**Video Script**

**Lecture 27 – The New Hollywood**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Hello everyone, and welcome to the New Hollywood!

Your reading by Dr. Tom Schatz for this lecture is called *The New Hollywood*. It looks at all of the changes from post-WWII Hollywood into the era of mega blockbusters in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the term “New Hollywood” is also used in a narrower way, to describe a group of filmmakers and a kind of filmmaking that emerged in the late 1960s and continued through the 1970s, and that’s what we’ll be talking about today.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts and a list of key media, because I’ve asked you to watch a whole bunch of short movie trailers in conjunction with this lecture. Sort of like the arthouse cinema lecture, today we’ll first talk about the general historical conditions of New Hollywood and then go through a grab-bag of directors and films associated with that era. The trailers will help you get a feel for how different these films are than classic Hollywood cinema.

Something I want to acknowledge up front, too, is the almost universal white masculinity of this group of filmmakers. This is something I’ll come back to at the end of the lecture.

**Hollywood in the 1960s**

So, through the last few lectures, we’ve focused on television in the 1960s and 1970s. What was happening with *film* during all of that social change? Well, there were four key things:

**[ANIMATION]** First, any remnants of the old studio system fell apart post-1948, when the Paramount decree happened. As your reading points out, the studios as businesses have staying power, but they must change the way they operate. They don ’t have the same kind of control over their stars. They can’t release films in the same way. They need to figure out what people want to see and deliver that, instead of subsidizing their own theaters with so-so films.

**[ANIMATION]** Answering that question is harder than it seems. The studios don’t die, but they aren’t doing great, either. So, *The Sound of Music* comes out in 1965 and it makes a whole boatload of money. But after that, box office receipts flounder. Hollywood is at a bit of a loss for what kinds of films people want to see.

**[ANIMATION]** Hollywood increasingly leans on high-earning blockbuster films to get them through leaner periods where their films are less well-received. Dr. Schatz calls the refiguring of the industry around occasional big films a “reliance on the calculated blockbuster.” We’ll dive into this in our next lecture, and that is a pun.

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, the Production Code is loosened, and loosened some more, and finally comes to an end.

**Jack Valenti**

The Production Code’s demise is thanks in part to this man, Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, the major trade and lobbying organization for Hollywood. He takes over leadership of that group in 1966 and says bye-bye to the Code for good in 1968. In its place, he institutes the age-based ratings system we know and love today.

He’s a Texan, also—love to shout out a Texan—who got his start doing promotional writing for the Humble Oil Company and their chain of gas stations. He was responsible for a big boost in sales based on a campaign around having the cleanest restrooms, so if you’ve ever wanted to trace a line of causation from toilets to all the flying bullets and f-bombs in Quentin Tarantino films, there you go.

**G Rating**

So the MPAA starts issuing ratings for films in 1968, and they basically adapt the same structure as the Legion of Decency’s old rating system. There’s a G rating for films suitable for general audiences, and they trademark that.

**M Rating**

There’s an M rating that gets renamed a PG rating, meaning that parental guidance is suggested.

They go ahead and trademark those.

**PG-13 Rating**

In 1984, based on the heart-ripping scene in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, the MPAA adds the PG-13 rating, to suggest that the film might not be suitable for young children. They trademark that bad boy.

**R Rating**

There’s your classic R, meaning that the film is restricted to adults unless you’re with a parent or guardian. Guess what they do? Trademark that one.

**X Rating**

And then there’s the X-rating, which is for films with mature content to which children will not be admitted, period. In the late 1960s, they apply this rating to films like *A Clockwork Orange, Last Tango in Paris*, and *Midnight Cowboy*, which you see here. What don’t they do?

**Deep Throat**

Trademark it. And what happens? The pornography industry uses it liberally as a shorthand for their films. The X-rating becomes synonymous with pornography as far as audiences are concerned, and as far as advertisers are concerned as well. Newspapers across the country refuse to advertise X-rated films. Hollywood filmmakers basically refuse to have their films rated X because it will make them seem like they’re pornographic, even when they’re not. They appeal X-ratings and are generally willing to make cuts to get it back down to an R.

**NC-17**

In 1990, the film industry finally responds by retiring the X and replacing it with the NC-17 rating, which—say it with me now—they trademark.

**Two poles**

So to recap—there’s a few things facing the film industry in 1968. You’ve got depressed box office receipts, studios unsure what audiences want to see, the official end of the Production Code, and all the social and cultural changes of the 1960s that have influenced audience tastes.

