

# **THE LOST DECADE: THE FORTUNES AND FILMS OF THE 'HOLLYWOOD RENAISSANCE AUTEUR' IN THE 1980s**

**CHRIS HORN**

History of Art and Film (School of Arts)

University of Leicester

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# **The Lost Decade: The Fortunes and Films of the 'Hollywood Renaissance Auteur' in the 1980s**

**Chris Horn**

## **Abstract**

The dominant view of late 1960s and early 1970s American film history is that of a 'Hollywood Renaissance', a relatively brief window of artistry and critique based around a select group of directors. In contrast, the 1980s are routinely seen as the era of the blockbuster and of 'Reaganite entertainment'. While key directors associated with the Renaissance period remained active throughout the 1980s, this work has been obscured by a narrow, singular model of American film history, which has placed undue emphasis on White House occupancy and box-office hits. This is an analysis of 1980s American film history, and of authorship, from a fresh perspective, through the prism of a group of filmmakers who had been lavished with praise for their 1970s films but whose subsequent careers have routinely been dismissed in perfunctory terms. Indeed, the 1980s careers of directors like Robert Altman, Francis Coppola and William Friedkin, far from conforming to a monolithic pattern of decline, show diverse and complex responses to societal and industrial changes. While this is a project that is concerned with industrial contexts, it is also very much about individual films, bringing to light a range of unheralded or obscure work that seems particularly suited to an auteurist interpretation, from the visual experimentation of *One from the Heart* (Coppola, 1981) to the experimental production contexts of *Secret Honor* (Altman, 1984) and the stylistic *élan* of *To Live and Die in L.A.* (Friedkin, 1985). Behind the homogenous picture of the decline of the auteur in 1980s American cinema are films and careers that merit greater attention and this study offers a new position from which to appreciate individual films, American film history, and the viability of sustained authorial creativity within post-studio era Hollywood.

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## Introduction

I'd blown it, Friedkin had blown it, Altman went into eclipse, one flop after another. Francis went crazy, even *Raging Bull* didn't do any business. Everybody kind of blew it in varying shapes and sizes.

Peter Bogdanovich<sup>1</sup>

The dominant view of late 1960s and early 1970s American film history is that of a 'Hollywood Renaissance', a relatively brief window of artistry and critique based around a select group of directors.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the 1980s are routinely seen as the era of the blockbuster and of 'Reaganite entertainment', as the 'Renaissance' seemingly evaporated in the aftermath of the unprecedented success of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and then *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), as well as the spectacular failure of several big-budget auteurist projects.<sup>3</sup> Yet key directors associated with the earlier period remained active throughout the 1980s. This project starts with the premise that their work has been obscured by a narrow, singular model of American film history, which has placed undue emphasis on White House occupancy and box-office hits. This is an analysis of 1980s American film history from a fresh perspective, through the prism of a group of filmmakers who had been lavished with praise for the creativity of their 1970s films but whose subsequent careers have routinely been dismissed in perfunctory terms. This study will demonstrate that the 1980s careers of directors like Robert Altman, Francis Coppola and William Friedkin, far from conforming to a

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 408.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1977); Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, Noel King (eds), *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004); Glenn Man, *Radical Visions: American Film Renaissance 1967-1976* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994); Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 11-48.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 49-84; Andrew Britton, 'Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment (1986)' in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2009), pp. 97-154; Tom Shone, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

monolithic pattern of decline, show diverse and complex responses to societal and industrial changes.

The project will ask what place did the auteurs associated with the Hollywood Renaissance (which I will usually abbreviate to Renaissance), and the films they made, occupy in 1980s American filmmaking, and assess what was the relationship between that place and how film history has been characterised in this period. In doing so, and by analysing the films made by these filmmakers, I question what strategies did these directors adopt in order to maintain authorial creativity? Despite the persistent view about the 1970s that, as Justin Wyatt puts it, 'by the end of the decade, the period of auteurism and formal experimentation had ended,' this project challenges such a notion through a specific focus on the 1980s work of the three above-mentioned directors.<sup>4</sup> A general chapter will corral the work of some of the other directors most associated with the Renaissance and will provide an overarching survey of the Hollywood industry in the decade, but it is the specific examination of the three directors' 1980s filmmaking experiences that will primarily function as exemplars of the 'fortunes and films of the "Hollywood Renaissance Auteur."'

While this study is concerned with the wider industrial context, it is also very much about individual films, bringing to light a range of unheralded films that seem to invite an auteurist interpretation. These films are appraised in terms of their directors' artistic sensibilities, and in the manner in which their direction was distinctive. The decade-long narratives of the auteurs under consideration were disparate and the film analysis is attuned to the particularities of each experience. Robert Altman's decade is examined in terms of the relationship between film and theatre, analysing how the director made a virtue of limited resources in making cinematic a series of inexpensive theatrical adaptations. These include *Secret Honor* (1984), a faithful recreation of a one-man, one-room play that, at first glance, seems to be entirely unsuitable for cinematic

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<sup>4</sup> Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 73.

adaptation; yet it is revealed to be a particularly rich example of Altman's creativity. When it comes to Coppola, I focus particularly on his attributes as a visual stylist, and on the ways that his background and personal influences manifest themselves in the texts. One example is *One from the Heart* (1981), which has suffered reputationally because of its central role in Coppola's financial downfall. I examine how the film engages with popular Hollywood genres, makes allusions to the classical era and employs an expressive and radical visual palette. William Friedkin is a different example again, who clung to more conventional routes for the realisation of his creative impulses. As with Coppola, the manner in which he mostly operated within popular genres is scrutinised but Friedkin's example contrasts with Coppola because - in all three films explored, *Cruising* (1980), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985) and *Rampage* (1987) - he was more inclined to offer present-day narratives that dealt with contemporary issues. At the same time, how Friedkin was unable to resist undermining his own conventionality is analysed, through narrative structures that veer towards the incoherent, and by his layering in levels of ambiguity, so that his films' chances of box-office success were often undermined. Although all these films directed by the three case-study directors divided critical opinion (at best) at the time of their release, what makes them particularly fascinating is how they challenged prevalent mainstream tastes at a time when populist cinema dominated at the box-office.

## **Defining the Hollywood Renaissance and the Blockbuster Era**

Before proceeding further, it is worth clarifying exactly what I mean when using the terms 'Hollywood Renaissance' and 'Hollywood Renaissance auteur', and why the 1980s have been singled out as a specific frame of reference. The term 'Hollywood Renaissance' is but one of a number of terms that have been used to describe this period. In fact, the most commonly used descriptor in journalism and in popular culture is 'New Hollywood' but, in academia, this has been complicated by



the term having been used to indicate different timeframes.<sup>5</sup> In an influential article, 'The New Hollywood', Thomas Schatz used the phrase to indicate the blockbuster period and the industrial developments that began in the mid-1970s.<sup>6</sup> Geoff King further confused the term's use by breaking it down into two periods, 'New Hollywood Version 1: The Hollywood Renaissance' and 'New Hollywood Version II: Blockbusters and Corporate Hollywood'.<sup>7</sup> This does, at least, have the advantage of indicating the symbiotic relationship between the two periods, both being underpinned by the involvement of Hollywood's power structures. 'American New Wave' is another alternative term but, in contrast to the French variety, the American movement was not so radical as to represent a complete break from the practices of classical Hollywood, more a modification of a common mode of practice.<sup>8</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, together and separately, have argued this point in a number of books and articles.<sup>9</sup> A more discrete, precise term then is Hollywood Renaissance because it indicates renewal, but also implies a revision of existing norms rather than definitive change.

Although Renaissance auteurs were singular creative artists with distinctive qualities, in order to understand the extent to which Renaissance-style filmmaking carried over into their eighties work, some account needs to be taken of its typical attributes to appreciate the relationship between films across the decades. One particularly succinct and precise explanation comes from a recent book by Nicholas Godfrey (when assessing why Friedkin's *The French Connection* [1971] is a 'New Hollywood'

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of those who use 'New Hollywood' as alternative to 'Hollywood Renaissance': Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005); Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood* (New York: Continuum, 1992) and Nicholas Godfrey, *The Limits of Auteurism: Case Studies in the Critically Constructed New Hollywood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood' in Jim Collins, Hilary Radnor and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8-36. See also Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Techniques* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> King, *New Hollywood Cinema*.

<sup>8</sup> For example, 'The American New Wave: A Retrospective', an international academic conference at Bangor University, 4–6 July 2017.

<sup>9</sup> David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*; Bordwell and Janet Staiger, 'Since 1960: the Persistence of a Mode of Film Practice' in Bordwell, Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 365-377.

film): 'contemporary resonance; genre frustration and revisionism; an emphasis on performance over stardom; a downbeat, fatalistic ending; and a self-conscious foregrounding of film style.'<sup>10</sup> Yet, while taking account of the Renaissance's broader facets, it is the examination of individuality expressed in the work of particular directors that reveals the most about such a disparate mass of films that encompass any number of styles and approaches in numerous genres, and with many different thematic interests. Robert Kolker, in the preface to the third edition of his seminal work, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, argues convincingly about why he chose to focus on specific filmmakers, an approach that bears comparison with my own:

I find [auteurism] still the most convenient tool to work through the complex, sometimes overwhelming, output of Hollywood...If coherence and influence can be pinned on one figure, then it seems reasonable to let that figure and the work be set as the object of study.<sup>11</sup>

However, the difference in my study is that I am more interested in reinstating the authorial coherence and influence that others have questioned whereas Kolker's career-long examinations tend to foreground his subjects' most accomplished work.

The usual account of American film history from the late sixties onwards tells us that in 1967, the box-office successes of *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn) heralded a Hollywood Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> This period - what a recent edited collection calls 'America's most celebrated era' - enabled the emergence of a new breed of film directors, many of whom were young and inexperienced, with backgrounds in film school and television (as opposed to having working their way up through the system, as had been habitually the case in the classical era).<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup> Godfrey, *The Limits of Auteurism*, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2000), pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Elsaesser, 'American Auteur Cinema: the Last - or First - Great Picture Show' in *The Last Great American Picture Show*, p. 37; Krämer, *The New Hollywood*, pp. 1-5.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Krämer and Yannis Tzioumakis (eds.), *The Hollywood Renaissance: Revisiting America's Most Celebrated Era* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

relatively brief period of innovation was terminated, as the usual story goes, by the emergence of a 'blockbuster era' that, arguably, is still with us some forty years later. Indeed, the directors of *Jaws* and *Star Wars* have often been blamed for the Hollywood studios' rejection of auteur filmmaking, despite their early careers having been firmly associated with the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> David Thomson was certain who was at fault when he grandly declared that 'I fear the medium has sunk beyond anything we dreamed of, leaving us stranded, a race of dreamers. This is more and worse than a bad cycle. This is something like the loss of feeling, and I blame Spielberg and Lucas.'<sup>15</sup>

The way the progression of these two periods is usually presented is that the careers of almost all of the other directors who emerged in the Renaissance period went into decline at the beginning of the blockbuster era leading to the conventional perception of the 1980s as a 'lost decade' for this group. Barry Langford offers a fairly typical, homogenised summation:

The careers of Friedkin, Bogdanovich, Rafelson, Coppola and others went into long-term decline...Scorsese endured rather than thrived...Altman forsook mainstream filmmaking altogether with a series of low-budget independent stage adaptations.<sup>16</sup>

Peter Biskind's view, in his influential but sensationalistic book, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, was even more apocalyptic, declaring, 'the New Hollywood directors were like free-range chickens; they were let out of the coop to run around the barnyard and imagined they were free. But when they ceased laying the eggs, they were slaughtered.'<sup>17</sup> Although this is certainly an amusing analogy (and fits neatly with Biskind's overarching rise-and-fall narrative), its depiction of a 'slaughter' is misleadingly unnuanced in describing the fate of a wide group of disparate filmmakers.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003), pp. 145-148.

<sup>15</sup> David Thomson, 'Who Killed the Movies?', *Esquire*, Vol. 126, No. 6 (Dec. 1996), p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Barry Langford, *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology Since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 434.

Much of the scholarly literature about the 1980s habitually focuses on society, industry and political ideology.<sup>18</sup> Stephen Prince, however, has gone against the grain about the decade's filmmaking by offering a perspective that seems, at first glance, to be in line with this study. He asserts that prevailing notions about the decade are 'monolithic...when, in fact, a more diverse and heterogeneous set of films and influences was at work.'<sup>19</sup> Yet Prince, who has made similar points in a number of outputs on 1980s American cinema, is still relatively indifferent to the work of Renaissance directors.<sup>20</sup> In the decade and beyond, the place in American cinema of formally inventive and thematically challenging films is more usually viewed through the perspective of the films made by younger directors who emerged in the eighties in the burgeoning independent sector, such as Spike Lee, Jim Jarmusch and the Coen brothers.<sup>21</sup> In fact, if film historians had been more inclined to make connections between the trajectory of the Renaissance auteurs' careers and these developments in independent cinema, and to link them to the afore-mentioned cadre of emerging filmmakers, then they might not have been quite as eager to assert that the careers of most Renaissance auteurs were in decline. At the same time, academic research about the 1980s tended to move away from authorship, and more towards issues of gender, race and sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Examples include Alan Nadel, *Flatlining on the Fields of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); William Palmer, *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995); Wyatt, *High Concept*..

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Prince, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1980s' in Prince (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> See also *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992) and *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (London: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Geoff Andrew, *Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick Film-makers in Recent American Cinema* (London: Prion Books, 1998); Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Examples include: Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1994); Mantia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981, revised ed. 1987).

## The 1980s and the Difficulties of Periodisation

It is undoubtably true that, by the late 1970s, audiences were tiring of the more complex, frequently downbeat Renaissance cinema and the box-office successes of the 1980s had a decidedly broader, family-friendly appeal than films like *The Godfather* or *The Exorcist*.<sup>23</sup> It is also important to remember that even in the Renaissance period, many of the biggest hits were still films, as with *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (Norman Jewison, 1971), that attracted a more traditional and broader viewership. After *Star Wars*, however, the focus of studio filmmaking became far more about trying to replicate its appeal to children and adults alike, epitomised in 1982 by Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* which even exceeded *Star Wars*' all-time box-office records.<sup>24</sup> It is also true that most of the 1980s films directed by Renaissance auteurs were commercial failures, although there were occasional exceptions.<sup>25</sup> But, whereas in literature about the 1970s, these directors' successes or failures in commercial terms are habitually kept separate from aesthetic assessments of the work (so that the most acclaimed films are not necessarily the most successful), their 1980s work has suffered, by comparison, from a tendency to conflate these different ways of describing a film as 'successful'.

As will become more apparent when this study outlines the market conditions in the 1980s, the supposed end of the Renaissance can be attributed to a number of reasons, but what often gets lost when writers strive to offer alternative and definitive ideas about this issue is the extent to which these factors are interlinked and interdependent on each other. I will return to this in more detail in Chapter 2 but the attitudes of the conglomerated Hollywood studios and the rise of the independent sector can be related directly to the way audience tastes were changing, that led in turn to an increasingly focused production of expensive blockbusters. Another frequently cited reason for the

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), p. 278.

<sup>25</sup> Appendix 2 lists the most successful films directed by Hollywood Renaissance auteurs (13 that grossed over \$20 million domestically).

demise of the Renaissance is the notion of auteurs out of control, as a number of high-profile financial disasters were attributed to directorial profligacy. William Friedkin's *Sorcerer* (1977) and Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) were but two of a number of such films but the culmination of this tendency was *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) which effectively bankrupted United Artists.<sup>26</sup>

So, when did the Renaissance end? Or is even trying to put a date on it a schematic and oversimplistic way to characterise the period? Indeed, why use the 1980s at all to frame the discussion? Peter Krämer and Yannis Tzioumakis recently assessed this difficulty, concluding that 'there does appear to be a general agreement that, as a group, the directors associated with the Hollywood Renaissance did most of their best work between 1967 and 1974, with overall decline setting in thereafter.'<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, my choice to begin later, in 1980, allows for a conception of the Renaissance that includes those films made after 1974 by directors associated with the Renaissance that *have* been discussed in terms of individual creativity. These include such acclaimed films as Altman's *Nashville* (1975), Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now*.

This sort of periodisation, of designating eras or using decades as limiting markers, always presents such difficulties in terms of definition. It also provides some inevitable contradictions in *this* study because I debate whether prescribing a specific end point to the Renaissance has led to a failure to make meaningful connections with more acclaimed earlier work, and by extension with the characteristics of the Renaissance. However, in order to make this project both manageable and clearly comprehensible, some form of delineation is necessary and there are good reasons to begin in 1980, and to consider the decade in its entirety. One is that, as I have already indicated, *Heaven's*

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<sup>26</sup> United Artists just survived when it was sold to MGM in 1980. The merged entity struggled to compete in the 1980s with the other majors. For an insider's account of the *Heaven's Gate* debacle see Steven Bach, *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of Heaven's Gate* (London: Pimlico, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Krämer and Tzioumakis, 'Introduction' in *The Hollywood Renaissance*, p. xviii.

*Gate* was the culmination of one strand of what is deemed to represent the complete demise of the Renaissance, because the effect of its catastrophic costs led directly to a focusing of minds in the boardrooms of the Hollywood studios. Beginning with 1980 also works on a more specific level because all three of the directors used as key case studies, by the turn of the decade, had recently helmed what were thought of as costly and extravagant failures: Friedkin and *Sorcerer*, Altman and *Popeye* (1980), Coppola and *Apocalypse Now* (although, in fact, the latter two both eventually made good profits despite their reputation<sup>28</sup>).

While there are strong reasons to begin this examination of post-Renaissance developments in 1980, the justification to end it in 1989 is not as immediately apparent. There is, however, one important development in American film history that does particularly encourage the treatment of the 1980s discretely. In 1989, *sex, lies, and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh) was a break-out low-budget success which, according to Yannis Tzioumakis, ‘precipitated the subsequent growth in independent cinema, paving the way for the establishment of a powerful institutional apparatus that supported a particular brand of independent filmmaking.’<sup>29</sup> Tzioumakis is pointing here towards the beginnings of what is sometimes called ‘Indiewood’ cinema, the name given to the collaborative practices and takeovers that emerged in the 1990s between Hollywood studios and independent production companies.<sup>30</sup> He also asserts that ‘critics repeatedly referred to *sex, lies, and videotape* as the film that changed the face of American independent cinema and have labelled 1989 [as] a “watershed year”.’<sup>31</sup> The film’s success, and the attention conferred on it, was a catalyst for the discourse surrounding auteurist filmmaking shifting towards a newer, younger breed, rather than on those under consideration here, and encourages the validity of ending this study in 1989. On a more specific level, the 1980s can also be understood as being particularly discrete for Coppola and

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<sup>28</sup> Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 278.

<sup>29</sup> Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 248.

<sup>30</sup> Geoff King, *Indiewood USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 252.

Altman. For the former, the decade straddles *Apocalypse Now* and his reluctant return to that which made his name, *The Godfather: Part III* (1990); Altman, meanwhile, left Los Angeles in 1980, changed his mode of filmmaking and returned ten years later. There are also a number of others' careers that can be easily understood in terms of pre- and post-1980, such as Ashby whose last critical and commercial success was *Being There* in 1979 and who died in 1988. Even Martin Scorsese could be considered in these terms because the eighties span two of his most lauded films, *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Goodfellas* (1990) - although, as I make clear later, the notion of a career decline for Scorsese in the decade, often propagated by the director himself, is largely a misconception.<sup>32</sup>

### Defining the Hollywood Renaissance Auteur

Who then can feasibly be described as a Hollywood Renaissance auteur, which of them will I discuss, and why? There are quite a number for whom one might apply the term because many different directors made films considered to be key texts of the period, and whose work seemed to fit in with its broad characteristics. Of course, no-one should be surprised that this group was almost exclusively white and male, although a recent book by Maya Montañez Smukler has provided a counter-narrative with her detailed account of those few women who did manage to direct films at this time.<sup>33</sup> Although they broke through in the wake of the directors of the early Renaissance successes (such as Mike Nichols, Arthur Penn, Dennis Hopper and Altman), the greatest focus, particularly in popular culture, has always been on a group that David Cook calls "'Film Generation" Auteurs, or the "Hollywood Brats,"' young cine-literate filmmakers who were influenced by the arthouse cinema about which they learned at film school.<sup>34</sup> Cook's designation is derived from an

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<sup>32</sup> Scorsese continues to this day to imply a dramatic downturn in the 1980s: in an interview promoting *The Irishman* (2019), he commented about the decade, 'at that time I really couldn't get anything made.' Philip Horne, 'Three and a Half Hours with Scorsese', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 29, No. 11 (November 2019), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Maya Montañez Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood: Women Directors and the Feminist Reform of 1970s American Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 133.



influential 1979 book, *Movie Brats: How the Film School Generation Took Over Hollywood*, by Michael Pye and Lynda Miles which features Coppola, Brian De Palma, Lucas, John Milius, Martin Scorsese and Spielberg.<sup>35</sup> Another important group of new auteurs emerged via the independent production company, Raybert Productions (later BBS Productions) owned by Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson (and Steve Blauner) which included Rafelson himself, Dennis Hopper and Peter Bogdanovich.<sup>36</sup> A number of older filmmakers began their careers working in television including Altman, Friedkin and Arthur Penn. At the same time, a number of the key texts associated with the Renaissance were directed by those who already had established careers, either in Europe or in the United States; by 1980, many of these had left the United States or moved determinedly with the times into the mainstream. Examples in this category include Roman Polanski, Michelangelo Antonioni, Milos Forman and Sidney Lumet.

Given the amount of literature devoted to the Renaissance, it is not surprising that writers have paid attention to a range of diverse filmmakers but this study confines itself to a relatively narrow group of auteurs whose careers were largely defined by the films they directed between 1967 and 1980.<sup>37</sup> So I have excluded those who had already established their careers before making films associated with the Renaissance (for example, Stanley Kubrick and John Cassavetes). I make an exception and include Penn (who had achieved success as early as 1958 with his feature debut, *The Left Handed Gun*) because of his centrality to virtually every writer's understanding of the period.<sup>38</sup> I have also not included directors who had moved firmly into the mainstream and whose names are usually excluded from canonical lists of Renaissance-era auteurs (Sydney Pollack, Mike Nichols, Paul

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Pye and Linda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film School Generation Took Over Hollywood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

<sup>36</sup> Another way of grouping Renaissance auteurs is through those who began working in the '[Roger] Corman School', crossing over a couple of my categories: Coppola, Scorsese, Bogdanovich, as well as other key figures such as Haskell Wexler and Monte Hellmann.

<sup>37</sup> For alternative selections of key directors of the period, see James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: New American Library, 1984), pp. 139-387; Cook, *Lost Illusions*, pp. 67-158; Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood* (New York: Continuum, 1992); Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance*.

<sup>38</sup> Altman also made his debut in the 1950s with the relatively unknown *The Delinquents* (1957) but his case is different from Penn's because his commercial breakthrough took another thirteen years.

