he would have taken all the money. By leaving some of it behind he is respecting his own moral code, even while breaking the law (Tracy 19).

Maintaining that moral code affords both criminals an air of legitimate anti-authoritarianism. Such an idea was far from unpopular in 1930s, an era marked by the Great Depression, widespread displacement, and crime. Mass unemployment — 33% at the height of Bonnie and Clyde’s crime spree in 1933 — cast negative perceptions upon financial institutions (Pew Research), and dust bowl conditions in the South caused

widespread damage to the agricultural industry. These conditions, Tracy argues, set the stage for Bonnie and Clyde's popularity, in which they both "revel."

Penn brings this search for fame more and more to the forefront of the 1967 film as the narrative moves forward. Bonnie and Clyde eventually team up with Clyde's brother, Buck, and his wife, Blanche. Again, the initial tone set by the two couples' meeting is optimistic and upbeat. Buck, an outwardly rambunctious man, hugs both Bonnie and Clyde aggressively, and Bonnie is obviously (and somewhat hilariously) uncomfortable with his attitude. Penn relies on his actors to capture the humorous dynamic, but from this point forward, the narrative begins to follow a fairly consistent pattern, situating scenes of normalcy between sequences of brutal, inescapable violence.

More specifically, Penn and his writers include scenes of the group (now semi-officially named the Barrow Gang) relishing their fame, and then immediately follow with scenes that make the immoral actions of the Gang explicit to the audience. When the Gang hides in a small house for a short time, Bonnie attempts to read the rest of the group a poem she has written with the intention of getting it published. Penn frames the reading most in a wide shot, with Bonnie sitting in a chair and speaking slightly toward the camera. The Barrow Gang, and the film's viewers, are her audience, and already we begin to view her as an important voice. Clyde even kneels beside her and berates Buck for interrupting, and the image recalls that of a monarch holding court over her subjects. This idyllic moment immediately shifts, however, when Clyde looks out a window and sees numerous policemen approaching the house. Suddenly, the house becomes the center of a full-blown firefight, and Penn is careful to train his camera, unmoving, on images of Clyde, Bonnie, and Buck opening fire at law enforcement. The sound design

uses amplified gunshots as well, creating an expansive and explosive soundscape that heightens the reality of the imagery. While the Gang escapes injury, two policemen are killed, and the scene's shooting style places their deaths either in tight medium shots or close-ups. The violence is impossible to look away from, for both the audience and the protagonists they are watching, and the reality of their situation is now clear (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Contrasting celebrity with gunfire

Once the firefight concludes and the Gang escapes, the pattern continues, albeit in ways that make the connection between fame and criminality less implicit. Buck grabs a newspaper from a mailbox and begins reading a report about their exploits as Clyde drives through the countryside. At the mere mention of her name, Bonnie becomes visibly excited; she adjusts her seat and smiles as she is described as Clyde's "yellow-haired partner." When the group stops and encounters a Texas Ranger

immediately afterwards, they capture him and force him to pose for photographs, waving a large gun in his face. Bonnie is the first to suggest the idea, though Penn uses



a wide shot to display the collective amusement of all involved. The Ranger is clearly terrified, but defiant; Penn captures his expression, wide-eyed and stoic, in close-up. In this scene, the memory of the last firefight (which occurred just minutes ago in the film's chronology) is all but forgotten, and the Gang practically leaps at the chance to use a figure of authority and a weapon of violence (the revolver) as props in a publicity stunt (Figure 4). Fame has become, once again, the most important goal; the violence is a means to an end.

Figure 4: Excited by fame and threatening authority

The couple's lust for fame continues in the later scenes of the film. The climax, and the scenes leading to it, offer a combination of previous themes; Penn and his screenwriters shift between scenes of sex, fame, authoritarianism, and violence. In one scene, Bonnie read aloud from a poem she has written about the couple's exploits. As

she does, Penn cuts between three different scenes. The first focuses on Bonnie and Clyde sitting in a car, darkened by shadows, as rain pours outside. Bonnie's verses are grim; one line mentions that "those who squeal/Are usually found dying or dead." But Clyde appears transfixed. "Do you think if I sent that to the papers, they'd publish it?" he asks. Bonnie smiles, and shakes her head, avoiding the question but clearly enjoying the thought. The shots therein are almost all close-ups, and capture the couple's delight at the notion of toying with the press. From here, the montage continues. Penn uses a dissolve to transition to Frank Hamer, the same Texas Ranger humiliated earlier, reading the poem from a newspaper clipping. The dissolve accentuates the passage of time between the two scenes, and strongly implies that the poem has been published. But more important is the way in which Hamer is shot and portrayed: covered in shadow, smoking a pipe, and glaring at the news clipping he holds. The shots in this short — but essential — vignette portray Hamer as a scheming villain in Bonnie and Clyde's story. Immediately afterward, Penn transitions again to a shot of Bonnie and Clyde sitting on a blanket in the middle of a sunlit field (Figure 5). Bonnie concludes the poem, which the real-life Parker actually sent to the press, with the following stanza, connecting the previous image of Hamer to a verbal acknowledgement of the couple's impending death:

"Someday they'll go down together;  
They'll bury them side by side;  
To few it'll be grief —  
To the law a relief —  
But it's death for Bonnie and Clyde."



Figure 5: Authority as a villain

This sequence is essential to the film mostly because of its foreshadowing. Though previous scenes have treated death without subtlety, the poem's publication, conclusion and Hamer's visual portrayal all draw implicit connections between the fame Bonnie and Clyde have accrued and their eventual death at the hand of authority.

Cinematographer Burnett Guffey's camerawork suggests that Hamer will eventually become the source of the death that the poem describes. Tracy argues that the treatment of authority — which serves to counter the positive anti-establishmentarian that Bonnie and Clyde collectively represent — allows the film to communicate a moral regarding its broader counterculture undertones:

Penn was not trying to make a biography of Bonnie and Clyde, but to use the characters to illustrate a modern (and metaphorical) morality tale in which rebelling against authority was considered a positive and worthwhile endeavor (Tracy 28).

The film's ending, in which the titular couple is gunned down by five officers in a brutal flurry of gunfire, acts as "an acknowledgement by the writers of the serious consequences of outlaw revolutionary beliefs" (Lennon). The final scene again uses visual and audio contrasts to position Bonnie and Clyde and Hamer as polar and political opposites. The couple are filmed together in medium close-ups as they drive along an empty country road, before stopping to help Ivan Moss (the father of a member of the Barrow Gang) fix a tire. There is little diegetic sound in this scene; most of the action occurs against a silent backdrop. Moss appears uneasy at several points during the sequence, and we soon understand why. Once Bonnie and Clyde have been drawn into the open, Moss ducks under his truck, and Clyde realizes that they have been trapped, quickly turning to look at Bonnie one last time.

Then the silence is broken, and a team of law enforcement officers — hiding in bushes to the side of the road — open fire. Penn cuts rapidly between shots of violence (Bonnie and Clyde are both torn apart by bullets) and the source of gunfire. Both targets writhe around as the soundscape is suddenly incredibly loud. When the shooting stops, the silence returns, and Penn now focuses on Hamer and his team as they emerge from the bushes. In a tracking shot, the camera shoots the small crowd of Rangers and onlookers through a bullet-riddled window, and Hamer glances at the camera for a moment before focusing on the aftermath of his manhunt. The film cuts to black, and "The End" appears on screen.