All of this sets the stage for New Hollywood cinema.

For the purposes of this lecture, think of New Hollywood films as existing on this continuum between two forces.

On the one end, taboo-breaking, arty, auteurism. This is the film we tend to valorize and canonize when we talk about this era. These films were made just after the demise of the Production Code; it was a lot of young directors with specific points of view taking advantage of the industry’s newfound freedom of expression to say “young” things. The films are anti-establishment, violent, and sexual, but unlike the pre-Code era, it’s not just to get butts in seats. It’s in service of the kinds of stories the Production Code made it harder to tell.

On the other end, you’ve got the industry concerns. How do the studios make movies that people want to see that will earn them money?

**[ANIMATION]** Though it’s tempting to think of the New Hollywood class of directors as pure visionary artists, the key here is to remember that they’re really concerned with both of these issues. They’re concerned with some combination of art *and* profit, because *they’re working within or adjacent to the Hollywood system*. This sets them apart from someone like, say, Maya Deren, who was wholly outside it.

**Continuum (again)**

**[ANIMATION]** Hollywood is, of course, always concerned with profit. What’s unique about the New Hollywood era is that edgy, gritty, artistic films become a very valuable commodity. In other eras, these directors might have been fringe, independent filmmakers. But in the 1960s and 1970s, they become a way for the major studios to reach the same youth market that television is trying to attract with era of relevancy programming.

This will change by the 1980s, when some directors are better than others at translating the popular elements of New Hollywood film into the blockbusters of the 1980s and 1990s. Toward the end of the lecture, we’ll think about some moments when this worked, and—to my great delight—one moment where it decidedly did not.

**Spectrum (art)**

So first, let’s talk about some of the films that typify the art of the New Hollywood era.

**Bonnie and Clyde**

If there’s one film that anticipates the trends of New Hollywood, it might be the 1967’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, directed by Arthur Penn. It tells the story of real-life Dust Bowl-era bank robbers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.

**Bonnie and Clyde gifs**

**[ANIMATION]** Even though this was technically a period piece (it was set in the 1930s), this film felt new, and in terms of its cultural politics, it felt connected to the anti-establishment values of the 1960s. It was a polarizing film that pushed the envelope by placing almost slapstick-style comedy scenes next to very grisly scenes of intense, unflinching violence.

Patron saint of film critics Pauline Kael wrote a review of this film in *The New Yorker* that is almost as famous as the film. In it, she questions the ethical implications of feeling nostalgic for the Great Depression. From the vantage point of the late 1960s, it might certainly seem like a simpler time. But it was also a time of deep inequality, struggle, and violence.

**[ANIMATION]** Kael’s review specifically digs into the use and meaning of the film’s violence. She notes the passing of the Production Code, saying that “only a few years ago, a good director would have suggested the violence obliquely, with reaction shots…and death might have been symbolized by a light going out.”

But in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the deaths are horrific and disgusting and spectacular. And Kael argues that this is the point—that Penn uses the newly relaxed Production Code to “rub our noses in it, to make us pay our dues for laughing.” By showing blood and bullet holes and remorseless killers, the film makes audiences question what we’ve been romanticizing on the screen all these years.

**The Graduate**

That same year, we get *The Graduate,* directed by Mike Nichols.

**[ANIMATION]** This film tells the story of a recent college graduate played by Dustin Hoffman who’s totally unsure what to do with his life. He’s seduced by an older woman—though, this is one of those castings that makes me want to punch a wall, Dustin Hoffman was 30 and Anne Bancroft, this supposedly ancient old sexpot, was all of 36 when she played the role. The film is famous for its frank sexuality and also of its rejection of those 1950s values; it’s not enough just to get a job in plastics and settle down. The older woman who did it is unfulfilled by that plan, and the younger man is unfulfilled at the thought of following in her footsteps.

It’s also known for its soundtrack by Simon and Garfunkel. They’re a really popular folk duo of the era and using them to score the film instead of, say, an orchestra, signals how hip and youthful it is.

**Night of the Living Dead**

I want to bring George Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* into the conversation, too. This is an independent film, not a Hollywood film, but it’s so influential and George Romero goes on to become a Hollywood horror powerhouse and touchstone, so I wanted to talk about it quickly.