Mazursky). I also omit those who did not begin their directorial careers until the Renaissance was either on the way out, or according to some had already ended (Cimino, Alan Rudolph and Paul Schrader).<sup>39</sup> This leaves a core group of eleven (three of whom are singled out for close attention), comprising 'Movie Brats' (Scorsese, Coppola, De Palma, Milius), those who started in television (Altman, Friedkin, Penn) and the Raybert directors (Bogdanovich, Rafelson and Hopper), plus one slight outlier (Hal Ashby) because he became a director after making a name as an editor.

The choice of the three directors to examine as case studies in individual chapters is made principally because their cases are particularly strong examples of the tendency to marginalise or dismiss all of their 1980s films relative to other parts of their careers. This body of work has either been largely forgotten or been saddled with reputations based more on extra-textual factors that have distorted appreciation of the actual films themselves. Furthermore, these three directors were responsible for some of the most successful and acclaimed films of the entire Renaissance period, including Altman's *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). It is not that these directors' 1980s narratives have been entirely ignored - emphatically not so in the case of Coppola - but it is more that the films themselves, in terms of content, style and substance, have tended to be side-lined. Two directors, Scorsese and De Palma, who (arguably) were the most successful both in commercial terms and for remaining true to their own personal styles and artistic choices, are *not* chosen for closer evaluation because, unlike almost all of the other Renaissance auteurs (again with the obvious exception of Spielberg), their 1980s work has not been so obviously ignored (their decades are dealt with briefly in Chapter 2).

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<sup>39</sup> Although I am unable to justifiably include Paul Schrader, I still want to make special mention of *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), one of the most fascinating, formally inventive and complex films of the entire decade.

## Methodology

The means by which this study will investigate the Renaissance auteurs' films and fortunes combine two interlocking approaches which might be broadly thought of as context and text. In simple terms, the context comprises the use of film-historical critical frameworks while the text is the study of authorship in specific films from specific directors. In analysing the context that influenced, determined and problematised the authorship of Renaissance auteurs and then showing how that authorship manifested itself in specific texts, the result is a symbiotic discussion where industrial and other extra-textual determinants inform an understanding of the films, while the analysis of specific films offers an understanding of what was the result of the interplay of all these factors.

This study is concerned with auteurs and I use the term repeatedly as a means to identify a particular type of director. For the purposes of this study, my own use of the term is broadly in line with Peter Lehman's definition of 'a filmmaker of substance who shapes and forms films with careful thought and attention to style, not just as window-dressing but as integral to storytelling.'<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the notion of the auteur in discussions about 1980s American cinema tended to move away from textual analysis, and towards a focus on industrial strategy, so that by 1991, according to Timothy Corrigan, directors now tended to be situated 'along an extratextual path in which their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs.'<sup>41</sup> Yet, while it is important to acknowledge this aspect of auteurism, it is surely fundamental in revealing how reputational capital is constructed for film directors, to also identify how authorship (which can still be construed in collaborative terms) manifests itself within the primary texts. Only some form of textual analysis can complete an understanding of where creative agency lies, sitting alongside the broader factors that condition a director's ability to generate employment opportunities and retain artistic control. In this

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Lehman, 'The American Cinema and the Critic Who Guided Me Through It' in Emanuel Levy (ed.), *Citizen Sarris, American Film Critic: Essays In Honor of Andrew Sarris* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), p. 76.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 105.

regard, in the chapters that examine specific auteurs' films, I seek to identify authorial agency in such a way that, for example in a film like *Fool for Love* (Altman, 1985), what is thought of as a faithful adaptation of Sam Shepherd's play is revealed to be far more of an 'Altmanesque' film than has been previously recognised. By addressing such aspects of the films, I am able to examine the 1980s in ways that contrasts with those like Corrigan or Philip Drake who have been inclined to use specified directors' films only as a backdrop to their studies of reputational standing and related industrial contexts.<sup>42</sup>

In one sense, this study of authorship looks back towards the original conception of 'auteur theory' because I am interested in discerning what Sarris called 'the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value.'<sup>43</sup> The directors under consideration were heralded as auteurs in the 1970s and I am interested in what happened to them in the subsequent decade, and what this tells us about the model of Renaissance auteur beyond the Renaissance. Unlike Sarris and the *Cahiers* critics, my concern with the extent of directors' creative control means explaining the processes by which films are made as well as through textual analysis. The exploration of industrial contexts and the production histories of individual films will be linked to how authorship is manifested in the specific titles under discussion. V.F. Perkins, in his assessment of 'Direction and Authorship' in *Film as Film*, assessed the problems and impact on a director's creativity from external pressures, stating that 'probably the director's bitterest subjection is not to the taste of the public nor to the occasional ineptitudes of his employers, but to the industrial system, the mechanism of movie finance, production and distribution.'<sup>44</sup> I am concerned in this project with how directors dealt with the impact of such pressures. When Chris Dumas describes one approach to authorship studies

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<sup>42</sup> Philip Drake, 'Reputational Capital, Creative Conflict and Hollywood Independence' in Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (eds), *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 140-192.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory on 1962 (1962)' in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (London: Da Capo Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993), p. 168.

as “‘practical’ auteurism,’ this is in line with my own because, when I consider films in relationship to the director’s other work, it is a ‘practical’ process because I do not assume that meaning is only derived from a singular vision, essentially a romantic but largely unsustainable conception.<sup>45</sup> What is particularly relevant for directors in the 1980s is Perkins’s assertion that ‘creative freedom does not guarantee, nor does industrial production rule out, a good result.’<sup>46</sup> I will examine, therefore, the case-study auteurs’ contributions to the films they directed by taking account of the impact of institutional power while still teasing out influences and characteristics shared with their peers, as well as thematic and stylistic similarities across the breadth of their own careers.

In considering the historical context, and in paying attention to its effect on the construction of the films under consideration, my approach is broadly in line with principles proposed by advocates of New Film History, as when James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper argue that the film historian can ‘add a material dimension to the analysis by showing how struggles for creative control can be glimpsed in the visual texture of the film itself.’<sup>47</sup> Such an approach allows for a more complex, nuanced, and possibly even a more ‘correct’, assessment of American film history.

The dissection of the progression of the Renaissance auteurs’ careers in the 1980s will underpin, and expand, the uncovering of authorship in the filmic texts, and my use of material (from archives, critical literature and biographical work) shows that the industrial context informs an understanding of the films. The archival research is a particularly valuable resource, one that is also highly informative for the other dimension of this project, the textual analysis of specific titles. My concern is with how the Renaissance auteur kept working means that non-filmic documents are important and informative, but so are the films they made. The Altman archives, lodged at the University of Michigan, are employed as a means to fill in the intricate details of production histories of his

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<sup>45</sup> Chris Dumas, *Brian De Palma and the Political Invisible* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Perkins, p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper, ‘Introduction’ in Chapman, Glancy, Harper (eds), *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 8.

projects (including those that were unmade). The range of information available from the director's papers is wide, from the financial details of projects which expands and deepens our understanding of low-cost contemporaneous filmmaking, to correspondence that questions the accepted histories about the authorship and production histories of films. One relatively minor, but illustrative example from the Altman papers is a letter from Harold Pinter that demolishes Altman's claim in interviews that the playwright was delighted with his television adaptations of two plays in 1987, *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* (both 1957).<sup>48</sup> Such detail is a reminder of how caution is always advised when assessing the veracity of any creative artist's public utterances. In addition to Altman's papers, two other archival sources inform the complicated ways that these directors managed to get their projects financed and distributed. The more limited of the two is the recently opened archives from the British completion guarantee company, Film Finances Limited. This valuable resource is usually only open to scholars for projects made before 1980, but an exception was made that enabled me to examine the production files for the two Coppola films, *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* (both 1983), that the company underwrote. This access allows me to reveal how the manner of authorial control on these two films has been previously misread in terms of the impact on creativity from institutional pressures. The third archival source, Friedkin's papers at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles, informs the discussion of production contexts in his 1980s work but my focus here is more on screenwriting material that relates to the textual strand of my study. Scripts and related items are also useful but more tangential in the chapter devoted to Altman. With Friedkin, however, draft screenplays, notebooks and correspondence are used to illuminate his processes from the initial adaptation of the source novel, through numerous draft scripts, and on to the final version of the film as shot.

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<sup>48</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 141; Letter from Harold Pinter to Altman, 30/9/1987, Box 93, Robert Altman Archive (RAA hereafter), University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library).

In recent work on the Renaissance, the centrality of the director in the academic study of the period has been challenged, with Aaron Hunter, for example, insisting that 'the canon that has been constructed around New Hollywood is heavily auteurist in nature, much to the detriment of a better understanding of the era.'<sup>49</sup> While these writers argue persuasively for new ways to move the discussion of the Renaissance away from auteurs, I prefer to take a diametrically opposite approach to those who would lessen the focus on the director-as-author. If Altman, Coppola and Friedkin can be considered as auteurs in the same way claimed for the likes of Hitchcock or Hawks (two directors who also operated within the Hollywood system), this should mean that an appreciation of their craft should be wide-ranging and not necessarily determined by when specific films were made (although this does present an existential problem due to this project's calendar-based focus, as I have already noted). In this regard, I recognise how important it is to appreciate directors' auteurist qualities across artificially created historical boundaries. All the familiar reasons expressed - directorial excess, the runaway successes of high-concept blockbusters, changes in audience preferences (often linked directly with Reaganite politics) and the conglomeration of studio ownership - are valid as part of an explanation for the changes that occurred from one period to the next but what tends to be missed from these familiar explanations for the demise of the Renaissance is much nuance in terms of individual directors' responses to these changes.

## Structure

Chapter 1 is a review of existing literature, comprising two parts that encompass the general followed by the specific. This encompasses both an overview of the most important scholarly studies of 1980s film history alongside an identification of the manner in which the Renaissance auteurs have been depicted, firstly in the broader literature and then in work devoted to them specifically. In

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<sup>49</sup> Aaron Hunter, *Authoring Hal Ashby: The Myth of the Hollywood Auteur* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 7, 11. See also Godfrey, *The Limits of Auteurism*; Krämer and Tzioumakis, 'Introduction' in *The Hollywood Renaissance*, p. xix.

discerning existing academic approaches to the decade, I highlight both literature than will inform my own analysis but also that which illustrates the gap in film studies that I am striving to fill. The general is the discussion of 1980s film histories and other analyses of American contemporary cinema, covering both work that focuses on ideology and politics, and that concerned with various aspects of the industrial component of filmmaking. The specific is a discussion of existing books and articles that deal with the three key directors, that describes the various critical approaches to the work, but also serves to illustrate the relative paucity of literature about their 1980s films.

Following the literature review, Chapter 2 is an analysis of the circumstances and production contexts that determined the place of the Renaissance auteur in the decade, broadly examining Hollywood in the 1980s followed by brief discussions of individual directors' decades. Eight directors are examined in pairs, ordered according to levels of career success in the 1980s, rather than according to any past connections. It is important to realise that the experiences of Renaissance directors were too diverse to fully appreciate the scope and nature of their place in the film industry from just three examples. As I have indicated, this study is partly about challenging the inclination to homogenise the group's fortunes and, for this reason, a necessary, if brief, overview of eight other auteurs is included.

When the study arrives at the three director-specific chapters, a consistent structure in each chapter allows for an easier appreciation of the differences in each individual's career progression. A chronological review of each auteur's decade-long work-practice is accompanied by the exploration of authorship in three films each. Chapter 3 deals with Robert Altman's unique decade when he directed a series of low-budget, independently financed, adapted plays that appear to stand apart from the director's typical methodologies, not least because of their seeming fidelity to their sources. Altman directed more films (for cinema and television) in the 1980s than any other Renaissance auteur, and how he managed to attain such a level of productivity is also discussed. I do not include for close analysis Altman's most well-known and critically acclaimed 1980s film, *Come*



*Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982) because it has attracted the most scholarly attention elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> The three films that are assessed – *Streamers* (1983), *Secret Honor* and *Fool for Love* - represent particularly interesting examples of how Altman expressed his artistic sensibilities.

Chapter 4 looks at Coppola's troubled, event-packed decade, one that has received extensive, if often superficial and disdainful, coverage elsewhere. In much of this literature, the films themselves are routinely treated perfunctorily, invoked merely as symptoms of his financial troubles and supposed 'Napoleon complex'.<sup>51</sup> My approach, while still needing to discuss the significant events, is to emphasise the ways that these external factors impacted on Coppola's authorship within the filmic text and I consider three 1980s films in which he was able to retain a high degree of creative control: *One from the Heart*, *The Outsiders* and *Tucker: the Man and his Dream* (1988). *Rumble Fish*, the most admired of his eighties work, is not examined in close detail because, relative to the other eighties work, it seems in far less need of academic and critical recuperation.<sup>52</sup>

The third case-study, in Chapter 5, is perhaps the most representative of the overall struggles suffered by Renaissance auteurs, in that William Friedkin encountered enough difficulties to be restricted to directing only four feature films. Even then, only two of the four fall unambiguously in the decade because *Cruising*, released in early 1980, was made in 1979 and *Rampage*'s 1987 release was confined to only two showings in the United States, eventually only being released more widely in 1992.<sup>53</sup> His decade is particularly interesting as an example of a director striving, frequently unsuccessfully, to remain within the embrace of the system. With the choice of three films to

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<sup>50</sup> For example, see Robert Self, *Robert Altman's Subliminal Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 159-166; Helene Keyssar, *Robert Altman's America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 243-259.

<sup>51</sup> The coverage of Coppola's 1980s in books and articles is discussed later, both in the 'Literature Review' and in Chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Chown, *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola* (London: Praeger, 1988), pp. 166-175.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Claggett, *William Friedkin: Films of Aberration, Obsession and Reality* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2003), p. 311.

examine closely, I omit 1983's *Deal of the Century*, a feeble comedy vehicle for Chevy Chase, because it was developed by others and is the project in which Friedkin was the least engaged. By contrast, his other three films in the decade - *Cruising*, *To Live and Die in L.A.* and *Rampage* - all represent fascinating instances of his personal authorship. Not only was he involved in these projects from the start but, for the only time in his career (at least in terms of screenwriting credits), he singlehandedly wrote all three of the films.<sup>54</sup> His overarching career has rarely been understood in auteurist terms, yet his 1980s films, despite having been inevitably assessed in terms of a dramatic career decline, can be still be persuasively compared with each other in terms of both theme and filmmaking practice.

The examination of films, and of these three directors' fortunes, is not simply about shining a light on undervalued work but also is employed as a way to provide insight into the transition between the 1970s and the 1980s. There were fundamental changes that made finding work more difficult for these filmmakers but what is interesting is the extent and manner in which this was achieved. The detailed examination of the directors' 1980s career arcs allows the discussion to be about both artistry and industry, and also to be about the difficulties of negotiating the tensions that are intrinsic to the relationship between the two.

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<sup>54</sup> Care always needs to be taken when considering the involvement of directors in the writing of their films. Directors were only granted a screen credit if they could satisfy the Writers Guild that they had written at least fifty percent of the script. The clarification of the 'genuine' authorship of scripts is greatly assisted - as I am able to do with Friedkin - by consulting original draft screenplays in archives.

## 1. Literature Review

This project addresses a gap in the study of American film history and it is therefore unsurprising that very little of the scholarly literature about 1980s filmmaking is concerned with the careers of Renaissance auteurs. The obvious exception is writing devoted to specific directors which is covered in the third part of this review. I begin by considering how 1980s Hollywood *has* been studied, firstly looking at earlier, and influential, writing that characterises 1980s Hollywood in terms of its ideological tendencies. While this section is very much about the blockbuster cinema in which this study is pointedly *not* interested, the profound influence on conceptions of the decade as right-leaning make this a logical place to begin. Of course, in dealing with specific directors and specific, frequently ill-regarded, films, the marketplace and circumstances in which these filmmakers worked at the time must still be considered. In this respect, the second section in this chapter examines histories that concentrate on industrial factors and the concurrent changes in filmic content. The final section discusses what is a fairly sparse body of work that directly addresses the 1980s careers of my three case-study directors.

### History, Politics and Ideology

In 1986, Andrew Britton wrote a polemic, 'Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment', for the journal *Movie*, that would have a significant influence on critical perceptions about 1980s Hollywood; indeed, the terms 'Reaganite entertainment', or more commonly 'Reaganite cinema', have now passed into popular usage.<sup>55</sup> Britton reveals, and castigates, the conservative ideology of contemporary Hollywood, and argues that 'blockbuster' films, which dominated the domestic box-office at that time, were representative of 'a general movement of reaction and conservative reassurance in the contemporary Hollywood cinema.'<sup>56</sup> Britton argues that 'entertainment' (a

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<sup>55</sup> For example, see 'Reaganite Cinema' in John Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2009), pp. 387-391.

<sup>56</sup> Britton, 'Blissing Out', p. 97.

pejorative term in his thinking) in contemporary filmmaking is not only 'ritualized and formulaic' but that its conventions work in such a way that they impede the articulation of complex issues and the meaningful development of theme.<sup>57</sup>

There is, however, an inherent contradiction in Britton's argument. On one hand, he asserts that this form of entertainment is devoid of meaning and 'never asks us to feel anything', yet on the other hand, he also insists that entertainment (in his terms) also invites its viewers to 'take pleasure' from the conservative 'Reaganite' values that the films promote.<sup>58</sup> If these films promote a firm ideology, however unconsciously received, can they be empty? Britton's answer to this conundrum seems to be that the paucity of meaning inherent in these films is merely a mask behind which lies an ideological agenda. In order to fully understand Reaganite entertainment in its appropriate cultural context, later writers would argue that it is necessary to take some account of the industrial and commercial factors that fuelled the type of product Hollywood made during this period. Being published in *Movie*, a journal associated with close analysis, such a context is largely outside of Britton's purview although, towards the end of his essay, he does reflect on the conditions of production, and the vast expense of feature films in the 1980s as being 'not intrinsically favourable to the progressive exploration of cultural contradiction.'<sup>59</sup> Britton set the tone for much of the subsequent critical work about the 1980s with his trenchant pessimism about the quality of Hollywood filmmaking in the first half of the decade caused by the overwhelming box-office dominance by the type of films he disparages.

This project, much like other later accounts of political and socio-cultural currents in 1980s cinema, takes issue with the narrow scope of Britton's thesis, because he undervalues the diversity of films in the first half of the 1980s. However, in another sense, my investigation of films, that are

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

neither formulaic nor necessarily right-leaning, has some affinity with Britton's thinking because it explores the type of filmmaking the lack of which he bemoaned. Many of Britton's attitudes about the perilous state of the industry in the mid-1980s were mirrored shortly afterwards by Robin Wood, with both writers regularly cited in the common conception of the decade's cinema as a reflection of the sitting President's political ideology. The influence of such views has become pervasive and sits alongside the notion of a 'blockbuster era' as defining characteristics of 1980s Hollywood in popular culture. In film studies, as will be seen below, such an overarching ideology as characteristic of the decade's cinema has been challenged, yet writers remained, nevertheless, mostly fixated on the most popular films of the decade because in emphasising industrial contexts, they leaned naturally towards the consideration of box-office hits.

Britton's essay was an extended journal article but the most comprehensive accounts of Hollywood history in the 1980s come from book-length studies: this section covering histories and overviews of the decade, therefore, concentrates almost entirely on monographs. There are, nevertheless, a number of useful edited collections that are not considered here but nevertheless contribute to an understanding of the period's cinema. Among the contributors to such volumes, writers like Timothy Corrigan, Justin Wyatt and Stephen Prince wrote less comprehensive versions and variations of the arguments presented in their books.<sup>60</sup> Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* picks up on Britton's article but, as its title suggests, is about more than just right-wing ideology.<sup>61</sup> However, in the chapter, 'Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era', Wood provides his own perspective (acknowledging Britton) on the right-wing politics of mid-1980s American cinema. He argues that the reiteration of familiar characters and stories constricts any possibility for adjustments in their conservatism. For Wood, the most worrying aspect of what he

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<sup>60</sup> Examples include: Mark Crispin Miller (ed.), *Seeing Through Movies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990); Jon Lewis (ed.), *New American Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998); Stephen Prince (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003).

calls the 'Lucas-Spielberg' syndrome is 'the enormous importance our society has conferred upon the films, an importance not all incompatible with their not being taken seriously.'<sup>62</sup>

Central to Wood's thesis about the Reagan era is that the commercial failure of intelligent films like *Blade Runner* (he also cites *Heaven's Gate* and *The King of Comedy* [Scorsese, 1983]) only encouraged the idea that 'today, it is becoming difficult for films that are not *Star Wars* (at least in the general sense of dispensing reassurance, but increasingly in more specific and literal ways) to get made, and when they do the public and often the critics reject them.'<sup>63</sup> Wood's approach is founded on his earlier text-based criticism, as seen in his earlier seminal work on Hitchcock and Hawks, resulting in him taking little account of films whose commercial failure may also be explained by other extratextual factors (for example, where a studio fails to promote or exhibit a film, thereby ensuring box-office failure).<sup>64</sup> In this chapter, Wood is largely unconcerned with more diverse, and more obscure, currents that existed in 1980s American filmmaking yet elsewhere in the book, as well as in *CineAction!*, the journal he helped found at this time, he explores work he clearly admires from the 1980s (although these were mostly released very early in the decade and straddle the two timeframes of the Hollywood Renaissance and the subsequent period of domination by the Lucas-Spielberg syndrome).<sup>65</sup> In the chapter, 'The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 70s', Wood's final example is Friedkin's *Cruising*, released in 1980 but made in 1979, where he offers a convincing, if partial, defence against the attacks on the film for its controversial portrayal of the contemporary 'gay scene'.<sup>66</sup> Invariably, when he examines individual films, Wood is insightful, even if his characteristically idiosyncratic opinions often offer readings that oppose critical norms, most

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965, revised edition 2002); *Howard Hawks* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981, new edition 2006).

<sup>65</sup> *CineAction!*, a Canadian journal, first appeared in Spring 1985.

<sup>66</sup> Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam*, pp. 52-62.

obviously in his chapter on Altman that challenges the 'fashionable acceptance where criticism ceases to ask questions and lapses into a celebration of excellences.'<sup>67</sup>

Following Wood and Britton's strident accounts, analyses of the American film industry in the 'post-classical' period, or in more specific work on the 1980s, frequently carried on examining it from an ideological perspective but tended to move the discussion away from the auteurist concerns that underpin Wood and Britton's thinking. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988), take a more balanced approach in their exploration of how, between 1967 and 1987, popular films 'debate[d] significant social issues'.<sup>68</sup> In their interpretation, the ideological currents and social movements of the 1960s give way to 'the failure of liberalism in the 1970s,' followed by (as Wood and Britton would agree) 'the triumph of conservatism in the 1980s.'<sup>69</sup> The authors examine films in terms of generic types (disaster films, horror films, fantasy films) but also uncover ideological similarities in the films of individual directors. In this regard, *Camera Politica's* discussion of authorial connections invites potential interpretations of Renaissance directors in terms of ideological consistencies that traverse the two decades. By exploring directors' films thematically, Ryan and Kellner challenge monolithic interpretations of films as either part of a Renaissance or of a blockbuster era. Making no division between decades, they assert that the 'movie brats...on the whole promote conservative ideas in their films,' granting exceptions for Spielberg (disagreeing with Wood and Britton) 'whose work is liberal in character,' and for Scorsese whom they think is largely uninterested in ideology. However, they do acknowledge that these filmmakers did not see themselves as political (with the exception of Milius) and, while mostly conservative, their films require nuanced interpretation, as they often

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-40. The original article was published in 1975 but Wood adds a postscript about Altman's later films, observing his ten-year old account 'has received nothing but repeated conformation from [Altman's] subsequent work' (p. 37).