### iii. Conclusions

The last sequence is perhaps the most famous in the film, and the culmination of its themes. Visually, it contrasts Bonnie and Clyde and the authorities that kill them simply by placing the former in the open and the latter hidden away. In their final moments, the titular protagonists attempt to help a friend and are gunned down for their naiveté. Hamer's position as a symbol of authority highlights the counterculture attitudes of the film's time and place, and general distrust of "the state." Hoberman explains these political parallels in *The Dream Life*:

Just as Bonnie and Clyde's sexual frustration is shown to fuel their outlaw violence, so their hard-won happiness must be punished by the authorities — as presaged by the police gun battles that disrupt their attempt at motor-court domesticity. Indeed, once Bonnie and Clyde triumph over internalized repression....the capacity for outrageous — and outrageously punitive — violence resides entirely in the state. The outlaw couple's climactic, bloody ambush-execution has tremendous finality. Their bullet-perforated automobile is evidence of official vengeance upon taboo desire (Hoberman 172).

In other words, Hamer is essentially a symbolic stand-in for oppression as maintained by American authority, and Bonnie and Clyde, despite their criminality, represent the youth movement of the 1960s. The film uses violence to communicate morals regarding these themes, as well as themes of fame and sexual freedom. While the couple enjoys their notoriety and outward effect they both have on their society, Penn is realistic about the world they (the film's predominately young audience) live in.

As scholar Paul Monaco notes, the film was "a cultural turning point in the American cinema" because of its sympathetic portrayal of criminals and the blatant on-

screen violence they commit. More influential, however, were the ways in which Penn communicate political ideas and reflected the era of the film using those elements. Penn himself commented that the film was addressing “a church going, highly moralistic, highly puritanical society, which has integrated and made a part of itself a kind of violence against human beings, which, viewed from the outside, seems absolutely intolerable” (Monaco 185). The contrasts and violence the film constructs allow us a glimpse at that outside view.

## ***Dog Day Afternoon* and the Politics of Robbery**

Eight years after *Bonnie and Clyde*, the New Hollywood movement was nearing its artistic and cultural zenith. Films such as *The Graduate* (1967), *The French Connection* (1971) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) had established the style and success of a post-Production Code industry. As previously censored material began appearing on-screen, films were increasingly using the language of cinema to critique broad political and socio-economic concepts. David A. Cook writes that “in a degree of self-examination extraordinary for this country in any medium at any time, the American commercial cinema was experimenting with social criticism and making money at it in the bargain” (Cook xv).

Cook’s assessment rings true when viewing the financial and critical success of New Hollywood. *The Graduate* was made for \$3 million, and made \$104 million at the box office (adjusted for inflation) despite its depiction of non-marital sex between a twenty-something recent college grad and a middle-aged woman. *The Candidate* (1972) critiqued the American political process and achieved critical acclaim. *The Godfather* (1972) remains one of the highest-grossing films of all time, and featured a violent story involving organized crime. By the mid-1970s, with the Production Code long-abolished, Hollywood was regularly producing films featuring social criticism. Crucially, these critiques were communicated through violent, sexualized, or “mature” material.

*Dog Day Afternoon* was one such film. It is a crime drama, a genre not typically associated with grand political themes. But when the film, based on a real-life bank robbery incident in 1972 and directed by Sydney Lumet, was released in 1975, the anti-

establishment undertones were difficult for critics to ignore. Alongside praise for its cast (including Al Pacino and John Cazale in starring roles) were critiques of the film's stance on class warfare. In a review for the *New York Times*, critic Vincent Canby points out that the characterization of one character signals "the tangle of city distress, anger, sweetness and violence, which is one of the main things that 'Dog Afternoon' is all about" (Canby). Analysis of the film as an allegory for class differences is a well-explored area within film scholarship.

However, the film also contains themes of celebrity and violence similar to those in *Bonnie and Clyde* that secure the film both within the New Hollywood and its time period. These themes reflected a turbulent political era, characterized most significantly by the Watergate Scandal (which occurred in 1972) and the Vietnam War. Both events had immediate and lasting impacts on domestic political attitudes; less than a month after Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency, U.S. News & World Report declared that the Watergate Scandal coincided with an 11 percent increase in voters voluntarily labeled "Independent" ("Effects of Watergate: Good and Bad"). The historian Julian Zelizer has argued that "the scandal continues to reverberate today throughout the political spectrum" and that "we still live in the era of Watergate" through the skepticism toward government (Zelizer).

*Dog Day Afternoon* never explicitly mentions Watergate. But the event is present in the attitudes and themes of the film, which reflect the destabilizing effects on political trust within the American public. Characters actively work against symbolic representations of authority. The news media covering the film's central robbery treat its perpetrator as a famous Robin Hood-like figure, and a crowd of onlookers root for

him despite his immoral actions. The perpetrator himself seems to embrace his role as counter-cultural icon while his hostages outright ignore personal danger to maintain their brief celebrity. The Attica prison riot is explicitly invoked, transforming an audience into a pseudo-protestors. Outside of that instance, however, specific cultural events go largely unmentioned.

Nevertheless, the film succeeds in capturing a broad cultural penchant for unrest, acting as a social and political document of the attitudes these events helped spawn. By centering themes of protest, fame, and economic tension on a deliberately flawed protagonist, the film offers a critique of the act of protest. It also uses its characters' penchant for anti-establishmentarianism and combines it with a violent conclusion, a similar technique to the one Arthur Penn applied in making *Bonnie and Clyde*:

In nearly all of these films, the criminal couple is portrayed sympathetically (though not without irony) and martyred at the film's conclusion by callous lawmen, reversing the moral order of the classical universe. Yet the American gangster film had always been used as a vehicle to explore wider social and cultural issues, and the criminal couples of the seventies were in many ways configured as romantic revolutionaries against the system that gave us Watergate and Vietnam" (Cook 184).

The effect produces a moving story, and more importantly a well-crafted reflection of a specific time and place.

### **i. Class and Protest**

*Dog Day Afternoon* opens with an epitaph: "What you are about to see is true — it happened in Brooklyn, New York on August 22, 1972." A carefully constructed montage of Brooklyn immediately follows. Director Sydney Lumet displays a series of

shots that capture a sunny summer day in the borough, establishing not just a setting but the underlying class issues that plague it. The first shot focuses on a large ferry, before pulling back to reveal a larger view of the New York City skyline. The next tracks a dog as it sniffs garbage and walks along a sidewalk in an unidentified New York neighborhood. This second shot features a predominately grey color palette, accentuating the downtrodden nature of the neighborhood; there is very little in the mise-en-scene that “pops” out at the audience. The next shot, a steady wide shot of a rooftop pool party overlooking the New York City skyline, is a near visual opposite. Lumet uses lush greens and blues to emphasize the difference in lifestyles between the swimmers and the people living on the street below. Immediately, we are shown two differing realities — signaled by two differing color schemes — contained in the same locale. The remainder of the montage continues this pattern, contrasting shots of working people (clearly middle or working class) and shots of an upper-class lifestyle. In one notable example, Lumet cuts from a shot of a man watering his bright green lawn in the midst of a row of white houses to a man watering the weeds in the sidewalk outside a small convenience store. Visually, the shift is stark (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Visual contrasts in New York lifestyles

Again, the effect of this montage is twofold. It establishes the setting in which the story of the film will take place, but it also highlights the different lifestyles within that setting and sets the stage for themes regarding class difference and protest. Lumet brings the disparity that will later fuel cries of anger on the streets outside a bank to the visual forefront of his audience's mind. He has defined a visual imbalance between the upper and lower classes of New York.