Unlike Arthur Penn, Romero made his film on a shoestring budget of just $114,000 and shot it outside Pittsburgh. But like Arthur Penn, Romero blends campy and jokey scenes with boundary-pushing horror. *Night of the Living Dead* helps move the genre beyond William Castle’s schlocky thrillers and into something weightier.

**[ANIMATION]** Unlike virtually all horror films before this point, *Night of the Living Dead* has a Black protagonist, played by Duane Jones (seen here). And—at the risk of spoiling the film, if you haven’t seen it—it’s worth mentioning that this character’s safety is threatened by both zombies and police, calling into question his vulnerability not just as a human, but as a Black human.

**Easy Rider**

Then, in 1969, we get an independent film that summed up the counterculture and launched several actors into long Hollywood careers. *Easy Rider,* directed by Dennis Hopper, and written by Hopper and Peter Fonda, is released just a few weeks before Woodstock. It tells the story of two bikers traveling the American West with the proceeds from a big cocaine deal.

The lore around this movie is enormous—that real drugs were being used in the scenes, etc. Whether that’s true or not, that mythology is so powerful because the film itself seems to break through so many of the strictures placed on classical Hollywood cinema. The characters of *Easy Rider* are like cowboys for the 1960s—drinking, drugging, free-loving their way across the country, the wind in their long hair and at least one luxurious mustache—and the film dramatizes the clash between their countercultural values with folks in more conservative places.

**[ANIMATION]** Let’s watch the iconic introductory scene of *Easy Rider*, through which you get a feel for all of these themes—especially because it’s amplified by a bitching 1960s soundtrack. **[PLAY CLIP.]**

Where they’re going they don’t need anything so *establishment* as *watches*, man. Watches are for *squares*.

**Badlands**

So, as we move into the 1970s, we see the rise of some of the auteurs most associated with the New Hollywood. Terrence Malick was a protégé of Arthur Penn—*Bonnie and Clyde* director—and his 1973 film *Badlands* shows some of that influence. His style is very different, quite lyrical and dreamlike, but the film tells the story of a young outlaw couple, and it too includes scenes of shocking violence.

For what it’s worth, Terrence Malick is still out there making long, lyrical films. *A Hidden Life* was my favorite film of 2019 and it’s now streaming on HBOMax, if you want to get a taste for his more recent work and you’ve got three spare quarantine hours to fill.

**Robert Altman**

No discussion of New Hollywood would be complete without the infamous Robert Altman, a director with a reputation as a filmmaking maverick and an antagonistic industry presence. He once punched a studio executive in the face, knocking him clear into a swimming pool, for telling him he needed to cut six minutes from a film he was working on. Altman said *of himself* that he was incapable of getting along with screenwriters: “I have a bad reputation with writers, developed over the years: “Oh, he doesn’t do what you write, blah blah blah…’ [the screenwriter of Mash] was very pissed off with me.”

Altman directed MASH in 1970, a comedy about the Korean war, which was super successful and spawned an even more successful television show. **[ANIMATION]** And as you can see in this advertisement from 1970, film critics were keen on how this and other New Hollywood films were taking advantage of the “new freedoms” of the screen.” It’s a selling point that the film represents a break from the previous era, when films were subject to the Code.

**3 Women**

If you want to characterize Altman’s films, know that they’re famously very talky—lots of words, lots of people talking over each other. One of his strangest and one of my favorites is 1977’s *3 Women*, which he said came to him in a dream. It’s about the increasingly weird relationship between two roommates who live in an odd, semi-populated California desert ghost town.

**Making Profits**

So, that appallingly quick tour represents something of the artistic side of New Hollywood films. In short, it’s a bunch of filmmakers combining the politics of the era with relaxed restrictions around what films can show on screen, in order to tell boundary-pushing stories that feel young, vibrant, and even a little bit dangerous.

On the profit-focused side of this equation, there are some directors who are able to capture some of that feeling in films that Hollywood is able to sell more broadly.

**Sugarland Express**

One such director is Stephen Spielberg. You’ll be watching his 1974 debut feature *The Sugarland Express,* which is a story about a Texas woman who springs her husband from jail and hijacks a police car to go get her son back from the state. This early film has much more in common with *Bonnie and Clyde* than it does with Spielberg’s big budget family-friendly later fare, like *Jurassic Park* or *Indiana Jones*.