<sup>68</sup> Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

contain 'elements that are potentially either Left radical or Right radical.'<sup>70</sup> For example, they identify Coppola as 'not progressive,' because although he is a modernist, he is also inherently conservative.<sup>71</sup> Ryan and Kellner do think that Altman is a socially aware director but also claim (debatably) that 'his left-liberal vision is limited; it does not target the underlying institutions of American society.'<sup>72</sup>

Moving into the 1990s, the tendency persisted to depict the prior decade's films in the context of politics and ideology. Ostensibly approaching the period on different terms, Stephen Prince's 'political imagery', William Palmer's 'social history' and Alan Nadel's 'cultural narratives' all conformed to Ryan and Kellner's method of gathering films together in terms of their political themes.<sup>73</sup> The profusion of such works indicates a shift from emphasising the romantic conception of individual 1970s directors as artists (in accordance with the original exponents of 'auteur theory') to privileging issues of representation, politics and social contexts. Nadel's book mostly focuses on films that depict the cultural landscape of 'President Reagan's America' and concentrates on popular films that are not overtly political (for example, the films of John Hughes). Everything in the book is related back to the overarching concept of a culture in thrall to a pervasive Reaganism. Palmer and Prince cover similar ground (although the latter's book covers 'contemporary cinema' and takes more account of 1970s films) by uncovering ideologically diverse themes and undercurrents in a fairly wide range of 'political' films. They set up different critical frameworks to expound their interpretations with Prince also taking account of both industrial structures and Hollywood's traditional attitudes and practices of the past. Palmer, on the other hand, establishes a more theoretically dense basis for

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Prince, *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992); Nadel, *Flatlining on the Fields of Dreams*; Palmer, *The Films of the Eighties*.



his examination of specific films employing New Historicism via what he calls 'the holograph of history...to give new dimension and flexibility to previously static, one-dimensional views.'<sup>74</sup>

In covering a wide range of 1980s films, Prince, Palmer and Nadel all make occasional references to films directed by Renaissance auteurs, mostly fleetingly and outside of any consideration of authorial agency. For example, Prince discusses Milius's *Red Dawn* as an example of 'Evil Empire' films and mentions, in passing, Coppola's *Gardens of Stone* (1987) as part of a cycle of Vietnam films that projected a disillusioned view of the war.<sup>75</sup> Palmer also examines *Gardens of Stone*, but in greater detail, and shows how it is not easily identified as either a Left or Right-oriented film. Palmer's interpretation suggests that the ideology in Coppola's 1980s films can be interpreted in a more nuanced way than Ryan and Kellner averred.<sup>76</sup> Nadel's sample is too mainstream for most of the low-profile films made by Renaissance directors, although he does analyse Rafelson's *Black Widow* (1987) as part of a female-led contemporary cycle that he calls 'the compulsive-attraction film.'<sup>77</sup> The gender issues that Nadel considers were analysed in greater depth in two influential studies published a few years earlier, by Yvonne Tasker and Susan Jeffords, where the masculinity (and bodies) of the popular male action hero (Stallone, Schwarzenegger *et al.*) is examined in the context of Reaganism, and in relation to genre and spectacle.<sup>78</sup>

## History, Industry and Style

The early 1990s also saw the publication of two important books, by Timothy Corrigan and Justin Wyatt, that did *not* examine contemporary cinema in terms of ideology and social history, instead examining aspects of filmic culture that arose out of contemporaneous industrial changes. Corrigan's

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<sup>74</sup> Palmer, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> Prince, *Visions of Empire*, pp. 56-59; pp. 141-143.

<sup>76</sup> Palmer, p. 53.

<sup>77</sup> Nadel, pp. 114-117.

<sup>78</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London; Routledge, 1993); Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.

1991 book, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*, examines films made between 1967 and 1990, and specifically focuses on the changes in viewing habits that developed during this period. By framing his discussion of specific films within a context of their responses to 'changing social and technological conditions,' in his own description, Corrigan's book becomes 'in an important sense, a historical study.'<sup>79</sup> Although the range of films examined does include a few from the Renaissance period, Corrigan concentrates mostly on the 1980s where the technological changes that allowed the spectator to see films in 'a cinema without walls' began to dominate viewing habits (VCRs, satellite dishes, cable networks). As Corrigan sees it, these developments were encouraged by fans' desire to see the new blockbusters again and again which could now be sated within the confines of the home.<sup>80</sup> In terms of this study, the most relevant section is when Corrigan discusses 'the commerce of auteurism.' Conceiving of directors in such a context, he argues that Coppola is a 'useless' auteur, not because he makes films of inferior quality, but because 'the spectacle of self-destruction becomes a way back to self-expression.'<sup>81</sup> Corrigan's use of Coppola as an example of commercial auteurism was influential on perceptions about the director in the 1980s, most pointedly in Jon Lewis's later book about the travails of Coppola's difficult decade (discussed in detail shortly).<sup>82</sup> Corrigan acknowledged that the importance of the filmic text has been relegated in contemporary notions of auteurism, yet follows the same path himself, making little reference to Coppola's films.

Corrigan is interested in a number of aspects of the period's cinematic culture, but Justin Wyatt's 1994 book, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, has a singular focus that he persuasively argues 'can be considered as one central – and perhaps *the* central development – within post-classical cinema, a style of film molded by economic and institutional forces.'<sup>83</sup> Wyatt

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<sup>79</sup> Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls*, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>82</sup> Jon Lewis, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy: Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood* (London: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>83</sup> Wyatt, *High Concept*. p. 8. Emphasis in original.

defines 'high concept' filmmaking and examines how it became the dominant force in Hollywood in the 1980s, with the success of *Jaws* and *Star Wars* (once again) identified as the crucial turning point. Wyatt provides a list of about eighty films (made between 1975 and 1992) that conform to at least one of three identifiers of high concept, 'the look, the hook, the book' (more prosaically, spectacular imagery, marketing opportunities and reduced narratives). For Wyatt, films are not simply high concept, or not, but can be placed somewhere along a spectrum, making them more or less high concept depending on where they fall.<sup>84</sup> Wyatt is adamant that a film's degree of adherence to high concept can largely explain its success, or lack thereof. His brief discussion of Renaissance filmmakers is conceived in these terms and those he lists as failing to adapt to the new environment include Altman and Friedkin.<sup>85</sup> Wyatt claims that Coppola and Scorsese, however, achieved some partial success by being 'able to adapt somewhat more successfully to the economic dictates of high concept.' He uses Coppola's two youth-oriented films made back-to-back in 1983, *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*, as contrasting examples of how a relatively greater adherence to high concept explains why the former was more successful at the box-office.<sup>86</sup> Although there is certainly some sense in the way Wyatt makes the connection between commercial success and high concept (as exemplified in the Lucas-Spielberg syndrome), it seems too simplistic to understand the smaller profits and losses in non-blockbuster production in such precise terms. Different films' commercial successes are inevitably dependent on a variety of factors, of which its degree of high concept construction is but one, and high concept becomes less crucial in small films only intended to have limited appeal. By yoking high concept directly to commercial success, Wyatt's singular interpretation of contemporary cinema is aligned to the conception of 1980s American filmmaking as being dominated by blockbusters, formulaic cycles and repetitive sequels. By 2000, with the benefit of ten years' reflection, Stephen Prince's entry in the estimable 'History of American Cinema' series, *A New Pot of*

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73, 191.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

*Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989*, takes a broader view of the decade, opposing monolithic opinion conceived in ideological or box-office terms, when he challenges what he calls the 'critical misapprehension' that supposes 'orderly and tidy' historical models of 'Reagan or blockbusters.'<sup>87</sup>

Where Prince departs from most generalised accounts of 1980s Hollywood is an insistence that while an economic history of the period is easily constructed, when considering the decade 'from a cultural and aesthetic standpoint, however, heterodoxy is the norm – a profusion of styles and subjects – tied to the medium's...need to appeal to diverse audiences.'<sup>88</sup> Prince's outlines how a need for lower-budget films to fill the schedule around the production of blockbusters and to cater for the burgeoning home video market, inevitably led to such a 'heterodoxy', not least from the growth in the independent sector. He questions many of the assumptions attached to the period, making a point that is crucial to this study, when he asserts that 'blockbuster films did not take over the industry. Bad films...did not drive out good films.'<sup>89</sup>

Prince's book is an expansive overview of 1980s American cinema that includes detailed analysis of the decade's broad industrial developments, offering a comprehensive account of the changes in ownership of the majors and their effect on filmmaking, and on the wider marketplace. He is also informative about other key structural changes, taking full account of the independent sector, and of the nascent ancillary markets of video and cable. Around the turn of the century, a number of other writers, including Yannis Tzioumakis, Emmanuel Levy, Peter Biskind and Thomas Schatz, took some account of the 1980s as part of wider historical examinations of independent cinema.<sup>90</sup> Schatz's

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (London: University of California Press, 2000), p. xv.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>90</sup> Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*; Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*; Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Thomas Schatz, 'Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film' in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, pp. 127-139.

article, “Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film’, from a particularly useful edited collection, concentrates on the changes in independent cinema that began in the 1980s but coalesced in the 1990s. His assessment underlines the significance of the interdependent relationship between studio and independent filmmaking at the time, a theme that will be seen (in Chapter 2 and beyond) to be particularly relevant to the story of Renaissance filmmakers in the decade. Both Geoff King and Tzioumakis have delineated quite specifically the nature of 1980s American independent cinema, identifying differences in filmmaking and industrial practices between the low-key 1980s and the more heavily financed 1990s. While the seeds of the successes of the latter were sown in the early 1980s work of filmmakers like John Sayles, the earlier period saw access to large scale distribution being much less available than in the following decade when the studios became more involved in ‘indie-style’ filmmaking.<sup>91</sup>

In contrast with much of the literature about the 1970s, books and articles about the 1980s are rarely organised by director, but in *A New Pot of Gold*, Prince’s attention to aesthetic considerations includes a dedicated chapter on ‘Filmmakers.’<sup>92</sup> Although he offers a useful overview of the 1980s careers of many directors, the book’s breadth of scope means that these are mostly only well-developed pen-portraits. For all his insistence about the variation and quality of 1980s cinema, Prince is not especially enthusiastic about Renaissance filmmakers’ eighties output, so Altman’s career ‘absolutely collapsed’ in a decade ‘of drift and continual struggle’ and he characterises Coppola’s 1980s films as an extension of the director’s personal struggles.<sup>93</sup> Thus on one hand, this study follows Prince by not side-lining aesthetics in favour of industry and ideology, but it opposes his tendency to casually dismiss the work of what he calls the ‘embattled auteurs.’

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<sup>91</sup> Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema*, pp. 8-10; Tzioumakis, ““Independent”, “Indie” and “Indiewood”: Towards a Periodisation of Contemporary (Post-1980) American Independent Cinema’ in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, pp. 30-33.

<sup>92</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, pp. 186-286.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222-229. Friedkin is not included.

Geoff King's *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* is a historical account of post-classical cinema from the late sixties to the end of the nineties that follows the example of Corrigan, Wyatt and Prince's *A New Pot of Gold* in privileging the industrial context, while still taking some account of politics and ideology. King's splits his account of 'New Hollywood' into two parts, with the Hollywood Renaissance as 'New Hollywood, Version I' and the blockbuster era that followed it as 'Version II.' King acknowledges the conservative ideology of the second New Hollywood but, like Prince, suggests that industrial factors are as important in the inscription of such an ideology as the way films reflect 'a changing socio-political context.'<sup>94</sup> The importance of understanding the different periods and their critical turning points in terms of the industrial forces that impact upon them, is the central tenet of King's book. The change from one period to the other is, King observes, more than just the story of 'directors out of control', but he is hardly original in insisting, in this regard, that the blockbuster, manifested by the successes of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, both grew out of, and away from, the Renaissance.<sup>95</sup> When it comes to the films of the 1980s, King's understanding of 'New Hollywood, Version II' means that only blockbusters are given much attention. The 1980s careers of the New Wave auteurs (Spielberg and Lucas aside) are treated perfunctorily, with, for example, Altman's decade dealt with in one sentence without even any mention of film titles.<sup>96</sup> In the final analysis, King's book is a well-told history that suffers because it cleaves too closely to the idea of two 'New Hollywoods' allowing little room for developments across the decades.

More recent overarching work on post-war American film history has, to a large extent, covered familiar ground: the most valuable contribution of recent books by Barry Langford and Nick Smedley is how they aid our understanding of modern Hollywood over the last ten years. Langford's well-written, scrupulously balanced book, *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology Since 1945*, has a title which effectively summarises his study's aims. His approach bears some

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<sup>94</sup> Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

resemblance to King's industry-oriented New Hollywood history, but also recalls some of the ideological examination of Ryan and Kellner or Palmer's books. When he turns to style, it is given only limited emphasis in terms of 1980s filmmaking. He argues that directors in the decade rarely displayed a 'signature style' but when they did, it was 'a high impact high gloss advert/music aesthetic rather than the *camera stylo*.'<sup>97</sup> Langford also makes the familiar distinction between the Renaissance and the 'New Hollywood' (he uses Schatz's meaning of the term) which he says began in the early eighties and continues to this day. In doing so, he again gathers together, and dismisses, in a couple of sentences, the Renaissance directors in the 1980s as a seemingly homogenous group. This is symptomatic of his approach that, in a similar vein to King, rarely engages directly with any primary texts in any depth. Even the inserts throughout the book that look at specific films, the 'biggest and the best' (box-office champion and Oscar winner) every ten years, are somewhat cursory and oriented to the films' positions in the commercial climate of the given timeframe. Smedley's even more recent book about post-classical American cinema makes grand claims for itself but his assertion that he is original in preferring 'to see Hollywood films as being in a direct relationship with the time in which they were made, as well as being part of a longer-term cultural development' is not too different from earlier socio-cultural studies of contemporary cinema.<sup>98</sup> Smedley accords the eighties very little attention in his examination of Hollywood from 1970s to the present day; this lack of interest in 1980s films seems symptomatic of the way this cinematic decade is commonly perceived in today's culture.

The concentration on ideology, on popular franchise filmmaking, and on marketing and high concept in literature about 1980s American cinema led to a tendency for one of the important reasons for the decline in audience interest for Renaissance-style cinema to be frequently elided: it

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<sup>97</sup> Langford, *Post-Classical Hollywood*, p. 208. For a rare exception that examines 1980s blockbuster aesthetics (in a positive light), see Elissa Nelson, 'Beneath the Surface and the Excess: An Examination of Critical and Aesthetic Attacks on Films of the 1980s', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (2013), pp. 1029-1050.

<sup>98</sup> Nick Smedley, *The Roots of Modern Hollywood: The Persistence of Values in American Cinema, from the New Deal to the Present* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), p. 7.

was clear that this type of filmmaking was no longer seen as culturally relevant to a 1980s viewership. In the wake of social and political developments, the ageing Renaissance auteurs were inevitably not as easily able to relate to the tastes of younger filmgoers, or to the prevailing socio-political context. The counterculture that had been so influential on their filmmaking in the first place had been replaced in 1980s America by a strongly corporate culture so that the downbeat, often left-leaning subject matter favoured by these directors now seemed out of place in contemporaneous culture.

How much these histories and studies of 1980s and contemporary cinema reviewed here can contribute to this project is limited by what motivated its undertaking in the first place. This literature exemplifies the gap, that I address, in considerations of the decade when the move in academia from auteurism and artistry towards, firstly, a singular concern with eighties cinema's underlying and overt political stances and the notion of a 'Reaganite entertainment', followed by a further shift away from aesthetics towards institutional concerns and wider ideological issues of gender and representation. The result was far less emphasis on individual texts, and the analysis of form and style, than in the scholarship that assessed the earlier Renaissance period. The notion of two distinct periods, of two 'New Hollywoods', so prominently inscribed - and rarely questioned - in this literature, has also contributed to this tendency because it, inevitably, emphasises box-office performance. Therefore, it is the scholarship that concentrates more on specific directors, and their films, that more usefully informs my later analysis of the primary texts.

## **Directors and their Films**

The literature that identified a 'New Wave' in the American cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s frequently examined the period through the prism of its most significant directors, promoting the idea of a new breed of American auteur. The titles of early influential accounts, Pye and Myles's *The Movie Brats* and Diane Jacobs's *Hollywood Renaissance*, became commonly used terms in



subsequent literature: both are organised around the directors most identified with the characteristic films of the movement.<sup>99</sup> In 1998's oft-cited *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, Peter Biskind also largely concentrated on directors, providing a vibrant, anarchic (if divisive) account of New Hollywood in the 1970s.<sup>100</sup> Biskind's extensive research and copious interviews tell a colourful tale and in his final chapter, 'We Blew It', the author presents an apocalyptic account of the post-Renaissance fate of most of the directors he has discussed.<sup>101</sup> One example is how Biskind offers a 'sobering' account of Friedkin's decline, recounting that it was his excessive and arrogant behaviour towards studio executives that destroyed his Hollywood career.<sup>102</sup> Biskind's account of the auteurs' collective collapse is a neat, but partially told, postscript but his undoubted wit occasionally serves to mask sweeping generalisations designed to accommodate his overarching narrative.

In 1980, Robert Kolker published the first edition of *A Cinema of Loneliness*, a book focused on a select group of New Hollywood directors; by 2011, it had appeared in its fourth edition.<sup>103</sup> Kolker has updated his analysis, and his choices, with each iteration (so, for example, the 2011 version now covers Altman's work up until his death). The first in 1980 was clearly focused on the Renaissance period and examined Altman, Kubrick, Scorsese, Penn and Coppola. In the second version, Kolker replaced Coppola with Spielberg; in the third Oliver Stone was added and in the fourth, he brings in David Fincher (with some attention also afforded to other contemporary filmmakers). In one key sense, then, this project tests the notion implicit in Kolker's approach that the auteur theory means taking account of *all* of a director's films. Kolker makes clear from the outset that he will concentrate on close readings of films and sounds a cautionary note about taking too much account of the economics of the film business because this can lead to 'a self-defeating cycle' where the emphasis

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<sup>99</sup> Michael Pye, and Linda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film School Generation Took over Hollywood*; Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance*.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 408-439.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 4<sup>th</sup> edition 2011).

on films as a commodity 'makes serious discussion of its form and content impossible.'<sup>104</sup> This sidelining of economic determinants does not stop Kolker from taking a clear-eyed view of his subjects, describing Spielberg as allowing himself to be integrated into the Hollywood machine because 'imagination is put at the service of placation and manipulation.'<sup>105</sup> As this observation about Spielberg implies, Kolker is not undone by romanticising the notion of a Renaissance, which he says was not a 'new wave' but merely a period of brief freedom where directors were 'left alone within a structure than momentarily entertained some experimentation.'<sup>106</sup> By now, Kolker has become somewhat different from many historians of the Renaissance because of his ongoing project to cover as wide a period as possible; thus, while he often pays most attention to a director's best-known (1970s) films, he continually draws parallels between *all* the work (including the 1980s). Kolker is able to find comparable motifs, themes and formal expression across the breadth of an auteur's *oeuvre*. The following review is confined to the specific case-study directors upon whom this project concentrates but Kolker would be an appropriate place to begin any such examination of literature about the Renaissance auteur in the 1980s. In the case of Altman, Kolker was one of the first scholars to develop complex arguments about the aesthetic and thematic commonalities across the director's films.

### **Robert Altman**

Kolker affords Altman a historically significant place when he argues that, alongside Kubrick, the pair are almost alone in American cinema in confirming 'the fragile legitimacy of the auteur theory with such a visible expression of coherence in [their] work.'<sup>107</sup> Kolker finds that the same ideas about subject, form and thematic resonance are repeated consistently throughout Altman's work.

However, he makes some exception for the theatrical adaptations of the 1980s which 'are more

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358-359.

contained, held fast by their verbal source and their budgetary constraints.’ He suggests that the theatrical films cannot be as open or as subject to randomness as the earlier work but, nevertheless, argues that each of the eighties films can read as standing in a dialectic relationship with earlier films in Altman’s career.<sup>108</sup> Kolker takes an aspect typical of the overall work from one film and examines it in some depth, while simultaneously drawing into his discussion a wide selection of examples elsewhere in Altman’s work. One pertinent paralleling is with *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976) and *Secret Honor*, Kolker arguing that Buffalo Bill Cody is recreated as Richard Nixon. So Altman’s interest in politics and celebrity are two sides of the same coin, and the Nixon film represents ‘a coda to the meditations on politics, celebrity, and spectacle previously undertaken in *Nashville* (1975), *Buffalo Bill* and *Health* (1980).’<sup>109</sup> Kolker also anticipates later Altman scholarship when he links *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), *Images* (1972) and *Jimmy Dean* together as all depicting women in crisis confronting oppressive forms of patriarchy.<sup>110</sup> The 1980s in Kolker’s overall analysis do not, at any time, form the principal focus but are used as part of his expansive use of the entire Altman canon. As I shall explain later, the differences between the 1980s work and the rest are arguably not as significant as Kolker suggests yet he is rarely as dogmatic, in this regard, as in more journalistic or generalised accounts of Altman’s career.