The film wastes little time utilizing that imbalance to narrative and thematic ends. Once the bank robbery is underway, and the police catch the perpetrators in the act, a large crowd gathers around the bank, framing the city block. The main character, Sonny — played by Al Pacino — has captured a handful of hostages, including the bank tellers, owner, and security guard. A standoff between Sonny and law enforcement ensues, and a detective named Moretti leads the latter side. In a notable sequence, Sonny leaves his partner in crime, Sal, to guard the hostages as Sonny heads outside to

negotiate with Moretti. Sonny stands outside the bank with the head bank teller, Sylvia, as Moretti attempts to communicate the helplessness of Sonny's situation. At Moretti's urging, Sonny realizes that the entire street is guarded by police officers, and the rooftops are lined with snipers. "You got nowhere to go, alright?" Moretti insists. Lumet shoots this scene with medium shots or close-ups, rarely allowing the camera to close the distance between the two men. Sonny regularly paces back and forth on the sidewalk, and deflects Moretti's attempts to get him to surrender. Lumet has formed a visual barrier between the two sides: When an officer gets too close for comfort for Sonny, he lashes out verbally, inciting the crowd to chant "Attica!" repeatedly. Suddenly, the crowd (who had previously gathered simply to watch the event) begins acting like a group of protestors, actively rooting against the police (Figure 7).

This sequence accomplishes two things. It establishes a tense relationship between Sonny and Moretti, which the rest of the film's narrative will rely upon. But Sonny also ties his hostage situation to the Attica Prison riot, an uprising that occurred in September 1971 in the Attica Correctional Facility. Over the course of four days, 1,000 inmates rioted and took control of the facility in an attempt to gain better living conditions and prisoners' rights. Forty-two staff were taken hostage. Negotiations were slow, and on the fourth day, state troopers stormed the facility. Forty-three people, including ten prison employees and 33 inmates, died. Most of the deaths were blamed on law enforcement (Ferretti).

The Attica riot was a major cultural event, and historians now consider it a watershed in the Civil Rights Movement. Andrew B. Mamo writes that the uprising

represented a “crossroads” in the fight for civil rights, and one that ultimately ended in needless violence:

The Attica prison movement was a moment of possibility for expanding rights that has since passed. The year 1971 represented the crossroads: the moment before prison litigation would grow sharply and before mass incarceration would become a major social phenomenon. It stands in sharp contrast to our contemporary situation. The rhetorical and intellectual space for articulating claims about justice in prisons began to narrow in the early 1970s. Media attention to the spectacle of violence and revolt helped channel rights claims from the more capacious form invoked within the prisons by the inmates themselves to a limited set of claims prohibiting overt, physical conditions of cruelty and barbarism. (Mamo 533).



Figure 7: “Attica!” and the crowd

In the context of *Dog Day Afternoon*, Sonny’s chant of “Attica!” evokes the excessive use of force that came to define the end of the Attica riot. The crowd’s reaction works in tandem with Sonny to position the law enforcement officers as a collective symbol of corrupt authority. Lumet is able to communicate this theme partially through his use of foreshadowing in the opening montage, which frame the upcoming robbery and the crowd’s response around the disparity between different lifestyles in the city. In the

negotiation scene, he uses similar cinematic techniques, contrasting the visual differences between the gathering mob and the police via blocking and editing. In several wide shots, the crowd, cheering Sonny on, sits on one side of the frame, while the officers occupy the other. The image places the two groups opposite one another, both visually and politically. Suddenly Sonny and the onlookers are allied against Moretti and the authority he represents.

A later scene makes the connection between Sonny (the leader) and the crowd (his followers) more explicit. To pay for a pizza the police have ordered, Sonny exits the building with a handful of cash. But on a whim, he starts tossing it at the onlookers. This throws the crowd into a frenzy. As wind picks up dollar bills and rains them down onto the street, the crowd frantically leaps into the air and on top of one another. Their desire for money eventually spills into the lines of police in front of them and is mistaken for aggressiveness towards law enforcement. Officers wrestle onlookers and push them back as people spill across signs reading “DO NOT CROSS.” The sequence effectively ends with a close-up on Sonny, observing the chaos that he has created (Figure 8). As a whole, it maintains Sonny’s position as an enemy of authority. By introducing the money, it also acts as a continuation of Lumet’s examination of class. Suddenly, Sonny is both a symbol against authority and against class differences, a Robin Hood for the average New Yorker.



Figure 8: Throwing money

Scholar Rahul Hamid argues that Sonny's struggle and involvement with the crowd transforms him into a "counterculture icon" and hero (Schneider 589). William Fowkes, a film scholar, agreed with this assessment. He argues that Sonny's spontaneous chant allows Sonny to occupy the position of "hero" under the given societal umbrella, established in the film's opening montage. However, the fact that Sonny is an outcast from the law (as a criminal) complicates this position, as his actions bring his morality into question. He only becomes a "hero" in the eyes of the crowd through an act of self-interest:

Sonny does not set himself up as any such hero. He has his own motives for robbing the bank, namely to finance his lover's sex change operation. He makes no attempt to tie his action to a larger program except in a very off-the-cuff way. When he ties his plight to that of Attica, he does so in a spontaneous way, mostly in response to the presence of the sympathetic crowd outside the bank. Any possible consistent program of his is further clouded when we learn that he was a Goldwater supporter. He is a man caught in the limelight of the moment rather than a hero (Fowkes 70).

The concept of “the limelight” that Fowkes introduces further deepens the film’s political meaning, and I will expand upon that meaning in the next section. Fowkes’ analysis also reveals a political undercurrent to an otherwise “realistic” film. The film largely focuses on a minute-to-minute fictionalized account of a real event. Again, there is a contrast between authority and non-authority, upper and lower class. But there is also a contrast between Sonny the man, a character outside the law who threatens innocent people for personal gain, and Sonny the hero. By lifting Sonny to the level of symbolism for the attending crowd, Lumet and his screenwriters have twisted the concept of protest. The film’s thesis suggests that a blind acceptance or creation of an icon disregards the flaws and pitfalls of the ideal that the icon represents. In the context of the film’s era, marked by civil unrest and protests like the Attica Prison riot, this idea is unmistakably political and timely. *Dog Day Afternoon* carefully constructs that idea by crucially relying on the language of cinema. The film is therefore an example of New Hollywood cinema as a form of political communication and discourse.

## **ii. Consequences of Fame**

In the previous section, I discussed how *Bonnie and Clyde* gradually made the crimes and violence of its two protagonists unavoidable, despite their relatively sympathetic portrayal. That film frequently subverted the audience’s expectations, and through that subversion came social and political meaning. *Bonnie and Clyde* were likable, yet simultaneously horribly violent and immoral. This technique, coupled with Arthur Penn’s comments on the “irony” of folk heroes committing violence, allowed the film to stand as a social document of its era and a political allegory about the counterculture movement.

*Dog Day Afternoon* and *Bonnie and Clyde* operate differently in terms of story structure. But they share similar themes and, as I will discuss in this section, narrative techniques. Sonny begins *Dog Day Afternoon* as a common thief, then takes his place as the film's countercultural icon through his invocation of "Attica!" and the crowd's protest-like response. However, later scenes reveal a man with a complex past who only becomes a "hero" partially because of the media attention he receives. His position as a morally righteous icon against authority is therefore suspect. These revelations again cast doubt on a protagonist in the New Hollywood canon. From that doubt, Lumet and screenwriter Frank Pierson draw a series of conclusions regarding the cost of protest in a country rife with political unease and the role of media in sensationalizing crime.