**Close Encounters**

Your reading by Dr. Schatz argues that one of the ways Hollywood capitalizes on the New Hollywood is by making stars out of directors. Spielberg circa *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is a great example of this strategy. In the trailer I’ve asked you to watch for this film, you’ll see that they mention Spielberg (and even show photographs of him looking very animated and directorial on set!) before they talk about the actors or show clips. And recall from our lecture on arthouse cinema, Spielberg cast another director, Francois Truffaut, in this film—*literally* turning him into a star.

**George Lucas**

Another big-name star director who made his debut in the New Hollywood class of directors is George Lucas, of *Star Wars* fame, who made **[ANIMATION]** *American Graffiti* in 1973, a film about cruising in Modesto, California.

If *Bonnie and Clyde* used violence to make audiences think twice about feeling nostalgic for “simpler” times, Lucas’s *American Graffiti* is a much more straightforward exercise in remembering the good old days. It’s a rosy and nostalgic coming-of-age story set ten years earlier, in 1963, but aspects of it still feel new—its pacing is fresh, it takes place all on one night, it’s *slightly* more frank about sex, it acknowledges in its epilogue that some of these characters would be lost to Vietnam, and it stars New Hollywood actor par excellence Richard Dreyfuss.

**Difficulty**

Again, art vs. profit aren’t really opposition to each other in the New Hollywood. But you get some directors whose films remain much more on the art side of things, like Terrence Malick, and you get some directors whose films are able to contain that newness in a way that makes it appealing beyond the youth market, like Stephen Spielberg.

And in the middle, there’s a host of experiments in trying to find the right balance of newness and marketability.

**Taxi Driver**

I know lots of RTF students are lil’ Scorsesebabies, and I really like his work too! But Scorsese *is* a New Hollywood voice who struggles for some time to find profitable footing in the industry. He makes *Taxi Driver* in 1976, a film that’s set in a decaying New York City after Vietnam and follows a veteran working as a cab driver as he descends into madness, plotting assassinations and murders. *Taxi Driver* is a critical and commercial success. It’s edgy, it’s bleak, it’s fresh, it’s very New Hollywood.

**Raging Bull/Christ**

His follow-ups, however, struggle. Scorsese makes *Raging Bull* in 1980, *Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988, and *After Hours* in 1985 (which is actually one of my favorite of his films, though it gets no love) but they’re not successful. He’s not a Spielberg, who’s fully translated his skillset into blockbusters, nor is he Malick, taking 20 years off to consider making a film about “the origins of life.”

**Goodfellas**

It isn’t until *Goodfellas* that Scorsese and Hollywood learn to dance with each other in a way that generates profitable art.

**Popeye**

And, if you want proof that life has a plan for you, I now get to teach you about one of the strangest pieces of cinema *ever made*, which I was *inexplicably obsessed with* as a child: Robert Altman’s *Popeye,* which came out in 1980. It was a live action comic strip adaptation starring Robin Williams and Shelly Duvall as Popeye and Olive Oyl.

**Popeye 2**

Here expression here is…the right way to receive this film. Rumor has it that Paramount lost the bidding war for the *Annie* musical. Producers asked what comic strips the studio had the rights to, someone in the meeting said *Popeye*, and that was that, *Popeye* the musical was happening! It’s something of a legendary flop—though not entirely, it did make a little bit of money—but it is a *really* odd artifact of the era.

Producer Robert Evans thought he could “tame” notoriously belligerent Robert Altman into making a hit, turning him from a New Hollywood auteur into a Stephen Spielberg.

**Malta**

That was wrong! This picture was off the rails from the moment it was conceived. Evidence, you ask? They built an *entire city* in Malta for this film. The set was way, way, way more elaborate than it needed to be, and it remains a tourist attraction in Malta that I dream of someday visiting.

Altman and his producer reportedly came to blows on the set. Allegedly everyone was on drugs—and trust me, that’s a vibe you can really feel watching this film. They hired folksy 70s songwriter Harry Nilsson to write the music. Perhaps you’ve heard of his other hits, including suicide anthem “I Can’t Live if Living Is Without You.” The songs are certainly interesting, but they are in no way *catchy*, and remember—this is supposed to be competition for “The Sun’ll Come Out Tomorrow” *Annie*, for pete’s sake.

**Popeye**

The product is a profoundly weird film. It is two full-ass hours long but easily feels twice that. It’s pure Altman, with his odd, mumbly, talky, low-fi style, coupled with this strange, old comic strip bizarre prosthetics. It is…it’s a masterpiece of bad choices and with a light sprinkling of cocaine dust across the whole thing.