In the 1980s, Robert Self published several articles about Altman that culminated in a 2002 book, *Robert Altman’s Subliminal Reality*, that effectively collated and solidified his earlier discussions of the director’s work.<sup>111</sup> Self explains the relationship between Altman’s films and art cinema, and considers theories of authorship in relationship to his subject. In ‘The Art Cinema and Robert Altman’ from 1982, Self had posited that Altman’s 1970s films, and those from other Renaissance-era directors, display ‘structures, styles, and ideological characteristics’ that reveal an art cinema

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407-408.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Self, *Robert Altman’s Subliminal Reality*. See also ‘The Perfect Couple: ‘Two Halves of One in the Films of Robert Altman’, *Wide Angle*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1983), pp. 30-37.

discourse.<sup>112</sup> By 2002, Self applied these ideas more broadly, at book-length, and identifies ‘subliminal reality’ as an exploration of unconscious and unsaid human emotions and interactions that persistently disrupt conventional classical norms. Modernist forms of storytelling that feature unresolved, ambiguously rendered narratives, characters with insecure identities, and reflexive critiques of the entertainment business are the basis for Self’s interpretation of Altman’s methods.<sup>113</sup>

Self does not choose to portray Altman as ‘the cinematic auteur of personal movies’ but, instead, analyses how the films relate to characteristic attributes of art cinema narration.<sup>114</sup> This emphasis relates to how Self understands the idea of the name ‘Robert Altman’ in the context of broader theories of authorship. In ‘Robert Altman and the Theory of Authorship’, Self underpins his own study of Altman’s authorship by reference to other theorists, including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, when he asserts that ‘at least half a dozen modes of discourse are signified as a function of the name of the author Robert Altman.’ Each of these discourses ‘authorizes “a notional coherence” that provides the means for us to grasp the text in the moment of its production before us.’<sup>115</sup> Thus the author-function is spread across a range of determinants, including collaborators (writers, actors, craftsmen) as well as industrial and societal pressures. This reads as being in sympathy with contemporaneous ideas about the limitations of the auteur theory; however, it also raises questions when applied to such a single-minded analysis of one creative artist. When a comparison of thematic similarities and interpretative strategies across the range of one director’s films is undertaken, it is inevitable that this will lead, to some extent at least, to a reliance on auteurist perspectives. Self is uninterested in intentionality, or where creative agency rests and his approach can be linked to Peter Wollen’s revised application of auteur theory from in the second edition of *Signs and Meaning in the*

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<sup>112</sup> Self, ‘The Art Cinema and Robert Altman’, *Velvet Light Trap*, No. 19 (1982), p. 30.

<sup>113</sup> Self, *Subliminal Reality*, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>115</sup> Self, ‘Robert Altman and the Theory of Authorship’, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Autumn 1985), p. 4.

*Cinema*.<sup>116</sup> Self's methodology, nevertheless, results (despite his protestations) in an inexorable focus on the personal signature of the director.

Whereas Self distances himself from auteur theory through his understanding of the author-name 'Robert Altman' as an amalgamation of competing discourses, in *Robert Altman's America* (the first book-length academic study of the director), Helene Keyssar takes a more traditional approach in her study of Altman's 'emphatically and specifically American' signature.<sup>117</sup> She claims to position herself somewhere between Andrew Sarris's auteur theory and Pauline Kael's dismissal of it as 'narcissistic adult males' intent on promoting inept cinema as meaningful. Keyssar actually cleaves quite closely to conventional auteurist approaches, her methodology being almost exclusively text based and taking no account of external factors, or other authorial voices, that impinge on Altman's ability to impose his personal signature.<sup>118</sup> Keyssar's background as a both a theatrical director and scholar is reflected in the perceptive way she analyses the eighties adaptations of contemporary plays.<sup>119</sup> For example, she observes that 'Altman finds precise and efficient catalysts to transform the closed theatrical space into open filmic space,' and suggests that in *Jimmy Dean*, the film's relentless drive 'toward revelation and recognition' follows the pattern of 'Western tragedies since Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.<sup>120</sup> Keyssar's book was written just before Altman's 1990s triumphal return to Hollywood, and to more familiar modes of filmmaking; her willingness to underplay how the eighties work is markedly different from the archetypal Altman film needs to be understood in this context. Her study, nevertheless, is welcome as a scholarly overview of Altman's 1970s and 1980s films that concentrates on purely textual interpretations.

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<sup>116</sup> Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, revised 4<sup>th</sup> edition 1998).

<sup>117</sup> Helene Keyssar, *Robert Altman's America*, p. 5.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. Keyssar's use of Kael here to exemplify opposition to auteur theory is a little surprising given Kael's famous championing of Altman in the 1970s.

<sup>119</sup> Marsha A. Chandler, 'Passing of Professor Helene Keyssar 1943-2001', *University of California Campus Notice*, 5/2/2001 (<http://adminrecords.ucsd.edu/notices/2001/2001-02-05-1.html>)

<sup>120</sup> Keyssar, p. 249.

In contrast to Kolker, Self and Keyssar's textual emphasis, Justin Wyatt's 1996 essay, 'Economic Constraints/Economic Opportunities: Robert Altman as Auteur' analyses the director through the prism of 'the commerce of auteurism' that Corrigan and Lewis both discussed using Coppola as exemplar.<sup>121</sup> Wyatt is largely unconcerned with individual films as he assesses how economic determinants influence the careers of even those directors who operate largely outside of mainstream influence. Wyatt underlines the arguments propounded in his earlier study of high-concept filmmaking: that Altman and the other Renaissance directors were unable to adjust to the shifts in audience tastes and studio policy in the post-*Star Wars* period.<sup>122</sup> He makes a familiar argument about the major studios' concentration on blockbusters contributing to Altman's alienation from Hollywood in the 1980s before describing how the increase in independent production in the late 1980s enabled Altman's successful return to Hollywood with *The Player* (1992) and *Short Cuts* (1993). Wyatt argues that Altman is closer to independent directors like John Sayles or Hal Hartley, whose auteur status is used to promote their films into the art house market, than he is to Scorsese or Coppola who were more able, or more willing, to adapt to contemporary audience tastes.<sup>123</sup> This illustrates how Wyatt's approach privileges economics above artistic reputation and achievement because, some thirty years on, the post-1990 work of Altman is rarely thought of as being comparable with contemporaneous independent cinema. Instead, it is perceived as a significant part of an iconic director's *oeuvre*; it is, in fact, his 1980s work that is more in need of reputational rehabilitation.

As well as coming under consideration in academic studies, Altman's life and work continues to be well-documented in various biographies and journalistic overviews of his films.<sup>124</sup> Patrick McGilligan's

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<sup>121</sup> Justin Wyatt, 'Economic Constraints/Economic Opportunities: Robert Altman as Auteur', *Velvet Light Trap*, No. 17 (Autumn 1996), pp. 51-58; Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls*, pp. 101-115; Lewis, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy*.

<sup>122</sup> Wyatt, 'Economic Constraints', p. 52; *High Concept Movies*, p. 191.

<sup>123</sup> Wyatt, 'Economic Constraints', p. 58. Wyatt bases this description of Scorsese and Coppola on their most successful films, not on their most interesting or complex.

<sup>124</sup> Examples include: Daniel O'Brien, *Robert Altman: Hollywood Survivor* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1995); Mitchell Zuckoff, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009); Kathryn Reed Altman and Giulia

vast 1989 biography, *Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff*, is still the most comprehensive account of the director's working life (although as with Keyssar's book, it was published before the nineties comeback and latter part of Altman's career thereafter).<sup>125</sup> McGilligan, while often professing an admiration for the films, is still determined to reveal all the problems that derived from Altman's lifestyle and personality, paying particular attention to the difficulties in personal relationships that had a direct effect on the films' production. Where McGilligan is most relevant, in the context of this study, is with his purported explanations for the director's change of direction in the eighties. He is fairly dismissive of the idea, that Altman himself promoted, that the retreat from Hollywood was simply a way that he could circumvent conventional distribution practices, suggesting that this was merely a cover for 'the downward spiral of his relations with major studios.' McGilligan provides very little empirical evidence to justify his description of Altman at this time as 'rancid and disordered.'<sup>126</sup> The problem is that McGilligan uses his own undeveloped criticisms of the films, casually and simplistically, to justify the narrative of personal and professional decline he tells us about Altman in this decade; in doing so, he reduces the films' own intrinsic qualities to a footnote in his story of Altman's fall from grace. Nevertheless, such difficulties aside, the book does provide us with a substantial amount of factual information and interesting anecdote that is informative in trying to unpick the reasons for Altman's flight from Hollywood.

Altman continues to attract academic attention and a 2015 edited collection offers the most wide-ranging contribution to-date to the body of Altman scholarship. Featuring articles from many leading Altman scholars, including Kolker and Self, *A Companion to Robert Altman* is too comprehensive in its scope to wholly ignore the 1980s; indeed, in his introduction, Adrian Danks claims the volume does not ignore those 'undervalued segments of Altman's career such as the often fascinating,

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D'Agnolo Vallan, *Altman* (New York: Abrams, 2014); Frank Caso, *Robert Altman: In the American Grain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).

<sup>125</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 518.

consciously contained ...works he made in the 1980s.<sup>127</sup> Despite this assertion, however, in terms of attention to specific 1980s films, only *Secret Honor* in Rick Armstrong's chapter 'Altman/Nixon/Reagan: Honorable Secrets, Historical Analogies and the Nexus of Anger' is analysed in any detail or complexity. Even here, as its title infers, the article is concerned mostly with locating the interconnections between history and the text, and less with the film's aesthetics or Altman's authorship.<sup>128</sup> The most directly relevant article to this project in the collection is Dimitrios Pavlounis's 'Staging the "Rebel's Return"' which examines the director's supposed early 1990s 'comeback' with *The Player*.<sup>129</sup> Pavlounis takes a view that chimes with my own when he suggests that the notion of a comeback at all for Altman is as critically constructed as any alleged decline, and how those championing the notion of a return did so 'without reflecting on their own complicity in containing Altman and his career within a strict paradigm.'<sup>130</sup> Pavlounis chooses to assess the problematic perception of a 'rebel's return' by analysing *The Player's* promotion and reception in terms of how 'different conceptions of Altman-auteur were put to use at a specific point in cinema history.'<sup>131</sup> What is absent from Pavlounis' account is any consideration of what comprised the period of alleged decline that stimulated such a notion.

## Francis Coppola

Altman is the most studied of the three directors, but Coppola is undoubtedly the most famous. It is therefore surprising that academic work about him has been relatively scarce by comparison with not only Altman but with other contemporaries like Scorsese and De Palma, or even Hal Ashby.<sup>132</sup> The most comprehensive examination of Coppola's authorship, by Jeffrey Chown, dates as far back

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<sup>127</sup> Adrian Danks, "'It's OK with me": Introducing Robert Altman' in Danks (ed.), *A Companion to Robert Altman* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 66.

<sup>128</sup> Rick Armstrong, 'Altman/Nixon/Reagan: Honorable Secrets, Historical Analogies and the Nexus of Anger' in Danks, pp. 617-663.

<sup>129</sup> Dimitrios Pavlounis, 'Staging the "Rebel's Return"' in Danks, pp. 932-986.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 946.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 940.

<sup>132</sup> A brief summation of the literature on Scorsese, De Palma and Ashby is provided in Chapter 2.



as 1987. His book-length study examines all Coppola's films to that date (only *Tucker* is absent from his 1980s work) and professes to offer 'a more balanced, objective view of Coppola's originality and accomplishments by attending to his failures of vision as well as the successes.'<sup>133</sup> He interrogates the value of auteurism so his title might have carried a question mark, yet Chown's academic distance is frequently challenged by his obvious admiration for the director. This is seen, for example, when he refers to his subject as standing out from the crowd because of 'a keen, and at times, tragic, sense of potential.'<sup>134</sup> Chown attempts to position himself in opposition to auteur theory by demystifying any notions of the director as romantic creative artist, and insisting that a preoccupation with thematic and stylistic similarities distorts our understanding of directors and their films. He achieves this distance only somewhat unconvincingly, however, by defining auteurism in narrow terms that implies that the consistencies between films must always be overt. Chown follows what will be seen to be a familiar pattern when writing about Coppola in the 1980s, by focusing more often on the turbulence of production contexts, and to critical reception, than on filmic content. When Chown compares *The Outsiders* unfavourably with *Rumble Fish*, he makes assumptions that Coppola is more of an 'author' of *Rumble Fish* than of *The Outsiders* based more on his personal preference and their relative box-office performances than any aesthetic differences.<sup>135</sup> Much like Keyssar on Altman, Chown offers some astute analysis on the basis of a methodology that cleaves much closer to auteur theory than he is initially willing to admit. This becomes eventually clear to Chown himself when he ends up realising that, in writing down his ideas, he experienced 'something like a Kirkegaardian [sic] leap of faith in a new appreciation of the value of the auteur theory.'<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Jeffrey Chown, *Hollywood Auteur*, p. 3.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-170.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Jon Lewis's 1997 book, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy: Francis Coppola and the New Hollywood*, concentrates solely on the story of the director's 1980s trials and tribulations. It places great emphasis on the rise and fall of Coppola's film company, American Zoetrope, detailing the acquisition and disposal of the studio lot, Hollywood General, and the attendant soap-opera and mind-boggling debts that surrounded the making and release of *One from the Heart*. Lewis makes his own perspective apparent from the outset when he declares grandly about Coppola's purchasing of a studio, 'it was, though it mightn't have seemed so at the time, one of the boldest moves in the history of the movie business.'<sup>137</sup> For Lewis, the perception that Coppola was undone by the extreme profligacy of *One from the Heart* (1981) 'misses altogether the larger story.'<sup>138</sup> He relates Coppola's experience to, and indeed uses him as an exemplar for, the general state of New Hollywood (in the post-Renaissance sense of the term) where Coppola is caught up in industrial developments that meant that studio filmmaking in the 1980s was a quite different experience for a potentially innovative and creative auteur than in the previous decade. Lewis adopts a defensive position on behalf of his subject from the beginning, giving Coppola plenty of justification for what is more usually perceived to have been outrageous and unreasonable behaviour. Given some of the profligacy that he recounts, it is debateable whether in the final analysis, Lewis is able to make his case stand up to scrutiny. His book certainly reveals plenty of examples, mostly in the early part of the decade, of the director's ego and hubris having a significant, and problematic, effect on the success of the films.

Lewis makes only passing reference to the content of specific films, largely confining himself to occasional personal comments about individual films' qualities and faults, and to their critical reception. He pays most attention to the production of *One from the Heart* and how Coppola's resultant debts meant he was forced to work off his debt with non-personal projects for much of the

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<sup>137</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes to Destroy*, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

decade. In detailing the complexities of making *One from the Heart*, Lewis draws extensively on Lillian Ross's consummate piece of journalism for the *New Yorker*, 'Onwards and Upwards with the Arts: Some Figures on a Fantasy.'<sup>139</sup> Ross's is an account of *One from the Heart* through its post-production phase and is an impressive piece of investigation covering in minute detail all the machinations of finance and distribution that dogged, and indeed condemned, the film. Lewis also devotes a fair amount of space to the soap-opera production of *The Cotton Club* (1984) and, again, relies to a large extent on another piece of thorough journalism: Michael Daly's revealing account, for *New York*, of the making of the film often reads like something out of a low-budget gangster film.<sup>140</sup> Lewis shows how limitations on authorship become inevitable in such a chaotic production and identifies that, for once, Coppola was not wholly responsible for the chaos surrounding the making of *The Cotton Club*.

Extracts from Coppola's journals, published in a book series that brings together various interviews and written pieces by filmmakers, are, at first glance, a frustration in terms of this project, because they cover about eighteen months that begin towards the end of the decade (October 1989-April 1993), mostly dealing with the period spent making *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.<sup>141</sup> However, written in the immediate aftermath of his 1980s experiences, they are revealing about his insecurities and lack of self-confidence, qualities he habitually concealed behind a public mask of extreme over-confidence. What comes through most forcefully in these journals is the sense that the conflict that he has often *publicly* expressed, between making the expensive and expansive films for which he is best known and a desire to emulate his cinematic heroes by making personal films from his own original scripts, is an ongoing *private* obsession as well. In July 1991, Coppola writes, 'I think I could be a dramatist...I need to do that kind of work [expressing emotions].'<sup>142</sup> One year later, he returns

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<sup>139</sup> Lillian Ross, 'Onwards and Upwards with the Arts: Some Figures on a Fantasy', *New Yorker*, 8/11/1982, pp. 48-50 +.

<sup>140</sup> Michael Daly, 'The Making of *The Cotton Club*: A True Tale of Hollywood', *New York*, 7/5/1984, pp. 40-62.

<sup>141</sup> Francis Coppola, 'Journals 1989-1993' in John Boorman and Walter Donahue (eds), *Projections 3: Film-makers on Film-making* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 3-46.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

to the subject: 'Do films the same way Ingmar Bergman did them...making a script that you wrote?'<sup>143</sup> *Dracula*, the reception of which Coppola worries about in the journals, was also the subject of a rare (but influential) scholarly essay about a Coppola film not from the 1970s. In 'Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*', Thomas Elsaesser uses the 1992 film as a vehicle for exploring how Coppola's abilities, hit films and failures all contribute to his being 'a striking example of the different options between classical and post-classical Hollywood, as well as between modernist and postmodern authorship.' For Elsaesser, the mythic aspects of Coppola's reputation have been coloured by the influence of Welles and *Citizen Kane* (1941) in many of his protagonists. It is noticeable, and symptomatic of the way the 1980s work is often unregarded that Elsaesser fails to mention *Tucker* despite both the film and its protagonist being even more indebted to Welles and *Kane* than those he does mention.<sup>144</sup>

Before concluding this section on Coppola, it is worth mentioning the considerable number of biographies and journalistic overviews that have been written about him. There are at least six books in English that fall into this category (all interestingly, perhaps unsurprisingly, written by men) and the degree to which they each cover the same ground means it is somewhat baffling that some were commissioned at all.<sup>145</sup> Such proliferation means there is no issue with understanding the biographical details of Coppola's 1980s career. Perhaps, the best example is one of the earliest, Peter Cowie's biography of 1989, which combines interviews with Coppola and others alongside extensive research, as well perceptive analysis of the films themselves. Cowie interestingly highlights that Coppola is, by nature, a gambler but observes wryly that a gambler 'also measures success in

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*' in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 194.

<sup>145</sup> Peter Cowie, *Coppola* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1989); Michael Goodwin and Naomi Wise, *On the Edge: The Life and Times of Francis Coppola* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1989); Ronald Bergan, *Francis Coppola* (London: Orion, 1998); Michael Schumacher, *Francis Ford Coppola: A Filmmaker's Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); Gene D. Phillips, *Godfather: The Intimate Francis Ford Coppola* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky, 2004); Stéphane Delorme, *Francis Ford Coppola: Masters of Cinema* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma Sarl, 2010).

monetary terms.<sup>146</sup> This seems to speak to the persistent conflict in Coppola's work that the journals highlighted.

### **William Friedkin**

Even more than Altman or Coppola, Friedkin is best-known for his work of the early 1970s, particularly *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The French Connection* (1971) and any academic analysis of Friedkin, and his films, has been relatively scarce, excepting these two iconic seventies texts. There have been two book-length assessments of his career although neither can reasonably be described as scholarly; Friedkin's 2013 breezy autobiography supplements these accounts.<sup>147</sup> In terms of the 1980s films, there has been a smattering of articles over the years, with *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985) attracting some scholarly attention at its time of release and *Cruising* enjoying a recent upsurge in interest (alongside well-publicised DVD and Blu-ray releases in 2007 and 2019 respectively).<sup>148</sup> Nat Segaloff's 1990 book, *Hurricane Billy: The Stormy Life and Films of William Friedkin*, is a biography that relies on extensive interviews with the director and his collaborators alongside the sort of relatively pedestrian film criticism that typically accompanies conventional biographical treatments of film directors. Unlike Altman and especially Coppola, the relative lack of biographical accounts of Friedkin's life means that Segaloff's book becomes more valuable. While the controversy surrounding *Cruising* attracted attention in the media, the details of the production histories of the other eighties' films in Segaloff's book are especially useful. One example is how the experience of making the ill-regarded comedy, *Deal of the Century* (1983), is depicted. Friedkin's regard for the film is such that as he makes no mention of it at all in his autobiography but, here, he tells Segaloff, 'I

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<sup>146</sup> Cowie, p. 3. For the greatest amount of forensic detail see Goodwin and Wise's hefty tome.

<sup>147</sup> Nat Segaloff, *Hurricane Billy: The Stormy Life and Films of William Friedkin* (New York: William Morrow, 1990); Clagett, *William Friedkin: Films of Aberration, Obsession and Reality*; William Friedkin, *The Friedkin Connection* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013)

<sup>148</sup> Articles not discussed in this chapter include Ric Gentry, 'William Friedkin', *American Cinematographer*, Vol. 66, No. 88 (August 1985), pp. 81-89; Mark Kermode, 'Cruise Control', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 8, No. 11 (November 1998), pp. 22-24; Bill Krohn, 'Friedkin Out', *Rouge*, No. 3 (2004), pp. 1-12 ([www.rouge.com.au/3/friedkin.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/3/friedkin.html)); Linda Ruth Williams, 'No Sex Please, We're American', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2004), pp. 18-20.

missed a lot of the comedy. At a certain point, I realized how sick the whole arms business was and it no longer seemed funny to me.’<sup>149</sup> Segaloff seems to know Friedkin well and, as is the case commonly with biographers (who are inevitably fans of the work), he does sometimes struggle to maintain an objectivity in his analysis, but this friendship also seems to enable him to gain some psychological insight into his subject’s mind. He provides a counterweight to the portrait of Friedkin’s 1980s excessive behaviour and dysfunctional relationships as depicted by Biskind.

Thomas Clagett’s book purports to focus on analysing Friedkin’s films but actually is far more an account of the films’ making and reception, alongside somewhat cursory film criticism, that adds little to the Segaloff book. Similarly, Friedkin’s own book is a jaunty account of his working life, with occasional diversions into his complicated private life. In terms of usefulness in understanding his films better, the persistent feeling is that he is providing a partial account that avoids too much self-criticism, or perhaps more accurately, self-understanding. What is interesting, in terms of this study, is when Friedkin observes how the Reagan era was ‘a feel-good period. The ambiguous films I revered and the ones I made were passing out of vogue.’<sup>150</sup> Friedkin’s analysis of his own craft occasionally throws up some interesting inconsistencies: he insists on how personal his films are to him, coming ‘from deep within my psyche’, yet he also argues against auteur theory when he states that the collaborative nature of filmmaking means it is untenable to attribute a film’s creative qualities to just one person.<sup>151</sup>

In 1995, Larry Gross wrote a thoughtful essay in *Sight and Sound* that set itself a difficult task in asking ‘Whatever Happened to William Friedkin?’<sup>152</sup> How Gross answers his own question, and the accompanying analysis, reflects the way Friedkin’s career is typically regarded. He observes how a ‘mysterious trauma was somehow visited on the career of William Friedkin...[after his] two early

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<sup>149</sup> Segaloff, p. 220.

<sup>150</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 376.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>152</sup> Larry Gross, ‘Whatever Happened to William Friedkin?’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 5, No. 12 (December 1995), pp. 14-15.

successes, *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*.<sup>153</sup> Gross reflects on the extent of the deterioration of the director's career and speculates whether the infamous failure of *Sorcerer* (1977) terminally soured his relationship with his own profession. After discussing how his subsequent films confirmed Friedkin's pessimistic view of society as corrupt and dishonest, Gross concludes that it is the remorseless darkness of his 1980s films that alienated him from both his audience and the critics.<sup>154</sup> This seems a reasonable argument that conforms broadly to Friedkin's own assessment, although it is untroubled by the nuances of industry's influence and interference, or of economics more widely. The difficulties bridging the gap between the serious and the commercial that Gross identifies about the director are also discussed in Friedkin's own book, and recalls the similar conflicts experienced by Coppola.