Immediately following the "Attica" sequence, the remainder of the scene takes place from the perspective of news media and onlookers. One shot captures the entire block, seemingly from the perspective of a camera on a helicopter as it flies high above the action below. The shot shows Sonny and Sylvia literally at the center of the frame, and at the center of attention for the police, news media, and crowd. Lumet then cuts to a shot of a living room with three people watching the television. From the diegetic sound (mostly made up of content from the news report of Sonny's robbery), it is clear that the people (a man and two women) in the living room are watching the hostage situation unfold. From their dialogue, we gather that they are Sonny's family. "Why rob a bank when you've got a sucker for a mother?" the man asks. The mother in question is visually distraught. In contrast, the second woman smiles incredulously at what is occurring. Based on her expression and dialogue — "I can't believe it!" — she is more entertained than frightened. Despite her brother being in fatal danger, the television she

is watching provides a degree of separation between the two of them. From an apartment, the robbery is entertainment.

Sylvia, literally a hostage, appears entranced by the attention she is given. She is interviewed by a reporter in an adjacent building, and as she describes the situation to him, her mood visibly changes. As both Sonny and Sylvia head back inside the bank, Moretti grabs Sylvia's hand and tries to convince Sonny to leave her behind as a gesture of good faith. Sonny is apprehensive, but it is Sylvia who pushes back the most. "Those are my girls, I'm going back in there," she replies, and the crowd cheers. Sylvia hears the response and can't help cracking a smile as she waves toward the people — and the cameras — around her, and Moretti is left staring in disbelief at what could have been a rescued hostage. Lumet applies a grounded, realistic style of camerawork to this sequence, using close-ups and medium close-ups to capture the emotional responses of his actors. (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Sylvia reacting to fame

Once Sylvia and Sonny are back inside, the media follows them. “Put the TV on!” Sonny exclaims, and the room is filled with the sound of news reports. Immediately afterward, the bank owner answers the on-site phone and then hands it to Sonny. “It’s the television people,” he says. “They want to talk to you.” Sonny accepts the call and begins answering questions from an unnamed news anchor. “Why are you doing it?” the anchor asks. Sonny is confused. “What? I don’t know what you mean by that,” he responds. “I’m robbing the bank ‘cause they got money here. That’s why I’m robbing it.” Outside, a camera remains trained on Sonny as he answers the questions, and when Lumet shoots Sonny in close-up, he places one of the bank tellers in the background. She fixes her hair and waves off-screen, smiling at the cameras filming the bank. Despite being held as a hostage, the teller is enthralled at the opportunity for fame. There is a chance that, through the robbery, she will become a celebrity. Sonny acknowledges their position in his interview. “We’re the entertainment, right?” he

nearly shouts. “What have you got for us?” When the interview is cut off (because of Sonny’s coarse language), the channel cuts to a Looney Toons cartoon. We hear the iconic, whimsical theme song as the camera pans to Sal, standing next to a rifle (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Sonny and Sal collide with the news

In his article, Fowkes outlines four sides to the main conflict in *Dog Day Afternoon*, described as “roles.” They are the robber; the bank employee; the police; and the spectator. Fowkes describes how each role interacts within the narrative:

Each player has a particular need or a concern which it is in his or her interest, as the holder of a particular position, to protect. The actions of the robbers are determined by the need to complete the robbery with a minimum of difficulties; this includes avoiding harming anyone, but not at the price of losing the game...the bank employees are motivated, in so far as they choose to defend their roles, by a desire to protect the bank's money. The police want to capture the robbers, but without sacrificing any of the hostages. And, finally, the spectators want a good show (Fowkes 71)

The last sentence in this piece highlights the needs of the crowd, including those watching on television. I argue that this role also includes the news media, represented

in the film by the reporter speaking to Sylvia, the news anchor interviewing Sonny, and the shot of a camera through the bank's front door. The media also wants, as Fowkes put it, a "good show." This idea is inherent in the performances and direction of *Dog Day Afternoon*. For a majority of the sequence, Lumet relies on the feigned excitement of his actors to suggest the power of news media in sensationalizing a bank robbery. However, he also employs a number of cinematic techniques to communicate that same idea. The transition from Sonny's interview to the Loony Toons theme draws a connection between the robbery as it is portrayed by the news and a literal cartoon. Lumet's decision to pan to Sal, absentmindedly staring into the middle distance with his hand resting on a large hunting rifle, accentuates the contrast between the cartoon's theme music and the potential for death and violence that both Sal and Sonny share. In total, the entire sequence lasts less than two minutes. But it speaks to the power the media holds over everyone involved. Sylvia and the unnamed bank teller behind Sonny, despite being held hostage in a life-threatening situation, are thrilled at the attention they are receiving.

That attention draws attention to Sonny's personal flaws and a backstory that casts doubt on his righteousness. In other words, it transforms him from an anti-hero to a "Rough Hero," a term coined by A.W. Eaton to describe a film protagonist who "is fundamentally morally corrupt but at the same time he is still a hero; that is, a sympathetic protagonist whom we are supposed to like and perhaps even admire...we cannot write off the Rough Hero's misdeeds as the result of misfortune, weakness, folly or ignorance; he usually fully intends to do bad and feels little or no remorse about his crimes" (Eaton 516).

Sonny is neither an example of a concrete Rough Hero, nor is he a pure Anti Hero. The narrative constantly shifts his characterization between the two archetypes. *Dog Day Afternoon* consistently displays “moral” actions in the first half of the film, despite Sonny’s initial position as a bank robber. But later scenes contradict these actions, or offer a new perspective on Sonny’s backstory that allows the audience to question his morality. One of the film’s more significant plot points is the reveal of Sonny’s motivations: he is trying to pay for his wife Leon’s sex-reassignment surgery. This revelation carries a social significance; *Dog Day Afternoon* was “the first American commercial movie in which the star/identification figure turns out to be gay” (Fowkes 70). But it also carries thematic significance within the film, contextualizing Sonny’s transgressions and allowing the audience to at least partially sympathize with him. The twist categorizes Sonny as an anti-hero based on Eaton’s definition. Sonny’s moral flaws are seemingly in service of a greater good, or at least a goal that benefits people other than himself, and that has made him a temporary Anti Hero. He is not, on the surface, a heartless monster.

Lumet and Pierson complicate this impression once Moretti establishes a phone line between Leon and Sonny. The following sequence portrays Sonny’s transformation from an assumed Anti Hero to a Rough Hero. Lumet frames the characters — who begin literally on opposite sides of a street — drastically differently. He shoots Sonny in extreme close-up in a dark room, forcing the audience to focus on his facial features. In contrast, Leon begins the conversation barely visible; Lumet places her in a corner of the hair salon, and only part of her face is visible. As the two sides speak, it is revealed that Leon had been staying in a hospital, and that she had attempted suicide by

prescription drugs in an attempt “to get away from [Sonny].” Sonny had robbed the bank without consulting Leon, and as Sonny begins to complain about his situation to them, Leon begins to shut him down. “I’m dying here, Leon,” Sonny says. “Do you ever listen to yourself when you say that?” she replies. “Do you know you say that to me every day of your life? You’re not dying. You’re killing people around you is what you’re doing.” As Leon’s voice rises in volume, she stands and begins to pace back and forth until the shot arrives in close-up at the center of the frame. Lumet has captured, via character movement and blocking, a visual representation of the conversation. Leon begins timid and obscured, while Sonny begins forward and unavoidable. As Leon breaks down and (finally) claims agency in the relationship, her entire face and body come into frame and claims visual agency of the scene; Sonny remains frozen and unmoving (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Leon claims visual agency

The sequence takes previous character traits — Sonny’s care for Leon, his motivation for the robbery, and position as an icon in the eyes of the media — and complicates them. Sonny and Leon’s relationship is implicitly frayed, if not broken, based on the pair’s dialogue. In fact, Sonny has become so overbearing and reckless toward Leon that she attempted suicide, and it becomes clear, as discussed, that Sonny planned the robbery himself. The revelations in this scene contrast directly with the previous discovery of the robbery’s purpose. Sonny is trying to pay for Leon’s surgery, but his decision to use a violent and illegal act to do so is entirely his own, and his treatment of Leon outside of that day is implied to be abusive. Thus, our impression of him is different; he becomes a prototypical rough hero, as his aggressiveness and immorality are ultimately a part of who he is.

Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Dog Day Afternoon* ultimately ends in violence. Moretti is usurped as negotiator by Agent Sheldon, who eventually “grants” Sonny and Sal’s

request for a private jet at an airport. A limousine arrives to drive Sonny, Sal, Sheldon, another agent and a handful of hostages to the airport, and the group navigates into the car. Sal sits behind Agent Murphy, who tells Sal to keep his gun pointed at the ceiling to keep Sal from shooting passengers. They arrive on the tarmac, where Murphy again reminds Sal to aim his gun up so he does not fire by accident. Sal does so, and Sheldon distracts him, allowing Murphy to pull a revolver hidden in his armrest and shoot Sal in the head. Sonny is immediately arrested, and the hostages are all escorted to the terminal. The film ends with Sonny watching Sal's body being taken from the car on a stretcher, and Sonny staring into the middle distance as the roar of the plane's engine drowns out all other noise. Before the credits roll, subtitles reveal that the real-life Sonny was sentenced to 20 years in prison. If previous sequences depict the excitement that celebrity brings to some of the characters, the ending does the opposite. Instead of joy and audience recognition, the rewards are prison and death.

### **iii. Conclusions**

From its opening scene, *Dog Day Afternoon* works to establish themes of class disparity and protest. The montage at the beginning of the film visually contrasts two different economic lifestyles, while scenes surrounding the bank introduce symbols that complicate the notion of protest against authority. Sonny becomes an icon for both his immediate audience and the audience watching his robbery through television, but the "truth" of his relationship to Leon allows the film's audience to question his morality and the legitimacy of the crowd's celebration of him.

Thematically, both *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Bonnie and Clyde* present different forms of oppression by authority, but also critique cultural responses to that oppression.

In *Bonnie and Clyde*, Arthur Penn implies that the main characters' violence is a result of their sexual oppression. In *Dog Day Afternoon*, Lumet positions the bank robbery as a response to Sonny's (and the city's) financial difficulties. However, both of these implications are made more complex by later plot developments. Bonnie and Clyde's response to social oppression results in violence, both for their victims and for them. Sonny's interactions with the media and his onlookers suggest a willingness to ignore immorality because in order to stand against authority. In both films, authority "wins" through violent means, drawing a negative connection between fame, unlawful acts, and fights against a perceived oppression. The films end by highlighting aggressive, violent responses from social and lawful authorities against countercultural "revolutionaries." The cinematic language with which both films communicate these ideas accentuates the legitimacy of New Hollywood filmography as a form of political discourse.

## ***Nashville* and Capturing the American Zeitgeist**

Robert Altman's *Nashville* was called a masterpiece from the moment of its release, and subsequent critical writings only reinforced this broad opinion. Empire Magazine called it a "dazzling, innovative classic." Pauline Kael, who previously wrote an impassioned defense of *Bonnie and Clyde*, called it "the funniest epic vision of America ever to reach the screen" (Kael). The film's reputation endured past its release year: it earned five Academy Award nominations, and upon Altman's death 31 years after the film's release it was widely called his "masterwork" (Magee).

Part of the film's critical and commercial success, I argue, comes from its proximity to the American Bicentennial. On the eve of the American Revolution's 200th anniversary, marked by patriotic campaigns and consumerism, Altman's film offered a complex mosaic of a country surrounded by two divisive cultural and political events: the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. In doing so, he captured a unique moment within the American zeitgeist, in which the public's trust in traditional bodies of authority suffered.

The Bicentennial Celebration, partially sponsored by the United States' federal government, was intended to celebrate "the fruit of the first successful revolution by a people" (Fridley 231), a statement that indicates the kind of revisionist patriotism the event intended to foster. The official celebrations began on April 1, 1975, when the American Freedom Train began a 21-month tour of the 28 contiguous states. Two weeks later, President Gerald Ford delivered a major address commemorating the event. His remarks reveal an impassioned, hopeful view of the future of the country:

We must once again become masters of our own destiny. This calls for patience, for understanding, for tolerance and work toward unity — unity of purpose, a unity based on reason, a unity based on hope. This call is not new. It is as old as the Continental Congress of two hundred years ago, as legendary as Lincoln's legacy of more than one hundred years ago, and as relevant as today's call to Americans to join in the celebration of the Bicentennial. Perhaps national unity is an impossible dream. Like permanent peace, perhaps it will prove to be a never-ending search. But today we celebrate the most impossible dream of our history, the survival of the government and the permanence of our principles of our founding fathers (Ford).

While Ford's address invoked symbolic ideals and a somewhat romanticized view of America, *Nashville* captured a much different image of modern American society. The film features a complex cast of 24 separate characters and more than an hour of original musical numbers, using a portrait of the Nashville music scene and a populist primary campaign to satirize notions of patriotism and media influence. David Cook summarizes the film's themes as they relate to the characters and the media:

The characters represent a cross-section of the American public, but all have a common desire to strike it rich in the world of country music, which stands in for American mass media at large. For much of its 160-minute running time, NASHVILLE charts the war in which our national entertainment media and our national politics work together to shield America from historical truth (Cook 95).

Of the films analyzed for this thesis, *Nashville* stands as the most overtly political because of its chronological setting, patriot iconography and overt American-ized symbolism. The combination of these elements, and the way Altman weaves them through his narrative, makes the film an example of New Hollywood film capturing a political mindset. In the midst of romanticized celebration, Altman uses a variety of cinematic techniques to present an alternate view of contemporary America, in which fame, violence and political disengagement all collide. The following section provides a

content analysis of the film's directional style, themes, and specific sequences that highlight the film's status as political discourse.

### **i. Campaigns and Distractions**

*Nashville* wastes no time establishing its iconography. After an opening sequence that parodies commercials for vinyl LPs, the film's first shot begins on the garage of the Tennessee State Headquarters for a political campaign, labeled with political advertisements for Hal Phillip Walker. A sign reading "Walker - Talker - Sleeper" sits in the middle of the garage door, and as it slowly opens, a voice fills the soundscape. "Tell the taxpayers and stockholders in America: on the first Tuesday of November, we have to make vital decisions about our management," it says. The door continues to open until a white van, plastered with Walker ads and fitted with four large megaphones at the top of the vehicle, emerges from the darkness. As the van pulls into the street, the side of the van is revealed: "Hal Phillip Walker: Replacement Party Candidate." The voice belongs to Walker, as a recording is blasted through the van's megaphones. "I've campaigned all over the country," he says. "And I've often heard the statement, 'I don't want to get mixed up in politics.' Or, 'I'm tired of politics,' or, 'I'm not interested.' Let me point out two things: all of us are deeply involved in politics whether we know it or not, and whether we like it or not. And number two: we can do something about it." Meanwhile, the van — navigating traffic in downtown Nashville — has to slow down for cars and eventually gets cut off by a red sedan. Altman shoots the entire sequence using zoom lenses and wide shots, presenting a large view of the van, the city, and the traffic. As the van rides off into the horizon, it joins the countless

other people in the city, ready to spread its message to an uninterested audience (Figure 13).