And while I will take any chance to talk about *Popeye*, there really is a reason I’m describing it in such great detail. Building a blockbuster—even with an A-list New Hollywood director and stars and studio money behind you—is far from guaranteed. Marrying New Hollywood with old Hollywood isn’t exactly like snapping puzzle pieces together. There are angles. There’s friction. And sometimes that friction lights a dumpster on fire, and you get *Popeye.*

We’ll spend our next lecture thinking about how to build a *successful* blockbuster.

**Mall**

So, I want to conclude our lecture by thinking about some big picture influences on film during the 1970s.

**[ANIMATION]** First, some factors that are influencing the industry. Why do all of these young directors become part of the Hollywood system? Well, first of all, there’s a loss of tax incentives for independent film. That gives moviemaking power back to the studios, because they have the money to finance things.

Second, there’s cable, movies on TV, and VCRs. Through the 1970s, new distribution channels radically reshape the film market. There are new ways to sell film and profit from it. Rewatching becomes a possibility for the first time, in earnest, and as home video becomes a valuable market, Hollywood film—especially plot-heavy blockbusters—becomes its cornerstone product.

Third, film schools serve as credentialing system. New Hollywood’s directors are virtually *all* film school graduates. George Lucas went to USC; Spielberg applied there and got rejected but moved to LA anyway and runs in those circles; Scorsese got his MFA from NYU in 1966; Malick graduated from the AFI Conservatory in 1969. Notably, Robert Altman did *not* have a film degree, but he’s a generation older than these young guns, who are sometimes referred to as “the movie brats.”

This is where I want to pick up the idea I talked about right at the beginning of class, about how this is a particularly masculine-leaning group of filmmakers—not just in their actual identity, but this sort of ethos that filmmaking was a gonzo, balls-to-the-wall, antagonistic, bombastic, ego-driven, fist-fighting process. The film-school pedigree helped studios take a risk on these young filmmakers.

The idea of risk is still important. It’s a key point of analysis when looking at industrial biases. To have a risk taken on you is a privilege. It’s an act of faith by the people with the money. Who merits credit and room before they’ve proven themselves? It tends to be white guys. A great, more recent example is that of Colin Treverrow. In 2012, he directed the small, lovely sci-fi picture called *Safety Not Guaranteed*. It had a budget of 750k. Do you know what his second film was? Jurassic World (2015), which had a budget of 150 million dollars.

This doesn’t discount the art that any of these filmmakers have made, or what they’ve accomplished. Risk is just a lens you can use to look at, dissect, and better understand the film industry.

**[ANIMATION]** Okay, what are some of the social and cultural influences on New Hollywood? Well, first, the suburbs finally produce a response to the problem of theaters and shopping. There’s a huge boom in shopping center construction from 1965 to 1975 in suburbs across the country. These shopping centers and malls are the perfect home for multi-screen movie theaters, which succeed in bringing the movies back to the suburbs in a way drive-ins never quite did.

The second influence is a waning interest in arthouse film. People just don’t want to see foreign, experimental films anymore. As standards loosen on television and in Hollywood, they come to crave the combination of edgier content with Hollywood gloss.

And finally, the mid-1970s to the 1980s sees the total demise of the counterculture.

**Mall**

What rises in its place is Reaganism—a conservative political wave—and a decade marked by conspicuous consumption, commercialism, wealth, and materialism. It’s the era, in other words, of the mall.

**Lost in America**

The last trailer I’m having you watch today is for a small film from 1985. If you think of *Easy Rider* as one bookend to this lecture, like punctuating the 60s and moving us into the 70s, think of *Lost in America* as the other book end, demonstrating how much U.S. culture changes throughout the 70s and into the 1980s.

*Lost in America* is made by Albert Brooks—whose real name is, hilariously, Albert Einstein—a guy who started as a stand-up comic in the late 60s and made some short films for the first season of *Saturday Night Live*. He wrote *Lost in America* with his collaborator, Monica Johnson, and the film is specifically about how the *Easy Rider* dream is dead in the 1980s. The main character and his wife attempt to “do an Easy Rider” and drop out of their yuppie, wealthy, unfulfilling lives, only to find that their plan is utterly unfeasible in this new decade.

If Donna Reed to Jimi Hendrix helped measure the distance in media and culture between the 1950s and 1960s, *Easy Rider* and *Lost in America* do the same thing for the 1970s and the 1980s.