A recent extended discussion of sexuality in *Cruising* is reflective of that film's ongoing rehabilitation. In David Greven's 2013 book, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese and Friedkin*, the author makes connections about representations of sexuality between Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and two films from 1980, Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* and *Cruising*. In the chapter devoted to the latter, Greven is largely concerned with its portrayal of male sexuality, and to its allusions to the Hitchcock classic (although the connections he identifies often seem somewhat forced). Greven is also concerned with re-enforcing the upturn in *Cruising*'s reputation, stating that 'careful reexamination of it reveals not only a less homophobic film than it was once perceived to be, but also a resonant exploration of the psychosexual foundations of homophobia.'<sup>155</sup>

One of the more complex and interesting examinations of Friedkin's work was provided in an essay in *CineAction!* about contemporary representations of 'Masculinity in the Movies', that focuses

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>155</sup> David Greven, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese and Friedkin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), p. 13.

on *To Live and Die in L.A.*<sup>156</sup> Lippe and Jacobwitz's analysis seems clearly influenced by, or at least extremely *simpatico* with, Robin Wood's understanding of contemporary American cinema at that time. Not only was *CineAction!* edited by the renowned critic but Lippe and Jacobwitz make specific mention of their admiration for films and directors that are also examined by Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (De Palma and *Blow-Out*, Scorsese and *Raging Bull*, Cimino and *The Deer Hunter*). The most revealing comparison with Wood, however, is how Lippe and Jacobwitz explore the homoerotic tensions that are present in *To Live and Die*, much as Wood does with Friedkin's *Cruising*. Such tensions are revealed as part of an examination of the codes of masculinity that were prevalent in many of the films of the period. Whereas many of these films are found by Lippe and Jacobwitz to be contemptible in their celebration of 'reactionary/regressive politics,' they choose to take *To Live and Die* as their case study 'because it foregrounds the tensions inherent in masculine dominance without trying invisibly to naturalize the masculine codes which are part of gender construction.'<sup>157</sup>

As this literature review has implied, the sort of close textual analysis in Lippe and Jacobwitz's essay, and in the work of Robin Wood, had become somewhat rare in the 1980s (and beyond). Their insights are, therefore, a particularly welcome contribution to our understanding of Friedkin in 'the lost decade.' This review of critical work about 1980s American cinema has established the broad existing perceptions about the decade's films. These include comprehensive accounts of ideological tendencies, technological advances and the shift towards high concept blockbusters. On the other hand, the films and fortunes of Renaissance filmmakers in the 1980s have not been served well in the existing scholarly literature: the following chapters seek to address this omission.

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<sup>156</sup> Richard Lippe and Florence Jacobwitz, 'Masculinity in the Movies: *To Live and Die in L.A.*', *CineAction!*, No. 6 (Summer/Autumn 1986), pp. 35-44.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.



## 2. Hollywood in the 1980s: Industrial Change and the Marginalisation of Auteurist Filmmaking

Filmmaking is a collaborative enterprise, with filmmakers able to exercise more creative control at some times than others, while some films are perceived to have more 'indie' qualities than others. These factors shift over time and depend on cultural and historical contexts.

Philip Drake<sup>158</sup>

The industrial conditions in the Hollywood marketplace in which the Renaissance auteur strived to find meaningful work in the 1980s were very different from those prevalent during the earlier period in which they made their names. As Philip Drake's observation above suggests, historical circumstances had a considerable effect on any film director's creative independence. Both their ability to generate finance for personal, often seemingly uncommercial projects, or the circumstances in which they might, alternatively, be employed to handle properties developed by others, were all affected. This chapter will provide an overview of the pressures and wider implications that characterised the working environment in American filmmaking at this time. The first section, 'Working in Hollywood in the 1980s', considers the relationship between finance and distribution, major studios' structural changes and how these impacted on decision-making, as well as a look at the development of the independent sector in the decade. Secondly, 'Renaissance Auteurs in the 1980s' details the specific circumstances of the decade for eight directors (with three more covered in greater detail in subsequent chapters), describing the ways that they made use of opportunities that they were either given or managed to generate themselves. The context, the structural changes and evolving commercial environment of the industry in the 1980s points us towards why specific directors experienced difficulties, but the diversity and characteristics of their

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<sup>158</sup> Drake, 'Reputational Capital', p. 141.

individual narratives need to be understood to be able to completely identify the nature of these filmmakers' place within the decade's cinematic history.

### **Working in Hollywood in the 1980s**

During the brief heyday of the Hollywood Renaissance, the studios were falling over themselves to get involved with the emergent auteurs of the time. By the beginning of the 1980s, in a post-*Star Wars* marketplace, these directors found themselves in a difficult position if they wanted to retain some degree of creative agency. As Geoff King puts it, 'the price of success for auteurist control at the industrial level remains...either modesty or a large measure of multi-market, mainstream conformity.'<sup>159</sup> However, it was not entirely true in the eighties that those directors who were able to remain in the studio system were always obliged to compromise in order to attract a mass audience. Similarly, it is too simplistic to think that those who looked to the independent sector may have had to work cheaply but could do so without much interference. Renaissance filmmakers did not work solely in one or the other sector in the 1980s, rather tending to move between the two in pursuit of adequate finance. Each individual director's arc shows different degrees of compromise and rebellion as well as diverse reasons for choosing, or being chosen for, projects. Furthermore, it was not always the case that working for studios necessarily equated with more commercial and populist filmmaking, or that an independently funded film automatically meant the opposite. Executives responsible for green-lighting projects in both sectors made decisions based on a range of factors that might include the state of the director's reputational capital or their ability to remain within budget, but also for any number of reasons not directly associated with the director. One significant factor, that accelerated in the 1980s and that influenced a director's ability to land finance, was the increasing power of agents as their construction of package deals of stars, directors and writers became more frequent. The perceived value of an auteur's star-image was crucial to such

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<sup>159</sup> Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p. 101.

arrangements and when Martin Scorsese signed up to the all-powerful Michael Ovitz's Creative Artists Agency (CAA) in 1987, this led him finally to realise his long-standing project, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), that he had struggled for years to get made.<sup>160</sup>

### Locating Finance and Distribution

Before considering the different ways that Renaissance auteurs' films were brought to market, it is important to understand how the term 'independent' can mean a number of different things, in order to appreciate the relationship between studios and other sources of finance. According to Yannis Tzioumakis, "'independent cinema" may be best conceived as a *discourse* that changes over time and is continually redefined.'<sup>161</sup> Tzioumakis has interrogated this problem of definition in some detail, as have a number of other writers.<sup>162</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, however, it suffices to use Emanuel Levy's simple explanation: 'two different conceptions of independent film can be found. One is based on the way indies are financed, the other focuses on their spirit or vision.'<sup>163</sup> The first categorisation relates to funding and distribution that derives from outside the Hollywood's major studios, whereas the second is more about what Richard Maltby describes as 'something between European arthouse cinema and the mainstream star vehicle and delivering an attention to theme, character relationships, and social relevance.'<sup>164</sup> Although I will occasionally refer to the 'spirit' aspect of the term, my focus here is primarily concerned with the industrial definition, while bearing in mind, as Tzioumakis points out, how its meaning continues to mutate over time.

Appendix 1 (p. 226) details the 1980s output of the eleven auteurs (as detailed in the Introduction), breaking down production and distribution according to major studio, mini-major or

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<sup>160</sup> Leighton Grist, *The Films of Martin Scorsese, 1978-99: Authorship and Context II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 156.

<sup>161</sup> Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 11. (emphasis in original)

<sup>162</sup> For example see Greg Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), pp. xi-xv; Tzioumakis, "'Independent", "Indie" and "Indiewood", pp. 28-40; Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, pp. 2-9.

<sup>163</sup> Levy, p. 2 (although he spends another 7 pages elaborating on this).

<sup>164</sup> Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2003), p. 223.

independent designations.<sup>165</sup> The director-specific detail will seem more relevant when I move onto the career arcs of the individual directors, but what can be deduced overall is how the proportion in favour of independent over studio finance is reversed when distribution is considered. Studios funded only 34% of the forty-nine 1980s feature films made by the group but they distributed 67%, with a further 20% by mini-majors. It was only those films with the smallest budgets and limited profiles that were distributed independently. The six relevant titles are three directed by Altman (for very particular reasons, examined at length in Chapter 3) with the others - *They All Laughed* (Bogdanovich, 1981), *Out of the Blue* (Hopper, 1980) and *Rampage* (Friedkin, 1987) - barely gaining any theatrical release at all.

Understanding the way distribution worked in the eighties is important because it illustrates the manner in which the studios were still able to retain a large degree of control over the wider marketplace which, in turn, can be related to how directors struggled to maintain creative autonomy. It is the effect on authorial agency that relates to the circumstances of production and distribution that is particularly relevant to identifying the place of the Renaissance auteur in the 1980s. In this respect, it is not enough to know whether the production company was independent, but also who was responsible for distribution. Not only that, but it is important to understand at what stage the distributor, usually a Hollywood studio, made their deal. If a studio's financial interest formed part of the initial fiscal structure, where distribution rights were wholly or partly responsible for finance, the studio will likely have some authority over the making of the film, thereby potentially diminishing a director's authorial control. In the 1980s, however, a common arrangement, responsible for something like one third of all box-office revenues, was for films produced independently to have their distribution rights sold on a 'pick-up' basis to a studio once production was complete.<sup>166</sup> In this circumstance, the studio clearly has no input into content or production

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<sup>165</sup> I take mini-majors to mean those companies that were not the 8 majors but were able to distribute their own films. The relevant companies in this project are Orion, Tri-Star, Cannon and Filmways.

<sup>166</sup> Maltby, p. 220.

budget while the (small) independent company's ability to turn a profit can exist on a knife's edge, dependent on selling the rights at a fair price.

Another problem in understanding the relationship between independent finance and creative control is that independent film companies do not necessarily only make 'independent-style' films. Even when they profess to offer a director complete freedom, they can still be just as interfering as a studio. Independent films may usually mean lower budgets, but a small film company will likely be even more desperate than a studio *not* to lose money. Drake illustrates this when discussing Hal Ashby's disastrous relationship with Lorimar making *Second-Hand Hearts* (1981) and *Lookin' To Get Out* (1982), arguing that 'independence is sometimes more readily available within rather than outside of mainstream Hollywood cinema.'<sup>167</sup> As with Ashby, it was often an auteur's reputation for profligacy that could mean that independents were even more restrictive than the studios .

In the early part of the decade, the number of films made by independent companies, but distributed by the majors, remained fairly constant but as the decade progressed, there was a need for extra product to satisfy the burgeoning video market. The number of films distributed independently rose rapidly to accommodate the demand from video, rising from 125 in 1983 to 242 in 1986.<sup>168</sup> Generally, these were cheap genre films and it is not surprising therefore that established filmmakers were typically unwilling to lower their expectations as far as the 'straight-to-video' market. While independent production rose at a rapid pace - 193 in 1986, 277 in 1987 and 393 in 1988 - forty percent of all independent films received no theatrical release and of those that did, most were commercial failures.<sup>169</sup> According to Peter Biskind, for a film to make more than \$10 million in the 1980s, it would have 'to play the suburban multiplexes,' a facility simply not available

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<sup>167</sup> Drake, p. 142.

<sup>168</sup> Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 117.

<sup>169</sup> Maltby, p. 219; Justin Wyatt, 'The Formation of the "Major Independent": Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood' in Neale and Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, p. 74.

for most independently distributed films.<sup>170</sup> Budgets were rising in all sectors in the 1980s and this fed into lower-end productions as well with Maltby arguing that escalating costs 'also raised the earnings threshold requirements for an independent movie to be considered a success.'<sup>171</sup>

### **The Studio System**

The changes in ownership of the studios, shaking off the remnants of the classical mogul-driven era, resulted in more hard-headed decision-making by executives who frequently had no experience of the industry, and no interest in films other than as vehicles for generating profits. Devoting vast sums on big-budget crowd-pleasers now tended to be balanced by a more cautious and parsimonious approach to other projects. However, the studios did not entirely reject medium-budget productions. According to Stephen Prince, in the eighties the majors still 'funded and distributed many pictures with limited commercial prospects and whose style and sensibility were outside the commercial mainstream.'<sup>172</sup> Yet their support was often highly conditional and not stable. They could drop out of projects at the last minute, as Martin Scorsese found with his first attempt to make *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1983 (five years before it was eventually made). After eleven months of pre-production and \$5 million spent, Paramount dropped out only four days before principal photography was due to start.<sup>173</sup> In fact, natural expectations were sometimes confounded by studios being especially risk-averse, as when Warners pulled out of backing Friedkin's *Cruising* once Al Pacino became attached because they were not willing to pay his going rate of \$2 million dollars.<sup>174</sup> In such a cautious environment, the problem for many of the Renaissance directors was that a maverick reputation made studios increasingly wary, particularly regarding whether they could stick to budget. Studios were now less welcoming of the opportunity to market films in terms

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<sup>170</sup> Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 81.

<sup>171</sup> Maltby, p. 221.

<sup>172</sup> Prince, 'Hollywood in the Age of Reagan' in Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (eds), *Contemporary American Cinema* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, 2006), p. 241.

<sup>173</sup> Grist, p. 155.

<sup>174</sup> Claggett, *Films of Aberration, Obsession and Reality*, p. 240.

of a director's personality and status as a commercial auteur. The debacle of *Heaven's Gate* and others cast long shadows in the 1980s and most directors found that trust had to be hard earned. Star-led projects were more likely to be given to filmmakers considered trustworthy such as Sidney Lumet or Mike Nichols, but this is not to say, as we see shortly, that the major studios did not sometimes place faith in certain maverick filmmakers, if only occasionally, and in particular circumstances.

The unprecedented success of *Jaws* and *Star Wars* might have initially been the stimulus that led the Hollywood majors to alter their policies about funding and distributing feature films, but there were other factors at play than simply chasing similarly extravagant box-office numbers. Profitability was no longer as firmly yoked to domestic theatrical attendance with ancillary revenue streams, including home video, cable television and music soundtracks, as well as a growth in international sales, becoming more important in terms of measuring success. Douglas Gomery explains the modern Hollywood studio's aims: 'vertical integration, the bedrock of the classical era, is still part of the basic strategies, but the emphasis is on horizontal integration to capture synergies with other media businesses.'<sup>175</sup> This becomes absolutely clear when one considers how, in 1980, U.S. theatrical attendance was responsible for about 30% of film revenues whereas by 1990, this had dropped to only 16%. At the same time, home video's share moved from 7% in 1980 to 39% in 1990.<sup>176</sup> These factors had a negative effect on any property not obviously suited to exploitation beyond a first-run theatrical release. If a project was not likely to be a good prospect in terms of a broad appeal that lent itself to repeat viewings on television and on video, did not have a marketable soundtrack or was not deemed to be a likely hit overseas, it would increasingly hold little interest for a studio. For example, even a huge success like *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1983), that earned \$94 million domestically, had considerably less overall potential for its studio than *Back to the Future* (Robert

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<sup>175</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), p. 198.

<sup>176</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 92.

Zemeckis, 1985) despite their theatrical receipts being almost identical.<sup>177</sup> The latter film would prove to be more exploitable, its broad demographic appeal leading to great success in video sales and rentals, as well in merchandising and soundtrack sales; like so many of the decade's most successful films, it also spawned successful sequels in 1989 and 1990.

In the 1980s, the major studios who fared best were those who consistently produced the very biggest hits with Universal, Warners and Paramount accounting for about 45% of the domestic market in the decade.<sup>178</sup> The first two had positioned themselves best to fully exploit the growth in ancillary markets; the amount of conglomeration, mergers and acquisitions (as well as some de-conglomeration by the end of the decade) was fuelled by other studios' attempts to catch up with Universal and Warners. Lew Wasserman's Music Corporation of America (MCA), originally a talent agency, had bought Universal in 1958 and also became a significant player in television production and music publishing. Wasserman was a pioneer who, according to Gomery, 'created the modern Hollywood system - just as Adolph Zukor invented the classic studio system.' He was the first to recognise the opportunities for exploiting cinematic properties in different media sectors by accumulating a library of titles, then selling - and re-selling - them to broadcast and pay television.<sup>179</sup>

Warners consistently performed well in the 1980s through similar structural advantages over the competition, in their case through their established record label and music publishing company. Steve Ross, who had bought Warners in 1969 for his Kinney Corporation, is identified by Gomery as being the first studio head, as early as 1980, 'to understand the viability of the home video market.'<sup>180</sup> Paramount too were very successful at the box-office in the decade but, unlike Universal and Warners, were owned by a conglomerate, Gulf and Western, with interests in a diverse range of industries entirely unconnected to the film business. When owner, Charlie Bluhdorn, died suddenly

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>178</sup> Data extrapolated from figures quoted in *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>179</sup> Gomery, p. 199.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.



in 1983, his successor, Martin Davis, followed Wasserman's example by divesting the company of all its interests, including financial services, sugar cane and auto parts, except for their still substantial interests in entertainment and publishing and re-naming the company Paramount Communications in 1989.<sup>181</sup> A similar lesson was eventually learnt by Coca-Cola who had purchased Columbia in 1982 for \$823 million, but only after conducting a seven year experiment in whether a film studio could be run by MBAs. The pursuit of synergy proved elusive, however, and Coca-Cola sold out to Sony, a company seemingly more obviously aligned with the film business, for \$3.4 billion in October 1989.<sup>182</sup> Columbia had a reputation for following rather than innovating, but with the formation of Tri-Star Pictures in 1983, they did participate in an enterprise designed to take the fullest advantage of prevalent marketplace opportunities. According to Prince, despite only being a short-lived experiment, the new company carried 'a special, emblematic importance in the developing Hollywood of the 1980s.'<sup>183</sup>

Columbia, HBO (the television subscription channel) and CBS Records formed Tri-Star with the intention of becoming the eighth major studio, its structure designed to immediately take advantage of the interaction between the three media sectors involved. The company immediately announced that they had the finance in place to produce an annual slate of thirty-five films, a comparable amount with the other majors.<sup>184</sup> What seemed potentially so significant about Tri-Star was its inherent synergistic characteristics. HBO, owned by Time-Life, was completely dominant at that time in pay-television with more than 60% of the nation's subscribers.<sup>185</sup> All the studios were obliged to make deals with HBO if they wanted to profit from this growing revenue stream. Yet, despite their considerable inbuilt benefit, Tri-Star went the way of many of the other mergers and acquisitions in the decade when CBS sold out in 1985 with Time-Life following suit in the next year, leaving Tri-Star

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<sup>181</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>182</sup> Gomery, pp. 282-284.

<sup>183</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 31.

<sup>184</sup> Gomery, p. 283.

<sup>185</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 26.

to continue as a sub-division of Columbia. It had not been able to find the sure-fire hit or franchise that was necessary to sustain such an ambitious enterprise. The company's only interaction with the Renaissance filmmakers was via two Coppola films: one of their more profitable titles, *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) followed by a box-office failure, *Gardens of Stone*. Other changes in studio ownership during this period included Rupert Murdoch's takeover of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, also in 1985, which led to the corporation becoming more singularly focused on the bottom line, and to a rapid and ambitious expansion into television.<sup>186</sup> Universal also finally changed hands when MCA was bought for \$6.3 billion in November 1990 by Matsushita Electric of Japan, a direct competitor to Sony, the recent purchaser of Columbia. Universal's relatively superior status is indicated by MCA's sale realising approximately double the amount that Columbia had managed just over a year previously.<sup>187</sup>

In the 1980s, the studios relied more and more on a small number of individual titles and franchises to sustain the sort of returns on their investment they expected. This seems unsurprising from a purely commercial perspective because the company which enjoyed the greatest share in each year in the 1980s was also always responsible for one of the top two best performing films in that twelve-month period. This was most apparent in 1982 when Universal's 30% share of the market (easily the highest share of any year in the decade) was largely attributable to the record-breaking \$228 million domestic returns of *E.T.*, more than three times those of the number two performer that year, *Rocky III* (Sylvester Stallone).<sup>188</sup> The consequence for auteurist directors of this singular focus on blockbuster success was that production finance became increasingly difficult to source from the majors. Although independent finance became, therefore, a necessity if a director wanted to keep working and retain some degree of creative autonomy, the issues from the past that dogged Renaissance auteurs' relationships with Hollywood executives could still sometimes be a problem, because borrowing funds was often conditional upon first securing a distribution deal with

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-49.

<sup>187</sup> Gomery, p. 221.

<sup>188</sup> Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, p. 278.

a studio. The majors' share of the overall domestic market, approximately 80% across the decade (with another 9% for mini-majors, Orion and TriStar), is a fair indicator of why studios felt disinclined to bother with anything other than blockbusters and franchises.<sup>189</sup> Although ancillary markets and alternative revenue streams were now more valuable than box-office returns, success at the latter still provided the best indicator of a film's potential in the former. For the right sort of blockbuster property, under contemporary market conditions, revenues could grow at an exponential rate. Sequels, soundtracks, transmission on cable and the opportunity for repeat viewings on home video all contributed to their profit potential. Almost every major studio had at least one successful franchise in the 1980s, including *Indiana Jones* and Paramount, *Back to the Future* and Universal and, of course, *Star Wars* and Fox. Thus, the cross-media opportunities derived from a small, select number of 'tent-pole' films meant studio executives were not overly concerned with the less commercial properties usually often favoured by auteurist filmmakers.

This is not to say, however, that studios only produced populist franchise cinema and they could still be persuaded to finance non-blockbuster cinema. Various factors came into play when green-lighting properties, including the attraction of a currently popular star being attached, or a pre-sold best-selling source novel. Studio heads even still occasionally courted directors but only those with the highest reputation for hit-making, so, for example, Gomery describes Spielberg as being 'successfully wooed away' from Wasserman at Universal by Steve Ross.<sup>190</sup> Where majors were involved in the decade with Renaissance auteurs, it was often when a particular director became involved in something more obviously commercial than their usual fare. Appendix 2 (p. 227) shows the most successful films at the domestic box-office (over \$20 million) directed by the group of eleven auteurs. The top four titles on this list were funded by studios and were the most mainstream films made by these filmmakers in the decade; excepting perhaps Altman's *Popeye*, they are also

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<sup>189</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 41.

<sup>190</sup> Gomery, p. 241.

their most untypical work as well. The dominance of the studios in terms of distribution is indicated by all thirteen films being distributed by majors or mini-majors, demonstrating how independent distribution did not yet possess the tools or the financial backing required to reach a substantial audience.