Figure 12: Introducing the Walker van

This sequence sets the stage not only for the film, but for the era in which it was released. It lasts only two shots, one that follows the van exiting the garage and the other that tracks the van as it navigates traffic, and it introduces the same number of ideas to the audience. The first is that there is a third-party political campaign taking place in Nashville, which serves to ground the subsequent narrative. The second — implied through the loudspeakers — is that voters are largely disengaged from the political process, a plot point that mirrors the reality of a post-Watergate America. The film was just a year removed from Richard Nixon’s resignation, an event that left behind “a profound legacy of cynicism toward public office.” Writing 40 years

afterward, the *Chicago Tribune* summarized the effect of Watergate on a public that had previously been politically optimistic:

You could say Watergate represents one point on a continuum in which Americans became more skeptical and questioning of authority. Opposition to the Vietnam War already had pushed Nixon to end it. Maybe the nation previously had been too trusting, and the duopoly of war and Watergate delivered a necessary correction. By that light, we'd be the better for it all. But there's a difference between skepticism, which is healthy, and cynicism, which corrodes. Interestingly, Nixon acknowledged this... "I let down our system of government — dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government that will think it's all too corrupt," he said (*Chicago Tribune*).

Altman and screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury not only acknowledge that cynicism, but weave it into the film's story beats. The name of Walker's political party — the Replacement Party — suggests a willingness by voters to look outside the established two-party system for more trustworthy candidates. The voice recording makes note of the political disengagement Walker has experienced while traveling around the country, and the combination of these elements makes it clear that that disengagement will play an important role in the film's themes.

The following twenty minutes, in which arrival of a country music star is greeted by overwhelming fanfare, celebration, and patriotic iconography, contrasts sharply with this cynical portrait. The star in question, Barbara Jean, is returning home having recovered from a burn accident, and the arrival is staged with great visual grandeur. Altman captures the sequence with wide angles of crowds and performances as the elite of Nashville's music scene welcome Barbara Jean back. A troupe of young girls march back and forth across the airport's open lawn, twirling rifle replicas. "They've practiced every day for two hours for a whole month just for this event,"

mentions a voice in the crowd. Flags, ribbons and banners (all carrying a red, white, and blue color scheme) litter the runway. News media, exemplified by an anchor narrating much of the scene, covers the airport and gives linguistic meaning to the visual jubilation. Meanwhile, a group of political campaigners carrying Replacement Party signs are locked in the airport away from the festivities. Once the crowd begins to thin out, Altman cuts to a shot of the news anchor speaking to his cameraman, while a Walker supporter smiles and waves a sign behind him. As the anchor concludes his broadcast, a police officer appears and forces the supporter away, literally dragging her out of frame. During the entire sequence, the Walker van follows the celebration and continues to advocate for his platform (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Silencing politics and welcoming entertainment

This sequence acts as a visual embodiment of the cynicism previously discussed, but also implies that the political engagement has been either oppressed or ignored by authority. The organizers for the event literally lock political influence (i.e. the campaigners) out of a celebration of celebrity, and in the final shot any possibility of

that influence is forcibly removed by law enforcement. In contrast, the celebration itself transfers an aura of authority and borderline sainthood to Barbara Jean. Altman again employs wide shots and zooms to emphasize the crowd's joy at her arrival. When she exits the plane, she wears a flowing white dress, and Altman uses a lower angle to visually accentuate her position "above" the audience. Barbara trips and falls briefly, and her minor accident sends onlookers into a visible panic. She is swarmed by worried fans and helped to her feet. Trust in fame, musical talent and popular culture has replaced trust in politics and the government in general. Altman's film substitutes political theater with musical performance, and produces a critique of politics by presenting the idea that a substitution is even possible.

Subsequent scenes reveal the influence of popular culture on *Nashville's* characters and, by extension, on American society at large. The collection of musicians, filmmakers, and businessmen who serve as the film's cast demonstrate an orientation towards material success, seeking each and every chance to perform and reach some level of recognition from audiences. In the film's narrative, that orientation drives several characters' internal conflicts, but it also reveals the need for entertainment in a divided and complex political moment. Barbara Jean, for example, attempts to sing at Opryland USA, a theme park in a Nashville suburb, but part way through her show she begins reminiscing about childhood memories. Altman stages this sequence using visually unremarkable camerawork; most of her "breakdown" is held in a medium-wide shot, and there is only occasionally a cut to the audience. Eventually, the band and audience begin voicing their displeasure with boos and shouts, and her husband-manager Barnett escorts her from the stage. As he tries to explain her exhaustion —

“She was just in the hospital, ya hear?” — the crowd is relentless. As a compromise, Barnett tells them that they can see Barbara Jean perform for free at the Nashville Parthenon the next day, simultaneously securing her performance for the Replacement Party, who will be hosting a concert gala at the same location (Figure 14).



Figure 14: A breakdown and Barnett’s compromise

The crowd’s reaction implies that Barbara Jean serves as a distraction from the divisive conflicts the country faces. They are angry that their source of entertainment has been taken away. This position renders Barbara Jean less human in the eyes of the crowd. Her exhaustion and embarrassment matter little; freedom from politics is what matters to the attending crowd. Ironically, this leads her to serve unwittingly for the Replacement Party, connecting the need for entertainment with political showmanship. Barbara Jean begins the scene as a celebrated artist, but ultimately what she provides is a counter to the politics that literally surround Nashville. But once her breakdown occurs, she is reduced to a tool of the very politics she counters. The “distraction”

eventually serves the campaign, and in Altman's film, the two end up more allied than *Nashville*'s characters initially realize.

## **ii. Music and Reality**

Critics praised *Nashville* upon release for the broad scope of its story, which helped Altman capture a sprawling series of characters. But the film was innovative outside of its narrative construction. As a musical, the film features more than an hour of musical numbers, most of which were written by the cast. Altman reportedly asked his actors to at least assist in the composition of their characters' songs, in an attempt to make their performances more natural. In interviews, Altman expressed his desire to capture "reality" through his actors, and explained that this intention led to the cast of *Nashville* composing their own material. In July 1975, a month after the film's release, he said that "having the actors write their own songs puts them organically closer to their roles. I think that's probably why the music [in the film] works so well" (Byrne).

Outside of legitimizing each actor's authenticity and revealing depths to each character, the songs also serve as narrative and thematic pillars around which the film is built. Each song envisions a mode of patriotism and national identity that Altman, through cinematic technique, treats both genuinely and ironically. There is little doubt that the characters believe in at least *some* of the lyrics that they sing; moments throughout the film reveal deep-seated patriotism and dreams of stardom. But Altman questions the validity of those beliefs in the context of the mid-1970s. How can we celebrate the history of a nation, he asks, in the midst of turmoil, both domestic and abroad? If the song's origins heighten the "reality" of the film, then their lyrics and

jovial nature clash sharply with the cultural reality of the United States; that is, one of political cynicism. *Nashville* eventually leads its characters to an allegorical showdown with anger and confusion. The climax concludes in violence, but the denouement suggests a hopeful future for a country in the throes of uncertainty.

The film establishes its musical landscape early on. The second sequence of the film features a “country music legend,” Haven Hamilton, recording a song in an otherwise unremarkable studio. The song, “200 Years.” uses a banjo, and organ, a rolling marching drum and a small choir, and the lyrics celebrate the arrival of the Bicentennial with a romanticized history of American warfare:

My mother's people came by ship  
And fought at Bunker Hill  
My Daddy lost a leg in France  
I have his medal still  
My brother served with Patton  
I saw action in Algiers  
Oh we must be doin' somethin' right  
To last two hundred years

Though “200 Years” seeks to celebrate the positivity of the Bicentennial, it does so by invoking wars and violence, portraying the conflicts as unavoidable events for each generation. At the same time, the song omits any mention of the Civil War, skipping over an entire era to wipe a domestically divisive event from the song’s chronology. A later verse recalls the recently-ended Vietnam War, again positioning a bloody conflict as an unavoidable part of American life:

I pray my sons don't go to war  
But if they must, they must  
I share my country's motto  
And in God I place my trust  
We may have had our ups and downs  
Our times of trials and fears  
But we must be doin' somethin' right  
To last two hundred years

Again, the notion of war is treated as a natural part of a great country's history. While singing, Haven wears a white, stylized cowboy outfit, complete with stars and sparkling accents. The combination of costuming, music and lyrical content depicts the singer, literally named "Haven," as a symbol of revisionist history. His music is protection from the uncomfortable reality of 1970s America, and his name combines an image of safety with the name of a Founding Father. The musician and his music are both absurd caricatures.