### **Independent Cinema**

The independent sector of American cinema underwent a significant but faltering upturn in the 1980s. Tzioumakis identifies a period from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s as the first of three phases ('Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood') that he identifies to provide a periodisation of contemporary American independent cinema. During this first phase, a market was established away from the Hollywood industry which achieved some limited commercial distribution and a small measure of box-office success, leading some critics to declare a new era in independent filmmaking.<sup>191</sup> Ever since the traditional studio model had begun to break down in the 1950s, the financial packaging of deals from sources other than the major studios had become increasingly prevalent. In the eighties, the demand for a greater amount of product was stimulated by the expansion in subscription television and from the sudden growth in home video yet it appears that the sector was not yet sufficiently mature to flourish, and to sustain itself (as it would begin to manage at the beginning of the following decade). This is amply illustrated by the fact that all of the decade's most successful independent production companies had either gone out of business by the early 1990s or, in a few select cases, were acquired by a major studio. It was the latter examples who were best positioned to take advantage of the 1990s upsurge in popularity for independent-style films. By acquiring companies like Miramax (Disney in 1993) and New Line (bought by Turner Broadcasting in 1994, who in turn were bought by Warners in 1996), or by setting up their own specialist divisions (Sony Picture Classics in 1992, Fox Searchlight in 1994), the studios played a major

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<sup>191</sup> Tzioumakis, "Independent", "Indie" and "Indiewood", pp. 30-31.

role in the accelerated success of independent cinema through their increased interest in financing *and* distributing 'indie-style' cinema. Miramax, 'the undisputed leader of the speciality film market in the 1990s and early 2000s', along with New Line, have consistently been the focus in much of the extensive literature that has examined the impact of independent cinema, much of which also tends to concentrate principally on the 1990s onward.<sup>192</sup> In the 1980s, those independent film companies who made the most significant impact in financial terms were those who participated in the populist 'franchise' sector of Hollywood filmmaking, rather than those who supported unconventional, 'indie-style' filmmaking. Such companies achieved a short-lived success by developing the type of films that fit quite easily into the 'Reaganite entertainment' template described by Britton and Wood. Carolco Pictures has been described as 'the most significant' of the 1980s independent companies but despite massive hits including the Rambo films and *Terminator 2* (1991), it eventually overextended and went bankrupt in 1995. The reasons for their downfall are indicative of the way the independent market worked at the time. The expected revenues from such huge hits did not materialise because the company were pre-selling the rights to various territories in advance of production. This was a necessity to be able to generate the substantial budgets needed to sustain the spectacle that their style of cinema demanded. The result of this policy was that the majority of the vast revenues generated were immediately passed onto the various distributors worldwide.<sup>193</sup>

Carolco did not engage much with the type of cinema more commonly deemed to be 'independent' in terms of content or vision, but other independent companies, some of which did *occasionally* finance more creatively ambitious films, also expanded too rapidly. The most visible of these was the Cannon Group, bought by Menahan Golan and Yoram Globus in 1979, which, in many ways, operated along similar lines to Carolco, specializing in 'B-movie' action cinema, often starring Chuck Norris or Charles Bronson. However, Cannon's eccentric owners also occasionally tried to

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. See also King, *Indiewood USA*; Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures*; Wyatt, 'The Formation of the "Major Independent."'

<sup>193</sup> Maltby, p. 218; *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 142-149.

boost their credibility by investing in films made by recognised arthouse auteurs including Altman (*Fool for Love*, 1985), Jean-Luc Godard (*King Lear*, 1987) and John Cassavetes (*Love Streams*, 1984). Of these, the only commercial success was Andrei Konchalovsky's *Runaway Train* in 1985. Not helped presumably by these 'arthouse' indulgences, Cannon followed what now feels like a familiar pattern. When they attempted to take on the studios by distributing their own films, they overreached and, in 1986, Golan and Globus sold out to Pathé.<sup>194</sup> Of course, there were plenty of non-blockbuster films being made by smaller companies, stimulated by the need to accommodate the expanding video market, and a number of independent organisations and individuals were more closely engaged with this sort of cinema, and with Renaissance auteurs. One example was Dino De Laurentiis, a well-known independent producer for years in Italy and Hollywood, who produced John Milius's successful *Conan the Barbarian* in 1982, although this fantasy crowd-pleaser was hardly typical of the type of cinema most Renaissance auteurs were trying to make. A preference for muscular cinema was also apparent when in 1985 De Laurentiis surprised many by producing *Year of the Dragon*, Michael Cimino's comeback after *Heaven's Gate*.<sup>195</sup> In the same year, he decided to try to compete on a more equal footing with the majors when he formed the Dino de Laurentiis Group (DEG), purchasing Embassy Pictures to handle distribution, as well as his own 32-acre studio lot.<sup>196</sup> DEG never produced a significant hit and critical credibility from films like *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) did not translate into the sort of profits necessary to keep solvent a fully-fledged studio operation: by August 1988, DEG was obliged to file for bankruptcy. Its last gasp productions included two final collaborations with Renaissance auteurs: Bogdanovich on the disastrous *Illegally Yours* (1988) and Friedkin's *Rampage* (1987), the release of which was caught up in the company's

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<sup>194</sup> The colourful nature of Golan and Globus's tenure is amply illustrated in the documentary *Electric Boogaloo: The Wild, Untold Story of Cannon Films* (Mark Hartley, 2014). See also *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 150.

<sup>195</sup> Arthur Penn told Richard Lippe and Robin Wood that 'it was brave and Cimino came through for [De Laurentiis] in the sense that he did a very responsible job for him fiscally.' Richard Lippe and Robin Wood, 'An Interview with Arthur Penn' in Robin Wood with Richard Lippe, Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Arthur Penn* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, revised edition 2014), p. 223.

<sup>196</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 152.

bankruptcy resulting in it being left on the shelf until 1992.<sup>197</sup> Another indie whose demise was similarly associated with Renaissance filmmakers was Filmways, who initially made its name in television but, by the late 1970s, had become heavily involved in film production, and in financial trouble. In 1981, it gambled its future on two films from established Renaissance filmmakers, Penn's *Four Friends* and De Palma's *Blow Out*, both of which performed poorly. The company was sold to Orion in 1982, another company with ambitions to compete on an equal footing with the majors, who itself barely survived the 1980s, also declaring bankruptcy in 1991.<sup>198</sup>

It is apparent that those independent production companies, who flourished in the decade, were unable to cope with rapid expansion because they did not possess the substantial reserves of capital required in order to bolster themselves against the inherently precarious nature of the business, where a gamble is undertaken every time a project is commenced. In the final analysis, the causes of the demise of these companies seems to have come as much from a reckless and over-ambitious approach to running their businesses, as much as from broader trends that favoured the conglomerates or from the ostensibly uncommercial films they often produced.

What distinguishes the independent market in the 1980s from its 1990s upsurge is partly attributable to the difficulties of surviving outside of the Hollywood studio behemoth, but another reason was that the video market did not prove to be the expected bonanza for low-medium budget films generally, and specifically for the type of films favoured by Renaissance directors. The most successful titles in the video market were almost always the same blockbusters and family-oriented fare that dominated at the cinema.<sup>199</sup> Although there was a growth in independently financed titles released in the decade in order to service the home video market, adventurous or challenging new cinema tended to fall in the gap between best-sellers and the more forgettable, disposable fare

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<sup>197</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 401.

<sup>198</sup> Douglas Keesey, *Brian De Palma's Split-Screen: A Life in Film* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2015), pp. 146-148; Lippe and Wood, 'An Interview with Arthur Penn', p. 218.

<sup>199</sup> Maltby, p. 219.

intended solely as 'straight-to-video'. For individual directors and their films, as we will see below, it was an adherence to mainstream norms, a willingness to compromise and the support of significant budgets from the major studios that was still the most likely route to commercial success.

### **Hollywood Renaissance Auteurs in the 1980s**

Established directors used to auteurist levels of control did not all respond in the same way to the changing marketplace. Some managed the difficult feat of moving between highly commercial and more challenging, innovative work while others moved more firmly into the mainstream. Then there were those who persisted, frequently in vain, in trying to get Renaissance-style films made at the studios; some were simply content to work with smaller budgets. As already stated, very few of the films by Renaissance auteurs were commercially successful but there were exceptions for both specific films and individual directors.<sup>200</sup> Even if the decade taken in its entirety represented a continuing diminution of *most* of the Renaissance auteurs' careers, there were a small number of directors who saw their reputation and marketability actually enhanced. Additionally, outside of my narrowly defined group, those such as Sydney Pollack and Paul Mazursky, whose films are sometimes associated with the Renaissance, forged a reputation in Hollywood for reliability.<sup>201</sup> Philip Drake observes that 'when filmmakers are able to exercise almost absolute creative autonomy it is usually because they either have considerable industry reputation and clout, or are positioned industrially in such a way as to be able to make the films they want.'<sup>202</sup> In the 1980s, however, while this can largely be seen to be true, such power was not easily earned and, unless your name was Spielberg, few directors were able to achieve anything close to 'absolute creative autonomy.'

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<sup>200</sup> See Appendix 1 for the most successful 1980s films directed by Renaissance auteurs.

<sup>201</sup> Their successes included *Out of Africa* (Pollack, 1986) and *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (Mazursky, 1986).

<sup>202</sup> Drake, p. 142.



## Enhanced Reputations: Martin Scorsese and Brian De Palma

Martin Scorsese and Brian De Palma, two 'Movie Brats' of Italian heritage, have been studied in tandem with each other by a number of writers, and for a variety of reasons: as postmodern auteurs, in terms of their films' examination of male sexuality and in their approach to genre.<sup>203</sup> The development and progression of their careers in the 1980s also invites a close comparison because, of my core group of directors, De Palma and Scorsese were the only ones who finished the decade with their reputation and marketability markedly enhanced. Yet neither Scorsese nor De Palma enjoyed a trouble-free eighties and each felt cause to question their position in Hollywood at one time or another in the decade. Indeed, they both experienced a high degree of opprobrium for controversial films that were deemed either blasphemous (Scorsese) or exploitatively sexual and violent (De Palma), exemplifying what Prince describes as 'one of the most remarkable facets of the industry's cultural history during the period...[that] Hollywood itself was attacked [for] products deemed to be unacceptably lewd, bigoted or sacrilegious.'<sup>204</sup> Yet, by the end of the decade, Scorsese and De Palma had both proved that they could handle a star-laden film and bring home a profitable studio assignment without too much trouble. Not only were *The Color of Money* (1986) and *The Untouchables* (1987) each director's most profitable to date, in the following decade both enjoyed even bigger hits that moved them further towards the mainstream.<sup>205</sup> Unlike many of their peers, both directors also consistently managed to retain, in varying degrees, their signature styles. These are filmmakers whose coherent and personal approach to filmmaking encourages an authorial discourse.

### Scorsese

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<sup>203</sup> Kenneth Von Gunden, *Postmodern Auteurs: Coppola, Lucas, De Palma, Spielberg and Scorsese* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 1991); David Greven, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese and Friedkin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013); Leo Braudy, 'The Sacraments of Genre: Coppola, DePalma, Scorsese', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1/4/1986), pp. 17-28.

<sup>204</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. xvi.

<sup>205</sup> *Cape Fear* (Scorsese, 1991); *Mission Impossible* (De Palma, 1996).

Martin Scorsese has often talked about his experiences in the 1980s in a negative light, but in doing so, he is really only referencing the period between *The King of Comedy* in 1982 and *The Color of Money* in 1986. This was the context when he aligned his decade with Robert Altman's by observing, 'in a way he was sent to the diaspora for ten years, and so was I.'<sup>206</sup> This is a wilful exaggeration because his experience bears little comparison with Altman's ten-year long exile from Hollywood. When Scorsese was discussing why he decided to make *The Color of Money*, he said he no longer wanted to be 'a director who'd have five years between films.'<sup>207</sup> In point of fact, the three years between *King of Comedy* and *After Hours* (1985) is actually the longest time he has ever gone between films in the entire course of his career, a statistic indicative of how much he has managed to consistently retain the confidence of the industry.

At the end of the 1970s, however, Scorsese's position in the industry was not as secure as one might expect: while established as a critical favourite, unlike many of his peers, he had never had a genuine hit. Despite *New York, New York*'s costly failure in 1977, his reputational capital was still sufficiently high for him to remain within the embrace of the studio system. In 1980, Scorsese was persuaded by Robert de Niro to take on *Raging Bull*, about the boxer, Jake La Motta, and producers, Robert Chartoff and Irwin Winkler, took the project to United Artists, their usual partner. After reading Paul Schrader's screenplay, head of production, Steven Bach said that the studio could not 'afford' a film that was 'written as an X.' De Niro and Scorsese rewrote (uncredited) a more acceptable version and the studio now gave the go-ahead.<sup>208</sup> Thus, even an apparently personal and artistically innovative film like *Raging Bull* was subject to institutional influence amid the necessity to find a sensible place in the marketplace. It was, however, United Artists' habit of not interfering once they approved a script (a policy not unrelated to the *Heaven's Gate* debacle) that led to *Raging Bull*

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<sup>206</sup> Mitchell Zuckoff, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography*, p. 381.

<sup>207</sup> David Thompson and Ian Christie (eds.), *Scorsese on Scorsese* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 108.

<sup>208</sup> Steven Bach, *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of Heaven's Gate* (London: Pimlico, 1996), pp. 164-166.

being unsparing and formally challenging in its portrait of an unsympathetic protagonist, clearly a contributory factor in the film's vaunted reputation. At the time of its release in November 1980, however, while it garnered positive reviews, *Raging Bull* was not a success: costing \$17 million, it took only \$10 million at the domestic box-office.<sup>209</sup>

Scorsese's next project was yet another collaboration with De Niro and their continuing ability to get films funded by major studios must have something to do with the prestige that the pair carried as a package. Backed by Fox, *The King of Comedy* was not an easy film to market, its use of comedy in the title and the presence of Jerry Lewis raised expectations of humour that the film was uninterested in meeting. At the time, the film divided critics but at the box-office it was 'an unmitigated disaster', taking a mere \$1.5 million before Fox withdrew it after only four weeks.<sup>210</sup> The film's reputation has grown in subsequent years and its influence has been often noted, as critics did recently with *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019).<sup>211</sup> The film's dismal performance and the subsequent cancelling of what Scorsese intended to be his next project, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, left the director dejected and seems to have prompted his later downbeat depiction of the decade as a whole.

It is not true, however, as Scorsese has claimed, that at this point Hollywood turned their back on him: far from it, Paramount (possibly feeling some guilt) offered him both *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Witness*, made successfully in 1984 and 1985 respectively. When Scorsese made the choice to move into the independent sector with his next film *After Hours*, although less starry auteurs had already made such a move, it was the more visible Scorsese, and the fact that he made the film so cheaply, that attracted so much comment. The film was funded by The Geffen Company for only \$4.5 million, with distribution on a pick-up basis that left Scorsese without any external interference.<sup>212</sup> Scorsese

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<sup>209</sup> Grist, p. 42.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>211</sup> For example, see Christina Newland, 'Joker', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 29, No. 11 (November 2019), p. 70.

<sup>212</sup> *Scorsese on Scorsese*, pp. 97-101.

showed himself, and others, that he could work quickly and cheaply: principal photography took forty days and the director only received a quarter of his normal salary. It performed well, considering its budget, making \$10.6 million.<sup>213</sup> However, Scorsese reported that, 'when I went to Hollywood to promote my next film I found, to my surprise, some people resented that we had made it for so little,' the implication being that it would be now be expected that everyone could work that way.<sup>214</sup> In the context of Scorsese's career, *After Hours*, although it has moments of characteristic invention (like all his films), has less of the more flamboyant touches that are characteristic of his most acclaimed work. As a relatively discrete entry in Scorsese's *oeuvre*, it was also, unusually for a director who tends to plough a singular furrow, very much of its time, forming part of a brief, concentrated cycle of 'yuppie nightmare' films, a sub-genre that now seems especially reflective of the Reaganite era in which these films were made.<sup>215</sup>

In September 1984, Scorsese was approached by Paul Newman about directing *The Color of Money*, an adaptation of Walter Tevis's sequel to his novel, *The Hustler*, the film of which had been an earlier notable success for Newman in 1961. Newman, who owned the rights, secured financing from Touchstone, Disney's adult division but Scorsese's previous relationship with Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg, who had just left Paramount for Disney, also contributed to the decision to finance the film.<sup>216</sup> In fact, following *After Hours*' moderate success, Scorsese had again received plenty of offers, including Warren Beatty's *Dick Tracy* (which Beatty eventually directed himself in 1990), indicating that Hollywood executives had short-term memories when it suited them.<sup>217</sup> At this stage in his career, Scorsese has said that he was interested in seeing if he could be the sort of director who can handle a more conventional film starring a Hollywood legend like Newman. The

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<sup>213</sup> Grist, p. 156.

<sup>214</sup> *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p. 101.

<sup>215</sup> Other examples include *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985), *Into the Night* (John Landis, 1985) and *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme, 1986).

<sup>216</sup> *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p. 97. In the latter part of the decade, Eisner and Katzenberg dramatically transformed Disney's fortunes. See *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 41.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

director proudly described how he finished in forty-nine days, instead of the scheduled fifty, and brought it in for \$13 million, \$1.5 million below budget.<sup>218</sup> This boast about an achievement, that was merely the fulfilment of a contractual duty, gives us some sense of how maverick directors like Scorsese were not habitually accustomed to working within allocated funding limits and timescale. This is reflected in Scorsese and Newman, despite their combined status, having to agree to put up a third of their salaries as surety against the film going over budget.<sup>219</sup> The film was Scorsese's highest performing to date, taking \$52.3 million at the domestic box-office and an indication of Hollywood's habitual 'short-termism' was his immediate receipt of a two-year 'first-look' deal with Disney.<sup>220</sup>

Scorsese was now finally able to make his long-cherished project, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. When he signed with his new agents on 1 January 1987, he observed wryly, 'the film has been the laughing stock of cocktail parties in Hollywood until the minute I signed with CAA – then it was made.' Universal, the one studio who had never courted the director, agreed to take on the project, but in a partnership with Cineplex Odeon.<sup>221</sup> This collaboration between a studio and a theatrical chain arose out of a law change that encouraged yet more conglomeration within Hollywood's power structure, but its significance has rarely been noted. In 1986, the 1948 'Paramount Decree' that had dismantled Hollywood's vertical integration, was annulled and MCA, Universal's owner, immediately acquired fifty percent of Cineplex.<sup>222</sup> Effectively, then, the financing came from a single source but the fiscal arrangement ensured that *Last Temptation* would receive an adequate release, an insurance against the possibility that some theatre owners might refuse to screen it. Such trepidation was justified when, as Michael Morris described it, 'a public outcry of a magnitude unprecedented in the history of religious films' came to pass.<sup>223</sup> Support for the film *within* the industry was, nevertheless, extensive and both the Directors' and Writers' Guilds berated those

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p.108.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> Grist, p. 156.

<sup>221</sup> *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p. 123.

<sup>222</sup> Grist, p. 159.

<sup>223</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 158.

theatres that refused to show the film. Its box-office performance of \$8.4 million domestically and \$4 million overseas was seen as reasonable, considering that, as its director put it, 'it's an "art movie" ...not a commercial mainstream movie. It runs 2 hours and 43 minutes and it was not made for exploitative reasons.'<sup>224</sup> After the relative conventionality of *After Hours* and *The Color of Money*, *Last Temptation* was a return to a more ambitious and personal style of filmmaking which, in hindsight, appears all the more remarkable considering how much populist filmmaking dominated at the time. It is perhaps a little surprising that the radical *Last Temptation* is rarely included when Scorsese's best work is discussed, but its artistry seems to have been overshadowed by the surrounding controversies. Reflecting changing attitudes to risk as the decade progressed, Scorsese was obliged in 1988 to make the film for about half of its 1983 budget (\$7 million compared with \$12-16 million), indicating again that he could manage on small budgets, this time in pursuit of something more formally adventurous and intellectually challenging. Scorsese worked for no salary and was equally parsimonious on set, shooting the film in 62 days and restricting himself to three takes for any shot.<sup>225</sup>

Scorsese finished the decade with his contribution, 'Life Lessons', to the anthology, *New York Stories* (1989), alongside short films directed by Coppola and Woody Allen. As Disney aggressively pushed for a greater share of the adult market, Touchstone financed the film, according to Grist, to 'enhance the company's institutional and critical prestige.'<sup>226</sup> In 1990, Scorsese returned to a familiar subject, Italian-American gangsters, with *Goodfellas* which achieved the rare combination at that time of both commercial appeal and critical acclaim. His next film, *Cape Fear*, was his most successful to that point, earning \$79 million domestically alone.<sup>227</sup> Scorsese subsequently enjoyed an uninterrupted run of well-funded films, with some more personal, and less commercial, than others.

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<sup>224</sup> Scorsese on Scorsese, p. 124.

<sup>225</sup> Grist, pp.155, 161-162.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* p.8. Spielberg was originally involved but dropped out and was replaced by Coppola.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

In the 1980s, Scorsese established a reputation for reliability and respectability that he still retains today.

## De Palma

Brian De Palma's 1980s career is unlike all the other Renaissance filmmakers because the films he made in the decade became fundamental in defining both his controversial reputation and divisive authorial image. Although *Carrie* (1976) was an important breakthrough for the director, four eighties films - *Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface* (1983), *Body Double* (1983) and *The Untouchables* - are, for different reasons, significant texts with which to consider De Palma, as well as contemporaneous developments within Hollywood cinema. Somehow De Palma steered his career towards respectability despite vituperative attacks aimed at the first three of these films. The result is that his work has polarised opinion more than any of the other Renaissance auteurs. In more recent times, there has been a belated torrent of scholarly interest in De Palma, much of which offers carefully argued defences of the most frequent criticisms of his filmmaking: his slavish devotion to Hitchcock, his predilection for extreme depictions of violence, and the objectification and exploitation of his female characters.<sup>228</sup> As well as recent defenders, there were a few earlier staunch supporters like Robin Wood and Kenneth MacKinnon, but more common attitudes about the director were like Kolker's, who dismisses De Palma outright because of his 'career of the most superficial imitations of the most superficial aspects of Hitchcock's style, worked through a misogyny and violence that manifest a contempt for the audience exploited by his films.'<sup>229</sup> The visibility of De Palma and his

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<sup>228</sup> Greven, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire*; Dumas, *Brian De Palma and the Political Invisible*; Keeseey, *Brian De Palma's Split-Screen*; Eyal Peretz, *Becoming Visionary: Brian De Palma's Cinematic Education of the Senses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>229</sup> Kolker, p. 187; Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, pp. 120-143; Kenneth MacKinnon, *Misogyny in the Movies: The De Palma Question* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990).

films has markedly increased outside the academy as well, spearheaded by the omniscience of *Scarface* as a cultural artefact (according to Chris Dumas, ‘the single-most widely influential film of the last thirty years’) and the well-publicised release of the 2015 documentary, *De Palma*, a fascinating, if extremely solipsistic, overview of his career comprised solely of the titular subject talking to camera with clips.<sup>230</sup> De Palma’s visual style is undoubtedly grandiose, and his debt to the ‘master of suspense’ is all too apparent in much of his work. While much of the scholarship that identifies the director as a consummate filmmaker is persuasive, it is difficult in so many of his films to appreciate them on their own terms because of the overwhelming assault on the senses that comes from De Palma’s overdetermined homages to Hitchcock. In the 1980s, *Blow Out*, arguably, stands apart because it wears its influences more lightly, and its style is delivered in a lower register than the other 1980s Hitchcockian thrillers, *Dressed to Kill* and *Body Double*.