Haven's attitude, however, does not reflect the soothing nature of the music he is recording. The scene, shot mostly with close-ups and medium shots, focuses on Haven and his facial expressions. As he performs, isolated in a sound-proof booth, he grows visibly frustrated with the studio musicians. During the second take, he stops the recording to single out Frog, a pianist with long hair and sunglasses. "He plays like a Frog," Haven says, speaking to his manager Bob. "When I ask for Pig, you get me Pig, and then we'll be ready to record." Haven leaves in a huff, but not before stopping to mock Frog on his way out: "You get your hair cut. You don't belong in Nashville." Altman immediately cuts to a "Welcome to Nashville" sign, and the opening fanfare to Barbara Jean's arrival invades the soundscape (Figure 15).

In this scene, Altman and Haven (Henry Gibson) use music to provide contrasting views of Haven and his beliefs. Even as he sings a patriotic song, his annoyed expression suggest a darker side to the performance. He may love his country, but his piano player gets on his nerves, and his dismissive and judgmental attitude toward Frog clashes with the mood of the music. Altman’s camerawork emphasizes this ironic relationship, and Gibson’s performance makes Haven’s irritation unmistakable. Once Altman cuts to “Welcome to Nashville,” the irony of the sequence is hard to ignore. There is little doubt Haven believes in the America, but he holds the untalented in contempt, and based on Altman’s cut, that attitude pervades the entire city.



Figure 15: “200 Years” and a Nashville welcome

“200 Years” is not the only song that differs from the “reality” of the characters’ lives. Later, Haven attends the first Opryland showcase in the film and sings “For the Sake of the Children,” a ballad with lyrics that celebrate traditional family values and

the meaning of marriage and posterity. Altman maintains his style from previous scenes, shooting Haven's performance with medium and wide shots that capture his stoic expression. The crowd applauds upon hearing the opening verse, which addresses the singer's fictional disloyalty to his wife:

Unpack your bags  
And try not to cry  
I can't leave my wife  
There's three reasons why  
There's Jimmy and Cathy  
And sweet Lorelei  
For the sake of the children  
We must say goodbye

On the surface, the song reflects the tradition of marriage as it relates to the United States; the singer cannot bear to break his marriage apart because his children's upbringing would be presumably ruined. The performance is similar to that of "200 Years" in that Haven becomes a vessel for American pride and tradition. The crowd's positive reception, and the fact that Haven is in front of audience at all, positions him as a figurehead of the Bicentennial. But *Nashville* continues to complicate the relationship between the music and its singers. It is later revealed that Haven has left his wife and is living with Lady Pearl, his companion who we previously assumed to be his wife. The conflict portrayed in the song is no longer fictional. Haven is living outside the values that "For the Sake of the Children" presents, turning the song into a false form of wish-fulfillment. This is made even more ironic by Haven's son Bud, serving as the embodiment of "Jimmy and Cathy/And sweet Lorelei" from the lyrics. In song, children keep marriages together. In reality, they live outside the traditional marriage structure;

Bud has been raised without a concrete mother-father structure. Haven's performance is "a simulacrum presenting an alternate outcome to a painful situation, a trauma-denying narrative" (Melehy).

These revelations, coupled with the song at their center, exemplify Altman's questioning of tradition within a contemporary cultural framework. He uses the language of cinema and music to first portray Haven's beliefs and public persona and then counter that persona with a personal look at his private life. There is a distinct difference between Haven the country music star and Haven the man, and this difference allows the audience to question the validity of the values he represents. Do trust in the Bicentennial and a traditional upbringing carry any weight in the shadow of Watergate and Vietnam? Or is the entertainment Haven provides simply a "trauma-denying narrative" for the entire nation?

The music does not offer concrete answers. But the lyrical content of said music regularly references themes of perseverance and overcoming hardship. In "200 Years," the singer overcomes war and conflict. In "For the Sake of the Children," he overcomes his own promiscuity and maintains his children's upbringing. In later songs, the exact nature of the hardships described is kept vague, but similar themes remain. Most notable is a song Haven sings directly after "For the Sake of the Children" titled "Keep a Goin'." As the former song concludes and the audience's applause dies down, Haven previews the song's cultural meaning. "And now I'd like to do a special favorite," he says. "The song that got me started in this business that's been so kind to me. A song you've loved through the years and one I'm sure you're gonna love tonight. 'Keep a Goin''!" Haven's introduction is a fabrication. The song — based on a poem by Frank

L. Stanton — is one of the only musical selections not written by the cast. But its lyrical content still applies to the film's themes:

When the weather kills your crop,  
Keep a-goin'!  
Though 'tis work to reach the top,  
Keep a-goin!  
If the skies are dark and grey  
Tell the world you'll be okay;  
And don't forget to pray  
Keep a-goin'!

During the performance, the audience claps along and cheers. It is easy to understand why: the song acts as an idealistic and hopeful response to the cynicism of its era. It implies that the best response to hardships (war, corruption, and otherwise) is to “keep a goin’,” a sentiment that mirrors Haven’s firmly established belief in America’s greatness. In his mind, and perhaps within the audience’s, perseverance, working hard, and overcoming obstacles through prayer define the American character. Altman captures the performance with his camera facing toward the audience, focusing past Haven and into his avid listeners and tracking along the stage. The angle positions Haven again as a symbolic figure, as if he is preaching a message to the crowd.

Music continues to play a significant role in later scenes, and Altman continues to question its values. This is especially true of the final sequence. The entire cast converges on the Nashville Parthenon for the Replacement Party concert gala, which Barbara Jean headlines. Her presence draws a large crowd, and the Parthenon steps are covered in patriotic banners and political advertisements. The song she performs, titled

“My Idaho Home,” offers a sprawling, multi-generational narrative of a family living on a farm, sung from the perspective of woman remembering her mother and father:

Momma and Daddy raised me with love and care  
They sacrificed, so I could have a better share  
They fed me and nursed me and sent me to school  
Momma taught me how to sing, Daddy lived the Golden Rule  
And now that I'm older, grown up on my own  
I still love Momma and Daddy best, my Idaho home

As Barbara Jean sings, Altman shoots her in a medium shot, but also pans across the entire cast of characters assembled on the makeshift stage. In the middle of the music, he cuts to a shot of the American flag, completely removed from the rest of the scene, as it flows in the wind and covers the entire frame. When the song ends, the crowd bursts into applause and Haven emerges with a bouquet of flowers for Barbara Jean (Figure 16).



Figure 16: “My Idaho Home”

The sequence is one of the most notable examples of *Nashville*'s music being used as a thematic center for the entire film. “My Idaho Home” captures an idyllic

narrative of rural American life, in which parental figures “know best” and provide guidance for a positive and assured future. Barbara Jean’s “Momma and Daddy” act as symbolic memories of a prosperous nation. Meanwhile, Altman’s staging around the Parthenon connects the music to a visual allegory of well-established civilization. Columns, invoking images of centuries-old architecture and linking them to a mythical version of the United States. Barbara Jean, wearing a flowing white dress, stands as a symbol of purity and righteousness. Scholar Roger B. Rollin writes that her character represents “Christian consideration, humility, and brotherly love” (Rollin 45), and by including an explicit shot of the American flag, Altman connects these ideals to the American landscape. Barbara Jean and her music embody a dreamlike version of her country.

The dream is immediately shattered. Once Haven enters with the bouquet and hands it to Barbara Jean, gunfire rings out from the crowd. Kenny, a character who has contributed little to the plot until now, has shot Barbara Jean and Haven, transforming a celebration of the United States into an assassination. Barbara Jean collapses and panic is immediate. Screams are heard and people both on stage and off scatter. Haven, shot in the arm, tries to calm everyone down. “Y’all take it easy now. This isn’t Dallas, it’s Nashville,” he exclaims, referencing the 1963 JFK assassination. “They can’t do this to us in Nashville. Sing! Somebody, sing!” Haven is rushed offstage, but not before handing the microphone to Winifred, an aspiring singer-songwriter who has spent the majority of the film booking small performances and trying to win over crowds. As Barbara Jean is carried away bleeding, Winifred nervously starts to sing “It Don’t Worry Me:”

The price of bread may worry some  
But it don't worry me.  
The tax relief may never come  
It don't worry me.  
The economy's depressed but not me  
My spirit's high as it can be,  
You may say I ain't free  
But it don't worry me.

Winifred is gradually joined by an attending gospel choir and the audience. As more and more voices join in, Altman pans first over the stage, the audience, and then finally creates a montage of children in the audience. Finally, he cuts to a wide shot of the Parthenon, surrounded by Americans united by music, before panning upwards to a cloudy blue sky (Figure 17).



Figure 17: "It Don't Worry Me"

This sequence offers a direct contrast to Barbara Jean's performance, exposing the reality underneath the music once again. Immediately after envisioning an American

utopia through memories of rural life, Barbara Jean is assassinated, and the reality of the current political situation becomes unavoidable for those in attendance. Altman, mirroring *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Dog Day Afternoon*, introduces violence in his film's climax. The film was released 12 years after the Kennedy assassination, and it invokes that event in its final moments to accentuate the turmoil beneath the city's surface. But while *Nashville* previously uses music as a means to question blind patriotism, the Parthenon sequence employs song to pacify violence and suggest the possibility of a hopeful future. In the face of death, themes of perseverance from previous songs in the film suggest that by uniting as a country, cynicism, anger, and violence can be overcome. Through a montage of young children witnessing the entire event, Altman also implies that that perseverance will continue for generations to come. Only through celebrity (Winifred, who finally has her big break) and music can American traditions carry on past the violence the crowd has experienced. The ending mirrors both *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Dog Day Afternoon*; all three films suggest that celebrity, media and fame are capable of soothing the reality of violent realities.

### **iii. Conclusions**

Beyond its cinematic influence, *Nashville* acts as an embodiment of the New Hollywood movement. It weaves social critique into its narrative, using a large cast of characters and numerous musical numbers to depict an uncertain country celebrating its legacy. Early scenes establish a reluctance to favor politics over entertainment and celebrity, while the music defends and then questions the validity of traditional American values and beliefs. Barbara Jean and Haven Hamilton, both figureheads of the Bicentennial and religion, exit the film wounded or dead. But through music, Winifred

is able to both claim fame for herself and unite the audience against the effects of Watergate, Vietnam, and the Kennedy assassination.

While *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Dog Day Afternoon* depict different fights and modes of oppression and authority, *Nashville* presents a conflict against idealism and political engagement. The Bicentennial, meant to celebrate the roots of a faltering nation, attracts visual grandeur. But underneath the banners, costumes, and lyrics of the music, reality and violence betrays the values they embody through performance. Haven's relationship with Barbara Jean complicates "For the Sake of the Children," and the America depicted in "My Idaho Home" is shattered by a literal assassination. All three films feature symbolic actions in response to socio-political events. The criminality in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Dog Day Afternoon* is an implied reaction to oppression, while the assassination at the end of *Nashville* similarly embodies the cynicism and turmoil of the era. But while the former films end with violence, *Nashville's* ending moves beyond the assassination and uses music to unite the different factions of America against the darkness of the film's time and place. Is ignorance truly bliss? *Nashville* does not answer the question, but it asks it using cinematography, performances and music. Thus, the film exemplifies the use of cinema, specifically within the New Hollywood movement, as political discourse. The images, sounds, characters and narrative all coalesce into socio-political messages.

## Summary and Conclusion

New Hollywood marked a significant shift in the priorities and business practices of the American film industry. By backing director-driven films made by young filmmakers, studios hoped to capitalize on a growing youth audience and compete with both international films and the growing relevance of television in society. The abolishment of the Production Code allowed content to appear on screen that was previously considered immoral, and New Hollywood films integrated this content into their narratives.

My analyses of the selected filmography, as well as research within Cinema Studies scholarship, revealed consistent critiques woven into these narratives. The critiques focused on themes of celebrity, oppression, cynicism towards authoritative bodies, and violence. These elements were made possible by the weakening and abolishment of the Code; thus, the films act as socio-political documents both *of* their era and *about* their era. Sonny's relationship with Leon, for example, helps frame his actions and complicates his relationship to *Dog Day Afternoon's* audience, contributing to the film's themes. That relationship would have been censored in previous eras due to the Code's ban on homosexuality. *Bonnie and Clyde* shocked audiences with its bare depictions of violence, and used that violence to both question the protagonists' morality and give power to symbols of authority. And *Nashville* used violence in a similar fashion, employing a literal character assassination and then contrasting it immediately with music and hopefulness to comment on the power of celebrity in a society rife with oppression. Similar thematic strategies would not be

possible to achieve with the same effect in the Golden Age of Hollywood, as brutal violence blocked chances at exhibition.

More broadly, these films act as examples of New Hollywood as implicit discourse on their respective eras. Bookended by events like the Kennedy assassination and the Bicentennial, the movement was born in an era marked by rapid change and unrest. Each film integrates some aspect of the era's zeitgeist into their narratives. *Bonnie and Clyde* draws a connection between sexual oppression and negative perceptions of authority, reflecting societal changes from the Sexual Revolution and the looming presence of the Vietnam War. *Dog Day Afternoon* critiques the validity of protest against powerful authority, integrating events like the Attica Prison riots in order to do so. And *Nashville* captures a lack of faith in politics and patriotism, a mood historians have at least partially traced back to the Watergate scandal, while using the Bicentennial as an ironic backdrop. All three films use violence to draw negative connections between celebrity, authority, and a perceived oppression.

New Hollywood was not the first film movement to offer discourse on social or political topics, nor was it the first movement to reflect its era in aesthetics and narratives. But the context of the movement's birth invites analysis, especially considering the landmark historical events that occurred therein. Changes within the American film industry, combined with the content of the selected films, make New Hollywood a unique moment in cinematic history, in which American traditions and history were examined and questioned through the language of cinema. It is my hope that this project provides a view of why this era of film was special, and continues to influence the movies we watch today. But by highlighting specific themes within these

films, I also hope to have contributed a more concrete and distinct argument for the value of the cinema within contemporary society. Films can speak to us emotionally, and instill audiences with empathy. But movies are also “a source of group identity” that can replicate collective experiences, making cinema a form of historical, social and political documentation (Hoberman 3). New Hollywood exhibited that documentation through on-screen violence and stances against perceived authority, capturing the turmoil of a nation in flux. In the blood and sweat of criminals and stars, the movement discovered the heart and soul of America.

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