De Palma began the decade with the independently funded *Dressed to Kill*, from an original screenplay he wrote himself. Filmways offered De Palma the opportunity to make the film on a budget of only \$7.5 million but its performance, realising \$31 million, was good enough for Filmways to readily agree to fund De Palma’s next film, *Blow Out*.<sup>231</sup> *Dressed to Kill*, as already noted, attracted angry accusations of female exploitation and objectification and was also embroiled in a ratings row when striving to obtain an ‘R’ rating. There are interesting parallels with Friedkin’s *Cruising* here, with both enduring disputes with protestors and censors. Both directors were contractually obliged to deliver an R-rated film, their rows with the ratings board played out through the press. Curiously, De Palma was also briefly attached to a version of *Cruising* before Friedkin, with elements of his script ‘repurposed’ for *Dressed to Kill*.<sup>232</sup>

*Blow Out* was an attempt to make something ‘more serious and reputable’ and distance himself from the horror genre, although the film remains a continuation of De Palma’s Hitchcock project, by

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<sup>230</sup> Dumas, p. 12; *De Palma* (Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow, 2015).

<sup>231</sup> Keesey, p. 146.

<sup>232</sup> *De Palma*; Greven, pp. 214-215.



way of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1967) - as foregrounded in the film's title.<sup>233</sup> Filmways effectively gambled their future on the film when the budget ballooned from \$5-6 million to \$20 million after John Travolta came on board. Banking on a star presence by independents was not unusual in the 1980s but the strategy failed for *Blow Out*, returning only \$8 million. It has a devastatingly downbeat conclusion and De Palma said 'no-one saw it until it was finished. When they saw the ending, they nearly died.'<sup>234</sup> Indeed, *Blow Out*'s final moments are as bleak as anything from the 1970s and the final shot of a broken Travolta recalls Gene Hackman's despair at the end of Coppola's similarly themed *The Conversation* (1974). It is a remarkable sequence, described by Robin Wood as 'among the most remarkable achievements of modern Hollywood cinema.'<sup>235</sup>

Despite *Dressed to Kill*'s controversy and *Blow Out*'s failure, De Palma found work within the studio system for the remainder of the decade (and beyond), making five films for four different studios. With *Scarface*, De Palma claimed that he wanted 'to move into a different world' because he had grown 'tired of making these Brian De Palma movies'<sup>236</sup> The remake of Howard Hawks's 1932 film of the same name originated with Al Pacino who initially recruited De Palma along with playwright and aspiring screenwriter, David Rabe, who was in turn rapidly replaced by Oliver Stone.<sup>237</sup> It is hard to understate *Scarface*'s abiding presence in popular culture today but at the time of its release, it did only moderate business, just about matching its budget of \$25 million.<sup>238</sup> Critics disliked it for its excess of graphic, cynical violence but the film was later picked up by the hip-hop generation, drawn to its portrayal of a glamorous 'drugs-and-guns' culture. The initial lukewarm performance of the film may also be traced to yet another ratings issue. After returning unsuccessfully to the censors three times in order to get an 'R' rating, De Palma decided not to

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<sup>233</sup> Keesey, p. 146.

<sup>234</sup> De Palma.

<sup>235</sup> Wood, p. 143.

<sup>236</sup> Keesey, p. 156.

<sup>237</sup> De Palma. Rabe keeps cropping up in this study: not only did he write Altman's *Streamers*, faithfully based on his own play, he wrote *Casualties of War* (1989) for De Palma. He also features briefly in Chapter 5 because of a failed collaboration with Friedkin.

<sup>238</sup> Keesey, p. 164.

change it anymore, even putting everything back in he had removed.<sup>239</sup> It is no wonder, then, that critics and audiences were so shocked by the film's violence.

De Palma's next move shows he was not yet entirely reconciled to working within the system - and indicates that he took a perverse pleasure in his own notoriety. In 1984, he was given a three-picture deal with Columbia, including an office on the studio lot, quite an achievement given the prevalent industrial context.<sup>240</sup> His first project, *Body Double*, was a return to his familiar Hitchcockian horror-thriller mode that can only be seen as a deliberate act of provocation, or as De Palma himself put it, 'there was a certain amount of "you think *Scarface* was trouble? I'll show you trouble" in my attitude going in to *Body Double*.'<sup>241</sup> The film includes a notorious, unpalatable 'driller-killer' murder scene that Prince calls 'the decade's ghastliest sequence of sexual slaughter in a mainstream film.'<sup>242</sup> Without any big stars, the film cost a reasonable \$9 million yet still barely covered its costs. Columbia cancelled his contract and De Palma once again was expressing a need to 're-invent myself' and do something where 'no-one could accuse me ripping off Hitchcock.'<sup>243</sup> *Wise Guys* (1986), a lukewarm gangster comedy, was another commercial failure, a mixed genre film that may have confused audiences expecting another *Scarface*. However, because De Palma brought the film in on budget, and on time, he proved to Hollywood that he was a team player.<sup>244</sup> This may have influenced Paramount's decision to hire him for *The Untouchables* which became his most successful film thus far.

A big-budget project with stars (Kevin Costner, Sean Connery and De Niro) and a budget in the region of \$20 million, *The Untouchables* was critically and commercially well-received, and made \$76 million at the domestic box-office and \$186 million worldwide.<sup>245</sup> De Palma had now moved onto

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<sup>239</sup> De Palma.

<sup>240</sup> Keesey, p. 180.

<sup>241</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p.165.

<sup>242</sup> *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 353.

<sup>243</sup> Quoted in Keesey, p. 180.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

another level within Hollywood, leading to him being entrusted, disastrously, with *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in 1990. Before that film, De Palma first used his new-found power to make a heartfelt film about a serious subject. Based on a real incident, *Casualties of War* was his contribution to the late eighties cycle of Vietnam films. It may have suffered from its similarities to *Platoon*, Oliver Stone's award-winning 1986 film, making a reasonable \$18.5 million, but not enough to cover its prohibitive \$22.5 million cost.<sup>246</sup>

For all the furore surrounding some of his films in the eighties, De Palma had gone from one film to another without too much difficulty. He managed to negotiate the system sufficiently well in the decade, despite setbacks, to remain firmly located within it. Like Scorsese, his body of work encourages an auteurist perspective because he so consistently adopts a signature visual style. Any De Palma film will inevitably feature the use of split-screen, 360-degree shots and overblown, theatrical staging, a schema that he frequently used as complementary to his thematic concerns. Even in those films he made in the decade that he did not develop from scratch, De Palma's visual sensibility is still obviously present, very much so in the case of *Scarface's* operatic style and excess of violence. Despite the high-profile, expensive failure of *Bonfire*, by the 1990s, De Palma was a big-name Hollywood director and when he made *Mission Impossible* in 1996, he moved into genuine blockbuster territory.

### **Hits and Misses: Peter Bogdanovich and John Milius**

Peter Bogdanovich and John Milius are very different filmmakers, although their work does share, like many of their peers, an allusive quality that invokes both classical Hollywood - particularly John Ford - as well as more arthouse influences. Renaissance auteurs regularly railed against the interference of executives in creative matters with Milius and Bogdanovich, particularly, sharing with the likes of Penn and Ashby, an inability to adapt themselves to the system's confines. Despite this,

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<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

they both briefly belied their decline with box-office successes: Bogdanovich with *Mask* (1985) and Milius with *Conan the Barbarian* and *Red Dawn* (1984). This section considers the circumstances that allowed these two to manage this small degree of success in the 1980s. However, despite my categorisation, both could just as easily be deemed to be in 'terminal decline.'

### **Bogdanovich**

Bogdanovich is, in many ways, the epitome of the Hollywood Renaissance auteur who, in his own words (borrowing from *Easy Rider*), 'had blown it' as the new decade beckoned.<sup>247</sup> However, his particular experiences tell us how important it is to take account of a director's individual circumstances, even when considering them as representative of a wider group, because the trajectory of Bogdanovich's troubled downhill career is particularly unique. By 1980, Bogdanovich had already managed to severely damage the reputation he rapidly established with three consecutive, critical and commercial successes: *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *What's Up Doc?* (1972) and *Paper Moon* (1973), films that defined (and continue to define) his career. What followed was a series of expensive failures that fostered a reputation for rampant egotism that caused Irwin Winkler to describe him as 'easily the most arrogant person' he had ever met in the film business.<sup>248</sup> By the turn of the decade, any remaining vestiges of his good reputation were destroyed by the effect on Bogdanovich of the tragic events of 14 August 1980. His girlfriend, the playboy model Dorothy Stratten, was murdered by her estranged husband, and the professional consequences for Bogdanovich led to an absence from directing for four years following his reckless, unfathomable actions regarding the completion and release of *They All Laughed* in 1981 (featuring Stratten in a leading role). The box-office failure of the film placed him in financial straits that eventually led to his bankruptcy in 1985.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Quoted in Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 408.

<sup>248</sup> Quoted in Leo Robson, 'Hollywood's Favourite Flop', *New Statesman*, 31/7/2015-13/8/2015, p. 19.

<sup>249</sup> Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 416.

*They All Laughed* was funded by Time-Life Films who were trying to establish themselves in Hollywood and were on the verge of releasing their first two films. They put up \$7.5 million but Bogdanovich fell out with the producers during shooting. Then came the Stratten tragedy and he felt obliged, according to Andrew Yule, 'to complete the movie for the sake of Stratten and all she had meant to him.'<sup>250</sup> When Fox, the film's distributor, became reluctant to put more money in, Bogdanovich's somewhat unhinged solution was to buy the film from Time-Life, also paying Fox half a million dollars to get the rights reverted. He made a deal with Mark Damon's Producers Sales Organisation, who managed to sell the film in forty overseas territories but, as in the States, returns were paltry.<sup>251</sup> It earned less than \$1 million at the domestic box-office and ended up costing Bogdanovich \$5 million of his own money.<sup>252</sup>

Bogdanovich's disagreements with an independent might appear to support the notion that it was often as difficult to achieve creative autonomy in that sector, but what happened on his next project, *Mask*, a return to a Hollywood major, indicates that, in his particular case, it was more about his failure to recognise how much the power dynamic had shifted in contemporary Hollywood. Late in 1983, Universal offered Bogdanovich the opportunity to direct *Mask*, a melodrama about a disfigured boy and his mother, based on a real story and budgeted at \$12 million. After handing over the film, the studio ignored the director's right of 'final cut' and re-edited the film, dispensing with eight minutes running time. Bogdanovich sued the studio for \$11 million but it was Universal's version that appeared on 8 March 1985. For all the director's protests, the film was a success, earning \$48 million domestically, prompting him to see sense and drop the law suit.<sup>253</sup> Placing Bogdanovich in this section *is* based on *Mask's* success and it is telling that again a Renaissance director's solitary eighties hit was a firm move into the mainstream financed by a studio. In this case,

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<sup>250</sup> Andrew Yule, *Picture Shows: The Life and Films of Peter Bogdanovich* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1992), pp. 167-168.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170-176.

<sup>252</sup> Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 415.

<sup>253</sup> Yule, pp 184-207.

it did not provide any form of rehabilitation: on the contrary, as Bogdanovich realised, 'suing the studio was the single worst thing I ever did in this business. The whole town really got scared of me.'<sup>254</sup>

Once Bogdanovich filed for bankruptcy, he was obliged to find work. Dino De Laurentiis, with his penchant for working with New Hollywood auteurs, offered him *Illegally Yours*, a screwball comedy, supposedly in the vein of *What's Up Doc?*. The feeble film that resulted had been a disastrous shoot, with DEG closing in on bankruptcy. According to its director, '*Illegally Yours* was without question the worst experience of my career from beginning to end.'<sup>255</sup> Bogdanovich's personal experiences coloured his professional ones in the 1980s and his difficulties indicate how important it was for directors to find some accommodation with the demands of an industry that perpetually threatened to undermine their creative impulses.

### **Milius**

John Milius was part of the 'film school generation', attending USC where he became firm friends with George Lucas. He stands apart from all the others because of his publicly expressed right-wing views, embodied in a persona deliberately constructed to provoke. His promotion of himself as a hyper-patriotic warmonger, a baiter of both liberals, and of liberal ideas, led, according to Milius at least, to his blacklisting by the establishment.<sup>256</sup> This seems to be supported by the fact that, between 1970 and 1991, he only directed eight feature films. Yet many of his public pronouncements often seem made more out of a sense of mischief than any serious intent, as when he asserted in a recent high-profile documentary (that has partially rehabilitated his reputation), 'I am not a fascist. I am much closer to a Maoist. However, I *am* a Zen-anarchist.'<sup>257</sup> Such playfulness notwithstanding, his work can certainly be read as reflective of his political concerns and it is a body

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<sup>254</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>255</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>256</sup> *Milius* (Joey Figueroa and Zak Knutson, 2013)

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

of work that displays a tightly-knotted group of themes and obsessions. Although his films are far more ideologically nuanced than usually perceived, his public persona has worked against a balanced understanding of his thematic concerns. This illustrates how an authorial star image was not always seen as an asset in the carefully controlled environment of 1980s Hollywood. There has been a consequent tendency to understand Milius's films as unabashed expressions of his right-wing views. Kolker finds his work as distasteful as he does De Palma's, commenting that 'his work is overblown with portent and violence, full of the racism, misogyny, meanness, and vulgarity that go with his ideology.'<sup>258</sup> This is not an uncommon view (although his 1970s work also has many admirers) but where Milius has been most appreciated creatively, especially among his peers, is as a writer, renowned for heroic work as an uncredited script-doctor - as Spielberg put it, 'none of us could tell a story like John.'<sup>259</sup>

*Conan the Barbarian* (1982) prefigured and inspired a whole range of fantasy cinema and television, the influence of which is still felt today, not least in the wildly successful television series, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Not only did *Conan* have an impact on the fantasy genre but the presence of the muscular Arnold Schwarzenegger, playing the eponymous hero, also heralded, alongside Stallone in the same year's *First Blood*, the 1980s obsession with 'hard bodies.'<sup>260</sup> *Conan's* original script was written by Oliver Stone who collaborated with four different Renaissance directors in the 1980s and fell out with all of them, after which the directors all rewrote his screenplays (or obtained rewrites).<sup>261</sup> *Conan* was produced by De Laurentiis who co-financed the film with Universal. With a modest budget reflecting its independent origins, it was a successful film, earning \$21 million

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<sup>258</sup> Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p. 177. This observation about Milius is absent from the 4<sup>th</sup> edition so perhaps Kolker has modified his views.

<sup>259</sup> Milius.

<sup>260</sup> Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.

<sup>261</sup> *Conan; Scarface; Year of the Dragon; 8 Million Ways to Die* (Ashby, 1986).

domestically and led to Milius's next film, *Red Dawn*, being backed by United Artists and distributed by MGM (now United Artist's owner after *Heaven's Gate*).<sup>262</sup>

*Red Dawn*, another right-wing fantasy, depicts an invasion on American soil by Russian and Cuban forces and shows a ragbag of youthful rebels fighting back, guerrilla-style. Milius, promoting it at the time, said that 'I see it as an anti-war movie, in the sense that if both sides could see this, maybe it wouldn't have to happen.'<sup>263</sup> The film did well with a domestic return of \$38 million against a budget of \$17 million.<sup>264</sup> *Red Dawn* may offer a fantasy of American derring-do, but it is a downbeat film and it can be argued that Milius's real target in *Red Dawn* was not communism but the federal government. Milius's films all emphasise the importance of an individual's ability to make their own decisions. This is a clear message in both *Conan* and *Red Dawn* and would be even more central to his final 1980s film, *Farewell to the King*, the story of a rogue American soldier (Nick Nolte), who has established a mini-empire in the jungles of Borneo during World War II. The character has echoes of Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, which Milius originated and co-wrote. Amidst a flurry of Vietnam films around the same time, it may have struggled to distinguish itself sufficiently to arouse much interest and it was not successful, only earning just under \$2.5 million.<sup>265</sup> Milius's problems seem to have stemmed from his confrontational personality and by not being willing to compromise sufficiently to find remunerative work. Yet it was probably his politics that most scared executives: the studios may have simply thought that he was not worth the bother.

### **Terminal Decline: Arthur Penn and Hal Ashby**

Arthur Penn and Hal Ashby directed some of the most revered films of the Renaissance period and both enjoyed, for a while, an unbroken run of critically acclaimed work. By the 1980s, however, although both strived to remain in gainful employment, they suffered a dramatic and permanent

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<sup>262</sup> 'Conan the Barbarian', *Box Office Mojo* ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=conanthebarbarian.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=conanthebarbarian.htm)).

<sup>263</sup> Patrick Goldstein, 'Red Dawn is Milius' Kind of Movie', *Los Angeles Times*, 16/8/1984, p. 11.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*; 'Red Dawn', *Box Office Mojo* ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=reddawn.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=reddawn.htm)).

<sup>265</sup> 'Farewell to the King', *Box Office Mojo* ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=farewelltotheking.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=farewelltotheking.htm)).



downturn in their fortunes. Ashby died in 1988 and Penn never made another film for the cinema after 1989's *Penn and Teller Get Killed*. Not one of the eight films they directed between them in the decade could be said to have even achieved a modest degree of success or critical praise. Penn, the acclaimed auteur behind *Bonnie and Clyde*, has attracted scholarly interest in the past, not least from Wood and Kolker, but his name recognition, if not his most well-known films, has diminished in recent years.<sup>266</sup> Ashby's status as an auteur-star of the Renaissance has progressed in the opposite direction. In the past, he was frequently excluded in canonical lists of the period's auteurs, although his lack of profile *has* been exaggerated by those seeking to correct it. From about 2009 onwards, however, a sudden surge of interest resulted in a number of books and articles, as well as a recent documentary.<sup>267</sup> Yet even Ashby's most staunch defenders struggle to find much good to say about his 1980s films and Penn is much the same. The circumstances that led to this pair's artistic and commercial decline were different, of course, but, in both cases, can be most obviously related to the prevailing market conditions. Neither seemed to be able, or were insufficiently inspired, to get the sort of projects made that they had managed in the previous decade. They were obliged to compromise with what seemed like atypical subject matter and styles simply in order to remain in gainful employment.

### **Penn**

Much like Bogdanovich or Altman, Penn struggled during the latter part of the 1970s to get even close to the outstanding commercial performance of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), the film that made his name. Unlike the others, though, his critical reputation remained largely intact. However, the box-office failure of *Night Moves* (1975) and *The Missouri Breaks* (1976) made it difficult for Penn to get

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<sup>266</sup> Kolker, pp. 17-105; Robin Wood with Richard Lippe, *Arthur Penn* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, revised edition 2014).

<sup>267</sup> Examples include Christopher Beach, *The Films of Hal Ashby* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009); Nick Dawson, *Being Hal Ashby: The Life of a Hollywood Rebel* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Aaron Hunter, *Authoring Hal Ashby: The Myth of the Hollywood Auteur* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); plus documentary *Hal* (Amy Scott, 2018).

projects off the ground in the latter part of the decade. This was the context that led to Penn accepting the opportunity to direct *Four Friends*, a coming-of-age drama set in the 1960s. While not obviously relatable to Penn's earlier work, it is the most interesting of his eighties work. It did feature as a recent entry in *Sight and Sound*'s 'Lost and Found' column where Geoff Andrew makes a somewhat debatable case for the film's rehabilitation: 'far from negligible...it interrogates the migrant's dream of America as a land of plenty and freedom.'<sup>268</sup>

It was another four years until Penn's next film, *Target*, a further retreat into conventional genre filmmaking, and his least characteristic to date. The circumstances that led him to accept the film are illustrative of the diverse ways that Renaissance directors found work at this time. In 1984, Penn had been approached about directing *Falling in Love*, a contemporary melodrama re-uniting Streep and De Niro after *The Deer Hunter*. Meanwhile Ulu Grosbard was attached to *Target* but left it to replace Penn on *Falling In Love*, supposedly because of a friendship with De Niro. The directors shared an agent, so *Target* was offered to Penn who explained to Lippe and Wood his thinking about accepting the assignment: 'I took it fully with my eyes wide open knowing the limitations of it, knowing the kind of film it was. But I thought also...dammit, I'd like to show that I can do this kind of high-kinetic...action film.'<sup>269</sup> Thus, the reasons for a filmmaker's attachment to a project can often be entirely prosaic. *Target* is an unremarkable but efficient example of a spy thriller that is steadfast in its generic conformity while *Dead of Winter* (1987), Penn's next film, was also conventional, a pedestrian and predictable gothic horror. His final feature film, *Penn and Teller Get Killed* (1989), a vehicle written by, and starring, the eponymous magicians, seems to have disappeared entirely without trace in the intervening years.

Even in 1986, Penn seemed resigned to the decline of his career. When asked if he might consider following Altman's example with low-budget theatrical adaptations, Penn responded

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<sup>268</sup> Geoff Andrew, 'Lost and Found: *Four Friends*', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (February 2018), p. 88.

<sup>269</sup> 'An Interview with Arthur Penn', p. 218.

enthusiastically, commenting, 'certainly Altman is a very good model to use, someone who has always found a way around orthodoxy. I've got to do more of what he does.'<sup>270</sup> He never did move into this type of lower budget filmmaking and, despite such enthusiasm, Altman's example may have never been a realistic option for him. Penn was the oldest of all the Renaissance auteurs (he was 67 in 1989) and it is possible that the fading of his career was simply attributable to the fading of his creative light.

### Ashby

Between 1970 and 1979, Hal Ashby directed seven films that were all critically and (in varying degrees) commercially successful. In sharp contrast, the four films he helmed in the 1980s were all financial and critical catastrophes, described by Beach as 'one of the saddest and most surprising reversal in the history of Hollywood directors.'<sup>271</sup> No other Renaissance auteur's 1980s arc so starkly illustrates the differences between the decades. The reasons for this dramatic turnaround, according to Aaron Hunter 'are complex...but one cause is clear...three were taken away from him before and during the editing process and cut or re-cut by a different editor.'<sup>272</sup> The cruel irony was that Ashby made his name as an editor, including winning an Oscar for *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967). Hunter is not alone in downplaying the extent that Ashby's behaviour was a significant, maybe *the most* significant, reason for the downturn in quality of his films and the comment about Ashby's removal from the editing of his films as a 'cause' seems incomplete because it elides *why* he was removed. It was his behaviour that caused him to be removed and the effect was poorly edited films. Drake's observation that Ashby's 'films made in the eighties...are rarely examined, and when they are, the approach tends to be in terms of artistic compromise and decline' does not seem to allow for the fact that such a stance may be justified.<sup>273</sup> *Second-Hand Hearts* is

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>271</sup> Beach, p. 9.

<sup>272</sup> Hunter, p. 155.

<sup>273</sup> Drake, p. 144.

unavailable in any commercial format, but the other three films are generic exercises that are difficult to reconcile with the director of *Harold and Maude* (1970) or *Shampoo* (1975).

In 1978, after the success of *Coming Home*, Ashby was offered a multi-picture deal with Lorimar Productions, a successful independent television production company, who were in the process of establishing a cinematic presence. By attaching themselves to a critically admired auteur, Lorimar, like other independents, thought they could bolster their credibility and create a public profile. The deal was particularly attractive for Ashby, coming with both creative control and profit participation.<sup>274</sup> He decided to shoot the first two films of the deal back-to-back and, surprisingly, the much-admired *Being There*, released in 1979, was actually shot after *Second-Hand Hearts* which did not come out until May 1981, despite principal photography being completed in September 1978.<sup>275</sup> Ashby had already fallen out with Lorimar over what he felt was inadequate marketing for *Being There* when the film company took exception to the time Ashby was taking editing *Second-Hand Hearts*.<sup>276</sup> When it did finally come out, the film was greeted by vicious reviews and Beach concludes that 'the film suffers from the performances of the lead actors, from a weak plot, and from a lack of tonal consistency.'<sup>277</sup>

Ashby's relationship with Lorimar deteriorated even further on *Lookin' to Get Out*, to such an extent that they ended up in the law courts for several years. Haskell Wexler, the film's cinematographer, commented that '*Lookin' to Get Out* was a lousy script...There was one weakness Hal had. Hal was confident that he could weave gold out of flax.'<sup>278</sup> Ashby was not in full control as he was trying to re-edit *Second-Hand Hearts* while shooting *Lookin'* at the same time. By October 1981, Lorimar had enough and, with the film already over \$5 million over its \$10 million budget, Ashby was forced to accept that another editor would now re-cut the film that was, at that stage, 2

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<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>275</sup> Hunter, pp. 125-136.

<sup>276</sup> Drake, p. 146.

<sup>277</sup> Beach, p. 144.

<sup>278</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 146.

hours 45 minutes long. By October 1982, after protracted arguments in the courts, Ashby allowed Lorimar's cut to be released. The film finally cost a staggering \$21 million but only registered gross receipts of \$1.66 million, largely derived from video and cable sales.<sup>279</sup>

The cost of Ashby's inability to forge a sustainable working relationship with Lorimar became apparent in June 1981 when Ashby signed a contract with Columbia to direct *Tootsie*. This was a clear indication that, at this stage, Ashby's reputation was still solid. Despite his contract with Lorimar being non-exclusive, they complained to Columbia that Ashby was still employed by them editing *Lookin' to Get Out*. By October, wary of a lawsuit from Lorimar, Columbia replaced Ashby with Sydney Pollack.<sup>280</sup> To add insult to injury, the film was hugely successful, the second-best performing film of 1983. However much blame might be attributed to Lorimar, and it is inevitable that there must have been some, it is apparent that directors like Ashby, who were unable to adapt a more responsible approach to filmmaking, were now finding it difficult to survive.

Ashby's next film, his penultimate, *The Slugger's Wife* (1985), was a comedy written by Neil Simon on which the director was dismissed from the film by Columbia for 'unprofessional conduct and material breeches of conduct [sic].'<sup>281</sup> When the studio released the film in a recut version, it earned just \$1.3 million on a budget of \$19 million.<sup>282</sup> Ashby's final film, *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986), is a generic action thriller and unlike anything else he had previously made. Produced by Mark Damon, and his company PSO, it was a chaotic project from the outset with Ashby even more uncooperative than usual; two days after shooting ended, in December 1985, he was once again fired. After a legal battle, in an echo of what happened on *Lookin'*, Ashby had to concede and allow PSO's edit to be released. Ashby died in 1988 and *8 Million* provided a sad coda to his career, as he yet again lost

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<sup>279</sup> Drake, p. 149.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> Beach, p. 149.

<sup>282</sup> Hunter, p. 179.

control of a film. Hal Ashby's career decline may have been symptomatic of prevailing market conditions but, in his particular case, there seems little doubt that much of the blame was his own.

### **Hardly Working: Bob Rafelson and Dennis Hopper**

Dennis Hopper and Bob Rafelson worked together on one of the defining films of the Renaissance era when Hopper directed *Easy Rider* in 1969 for Raybert Productions, co-owned by Rafelson. Despite both achieving early breakthroughs (Rafelson with *Five Easy Pieces* in 1970), it is striking how their subsequent directorial careers are both characterised by a paltry number of projects realised. Hopper directed seven feature films between 1969 and 1994 and Rafelson, ten between 1968 and 2002. In the 1980s, they managed to direct just two features each, yet with their second films, *Colors* (1988) and *Black Widow* (1987), they actually managed to achieve some box-office success, albeit with no discernible long-term benefit to their overall careers.

### **Rafelson**

Bob Rafelson's career has never attracted much considered attention, his relatively meagre output only resulting in a run-of-the-mill book from 1996 by Jay Boyer, and some attention given to the two films that made his name, *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972): much like Bogdanovich or Friedkin, Rafelson's subsequent career seems to be overshadowed by these early critical favourites.<sup>283</sup> Rafelson had founded Raybert Productions with Bert Schneider (later BBS Productions) and made their name originally in television with *The Monkees* (1966-1968), featuring the eponymous pop group. Raybert/BBS went on to produce some of the most important films of the early Renaissance, notably *The Last Picture Show*. It is difficult to fully grasp why Rafelson struggled to get films made for the majority of his career, but his inability to keep within prescribed limits, or to countenance interference from those controlling the purse strings, certainly played its part.

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<sup>283</sup> Jay Boyer, *Bob Rafelson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

Since *Stay Hungry* in 1976, Rafelson had been vainly trying to get directorial projects off the ground when Jack Nicholson, who looms large in Rafelson's career, offered him the opportunity to make a new version of James Cain's novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), which had been adapted twice before in the 1940s.<sup>284</sup> Close friends for many years, Nicholson starred in five of the ten films Rafelson directed as well as being attached to a number of his unmade projects.<sup>285</sup> The offer was attractive, coming with the promise of the sort of autonomy he had enjoyed at BBS. Co-funded by Lorimar and MGM, with a script by David Mamet, the film aimed to stay closer to its source text than the earlier adaptations.<sup>286</sup> The film's scrupulous attention to period detail recalls the neo-noirs of the Renaissance period: it is not just the presence of Nicholson that is evocative of *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974). However, Cain's protagonists, anti-heroic murderers, did not appeal to audience tastes in 1981 and the film performed modestly, earning \$12 million domestically. As usual, Rafelson struggled to get anything made in the aftermath and it was another six years before he directed *Black Widow*.<sup>287</sup>

Meanwhile, Rafelson's greatest frustration around this time was *Heaven and Earth*, a film he was set to make for Warner Bros about Diane Fossey. Universal had a similar project in the works, *Gorillas in the Mist*, so the studios joined forces and Michael Apted, the director attached to the Universal project, was given the job. Rafelson had invested considerable time and effort on the Fossey story only for him to see someone else effectively make the film.<sup>288</sup> His career seems to have been predicated on such misadventures although, on this occasion, there is nothing to suggest he was at fault. In 1986, proving he was not entirely forgotten in Hollywood, Fox offered Rafelson *Black Widow*, a large-scale studio project with nearly 100 locations in 5 states, certainly a challenge for a director with no experience of working on such a scale. Although more conventional than his earlier

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<sup>284</sup> *Ossessione* (Luchino Visconti, 1943); *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946).

<sup>285</sup> Boyer, p. xvii.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>287</sup> 'The Postman Always Rings Twice', *Box Office Mojo* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?is=postmanalwaysringstwicetwice.htm>).

<sup>288</sup> Boyer, p. 94.

work, it is a slick and sure-footed production showing how even a supposed maverick like Rafelson could adapt himself to market conditions. The film also has feminist credentials, with one reviewer praising 'its unique creation of a plot in which its two women protagonists interact directly with each other in their own right, rather than as mediated through a male psyche.'<sup>289</sup> Released in February 1987, *Black Widow* was fairly successful, earning about \$25 million against a budget of \$11 million, enabling Rafelson to realise his dream project, *Mountains of the Moon* (1990), an expensive failure about Burton and Speke's search for the source of the Nile.<sup>290</sup> His career limped on much as before after that, aided by his friendship with Nicholson who appeared in two more of his films. Rafelson can be compared to many of the Renaissance directors because he found it difficult to interact successfully with studio executives, or to compromise his artistic choices to pursue commercial success. This is hardly surprising as Rafelson had begun his career running his own independent film company. Eventually, he seemed to recognise his problem: in 1990, he was self-aware enough to observe, 'you learn after a while that the guys from the studio have a job to do and you have a job to do, and it's never going to be the same job. But they're not the enemy.'<sup>291</sup> Such a belated understanding may have come rather too late for any return to the embrace of mainstream Hollywood.

### **Hopper**

Dennis Hopper's travails were starker and more clearly defined than Rafelson's. Having broken through with *Easy Rider*, his follow-up, 1971's *The Last Movie*, infamously preceded all of the other directors' high-profile expensive failures. Its extravagant and chaotic production in Peru was dogged by negative publicity, the first incarnation of the New Hollywood auteur out-of-control. Hopper, infamous for his embrace of a hedonistic lifestyle, was effectively blacklisted by Hollywood. In 1983,

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<sup>289</sup> Maggie Heung, 'Black Widow (Review)', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987), p. 57.

<sup>290</sup> Boyer, p. 93.

<sup>291</sup> Bart Mills, 'A Misfit Goes Mainstream', *Guardian*, 19/4/1990, p. 24.



Hopper described his difficulties: 'I've been working very hard to survive and trying to keep in the motion picture business...trying to establish the fact that I'm not a difficult person to work with.'<sup>292</sup>

The next time Hopper was able to direct a feature film after *The Last Movie* in 1971 was not until 1980, and he arrived at the opportunity by chance. Hopper had signed on to act in a small Canadian film, *Out of the Blue*, to be directed by one of its writers. Hopper had recently begun to rehabilitate his acting career, starring in Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* in 1978 as well as his memorable cameo in *Apocalypse Now*. When the production hit trouble, both the backers and the director asked Hopper to take over. Once in charge, he recast the main roles, rewrote the script and did not use any of the footage already shot.<sup>293</sup> The resultant film is remarkable, not least because it has languished in relative obscurity, although Barbara Scharres' 1983 article, 'From Out of the Blue: The Return of Dennis Hopper', offered a perceptive analysis of the film, making connections with Hopper's earlier work, observing that '*Out of the Blue* involves a single-minded refining of [Hopper's] favourite themes to their most concentrated form.'<sup>294</sup> The film was also recently featured in a recent season at the BFI in London, 'The Other Side of 1980s America', a selection of low-budget, relatively obscure films that offered an opposing view of the decade's dominant Reaganite perspective. In an article accompanying the season, Nick Pinkerton describes the film as 'Hopper's finest film...the star of the counter-culture engages with emergent hardcore punk'<sup>295</sup> It is the film's invocation of existential angst that is so powerful and, with the possible exception of *Blow Out*, its devastating ending is as bleak as any other American film of the period.

*Out of the Blue* disappeared without trace and it was another seven years, with *Colors*, before Hopper was given an opportunity to direct again. Orion only gave him the assignment, according to

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<sup>292</sup> Robert Morales, 'Head of Hopper' (1983) in Nick Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper: Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2012), p. 117.

<sup>293</sup> Barbara Scharres, 'From Out of the Blue: The Return of Dennis Hopper', *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Spring 1983), p. 29.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> Nick Pinkerton, 'The Other Side of 80s America', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 28, No 6 (June 2018), p. 24.

Hopper, because 'Sean Penn wanted me to do it.' Hopper demanded changes to the original concept with a white and a black cop in Chicago replaced by a more traditional and familiar Los Angeles-set, all-white partnership of a tough old veteran (Robert Duvall) and a hot-headed rookie (Penn).<sup>296</sup> *Colors* was a move into the mainstream for Hopper, earning \$46 million domestically on a reported budget of only about \$9 million, its success leading to Hopper enjoying a brief moment when he could get films made.<sup>297</sup> Two films he directed were released in 1990, *The Hot Spot* and *Catchfire*, but in the case of the latter, Hopper fell out so badly with the producers that he took his name off it, instead using the customary Alan Smithee moniker. As we have seen, Hopper is another of the Renaissance auteurs whose personal behavioural issues leaked into his professional life to the extent that a reputation as an unstable and intoxicated troublemaker was established early on in his directing career. Unlike even Ashby or Rafelson, he never really established any sort of track record and, thus, financiers were even less willing in his case to take any sort of risk. This was already true in the 1970s but by the 1980s, such views were hardened by the changes in prevailing audience tastes, leading studios to be even more reluctant to employ someone with such a troublesome reputation.

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There are a number of factors that have revealed themselves to be frequent determinants in the relative success or failure of Renaissance auteurs in the 1980s. Behavioural issues and varying degrees of willingness to adjust to less forgiving managerial environments were certainly one factor. Philip Drake's discussion of reputation, by way of the early 1980s experiences of Hal Ashby, also offers a useful perspective but only takes us so far in terms of an understanding of the Renaissance directors' place in 1980s American film history. Drake's suggestion about the analysis of reputation

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<sup>296</sup> Bill Kelley, 'True Colors' (1988) in *Dennis Hopper: Interviews*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135; 'Colors', *Box Office Mojo* ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=colors.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=colors.htm)).

being more valuable than the study of authorship fails to take account of how a reputation is dependent on the quality and viability of films which are, of course, authored in some form or other, if with varying degrees of collaborative practice. Drake goes on to say that ‘analysis of...archival materials enables nuanced accounts of creative decision-making to be built, alongside detailed production histories, offering a useful corrective to auteur studies that emphasise individual rather than collaborative or negotiated film authorship. These allow us to consider how processes as well as people author films.’<sup>298</sup> I would suggest that it is more accurate to think of ‘processes’ as the means by which authorship can be understood, even if derived from multiple sources, as when a director’s contract allows substantive outside interference. These processes, rather than authoring films, can offer nuanced ways with which to understand authorship as more than just an expression of an individual’s artistic vision. My broader employment of archival resources than Drake’s methodology manages, particularly using script materials, will enhance a more complete perspective in the following chapters when closer discussions of Altman, Coppola and Friedkin’s decades places them more precisely within, or outside of, the Hollywood system with individual films closely examined as expressions of authorship within that context. Their very different arcs highlight the shortcomings of a homogenous approach to the ‘downfall’ of the Hollywood Renaissance.

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<sup>298</sup> Drake, p. 146.

### 3. Robert Altman: Escape from L.A.

Altman emerged from the eighties - his lost decade - with a trail of flops and his maverick reputation in disrepair.

Anthony Quinn<sup>299</sup>

Making *Secret Honor* and *Streamers* and those pictures meant just as much to me as making *Nashville* or *MASH*. I've been here all the time. So you're the comeback.

Robert Altman<sup>300</sup>

Robert Altman's career in the 1980s has a very specific narrative. In the first year of the new decade, his relationship with the Hollywood studios broke down completely following a scabrous war of words with Paramount and Disney while making *Popeye*, and when his previous film, *Health*, was deemed unreleasable by 20th Century Fox.<sup>301</sup> With one unfortunate exception (*OC and Stiggs*, made in 1983 and released in 1987) that further hardened the director's alienation from the majors, Altman worked throughout the decade away from Hollywood. But the most remarkable aspect of his eighties films, including those made for television, is that until *Tanner '88* (1988), all are straight adaptations of plays with the screenwriter, in every case, listed as the playwright (*Beyond Therapy* [1987] is also credited to Altman). This suggests, mostly if not entirely accurately, that the dialogue in these films faithfully follows their original sources. As Pauline Kael observed about Altman at this time, 'it was as if he had just discovered theater, and he approached a playwright's text with a respect at the opposite pole from his treatment of a screenwriter's work.'<sup>302</sup> This was one way that the decade represents a significant change in direction for a filmmaker more used to unpicking his screenwriting collaborators' work with cavalier abandon.

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<sup>299</sup> Anthony Quinn, 'On Both Sides of the Ledger', *Independent on Sunday*, 20/2/1994, p. 18.

<sup>300</sup> Altman's response to being labelled "The Comeback Kid" on the release of *The Player*, as told to Eleanor Ringel of the *Atlanta Journal* (1993). Quoted in Pavlounis, 'Staging the "Rebel's Return"', p. 935.

<sup>301</sup> McGilligan, p. 516; Stephen Farber, 'Five Horsemen After the Apocalypse', *Film Comment*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (July/August 1985), p. 33.

<sup>302</sup> Pauline Kael, 'The Current Cinema: Lasso and Peashooter', *New Yorker*, 27/1/1986, p. 84.

Although Martin Scorsese claimed that ‘in a way [Altman] was sent to the diaspora for ten years.’ Altman’s own attitude to the notion that the 1980s were a regression is illustrated by his statement at the start of this chapter, not necessarily a surprising perspective given that his alleged banishment actually resulted in him directing eight films for the cinema, five for television at feature length, one short in an anthology and an eleven-part television series.<sup>303</sup> It is hard to square this volume of work with any sense of a ‘lost decade’ and a ‘reputation in disrepair’ (as Anthony Quinn asserted in the epigraph above). Such productivity begs the question as to how this level of output was achieved and what were the circumstances that led Altman to such different material and production contexts. This chapter examines these issues through an analysis of Altman’s 1980s filmmaking journey, using the available evidence (including material from his Archives) to provide a fuller picture of a period that represents an outlier in the director’s career, and that has been generally sidelined in comparison with both the 1970s and the 1990s. Often working with miniscule budgets, Altman retreated to small, emerging markets away from Hollywood interference, exploring opportunities provided by the need for content from the burgeoning videotape and cable markets. As Altman himself observed about these new areas, ‘there are now more ways to get the money back. It means you’ve got a better chance of raising the money in the private sector.’<sup>304</sup> However, as Chapter 2 showed, independent filmmaking’s commercial viability was still not fully developed at this time and Altman’s engagement with alternative financial sources may have secured the funds to make his films but rarely allowed for adequate levels of distribution to achieve any discernable commercial success.

Running concurrently with the story of Altman’s travails in the 1980s will be the closer analysis of three films in order to understand how he brought his authorship to bear on the filming of scripts largely left as they were performed in the theatre, and how these transcriptions can be understood

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<sup>303</sup> Scorsese in Zuckoff, p. 381.

<sup>304</sup> Quoted in Robert Murphy, ‘Art, Commerce, Corruption...’, *AIP & Co*, No 55 (June 1984), p. 29.

in terms of the relationship between theatre and cinema. Altman's approach to these plays, that makes them cinematic, is a re-adjustment, or even a refinement, of the methodology that defined his more renowned films of the previous decade. Working with material unsuited to his trademark overlapping dialogue and populous visual tableaux, he adopts a camera style that is more intimate, yet retains a characteristic fluidity. As always, he uses the zoom liberally, and unconventionally, and where opportunity allows he retains his penchant for filming characters through windows or mirrors, using reflected and refracted images to symbolise underlying themes, a trait that runs through his entire *oeuvre*.

## Filming Theatre

Before examining Altman's filmed plays more specifically, a few paragraphs reflect on the relationship between theatre and the cinema, in order to offer a framework for understanding what these films are seeking to achieve. André Bazin observed that 'the relations between theater and cinema [are] certainly not limited to what is generally and deprecatingly called "filmed theater."' <sup>305</sup> While arguing for a more balanced understanding of the relationship between the two media, he does suggest that films derived from plays have a tendency 'to overcompensate by the "superiority" of [their] technique' because of 'an urge to "make cinema."' <sup>306</sup> This seems particularly relevant to the way that Altman resisted overt cinematic flourishes and avoided 'opening up' his filmed plays. He subjugated many of his familiar techniques to the needs of the material he was adapting (undoubtedly, a lack of funds was also a contributory factor) and he seems to have recognised that, as Bazin observed about Cocteau, 'the role of the cinema was to not to multiply but to intensify.' <sup>307</sup> Susan Sontag also argues that adapting theatre well does not mean necessarily expanding the diegetic space. She observes that 'it is no more part of the putative "essence" of movies that the

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<sup>305</sup> André Bazin, *What Is Cinema Volume 1?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2004, trans. Hugh Gray), p. 85.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

cinema must rove over a large physical area, than it is that movies ought to be silent.’<sup>308</sup> In the cinema, the camera operator is able to roam about and re-orientate the space seen within the frame, but a director can still resist an entirely natural urge to be expansive in doing so. Films can, theoretically if not always practically, depict any number of dramatic settings but, in the theatre, as Martin Esslin observes, a single frame (or proscenium arch) ‘has to serve for a multiplicity of possible spaces.’<sup>309</sup> Thus, when a director chooses not to revise or ‘open up’ a play, especially if on a restricted budget, he or she is more likely to adapt those that depend on single locations. Indeed, nearly all of Altman’s 1980s work is confined to just one space.

In the theatre, each audience member uniquely chooses where to look, but from a fixed point (or seat). In the cinema, everyone shares the same view but their perspective of the action taking place is ‘directed’ by the choices made about what images are presented, and in what way. Differing shots can deliberately encourage the viewer to question whose point-of-view is being privileged and, as Sontag tells us, ‘this ambiguity of point-of-view...has no equivalent in the theatre.’<sup>310</sup> A film director can place emphasis by purely cinematic means (most obviously with the close-up) and a camera is a flexible tool that can be used to interpret the same written material as performed on the stage, but in different ways. Altman’s judicious use of a zoom lens is an example of how the tools of filmmaking allowed him to direct attention on moments, characters or objects.

It is a question, when adapting a play for the screen, of selecting a suitable vehicle. Plays that do not seem to be obviously cinematic, will need expansion and revision, and to be rewritten accordingly. Yet, the text of a revered play is more likely to offend those familiar with the original if it veers too far from its source or is unnecessarily expanded (as they see it). Andrew Sarris, for example, complained about *Fool for Love* that ‘a very effective play has been stretched out into a

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<sup>308</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Film and Theatre’, *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Autumn 1966), p. 28.

<sup>309</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen* (London: Methuen Drama, 1988), p. 40.

<sup>310</sup> Sontag, p. 30.

very ineffective movie.<sup>311</sup> On the other hand, reviewers frequently criticise films for failing to overcome the static nature of plays when they are not opened up sufficiently, as when Nigel Andrews called *Streamers* a 'four-wall screaming match'.<sup>312</sup> When a play is inherently claustrophobic, it is not an absolute that any opening up will necessarily make it more cinematic. Whereas Altman used the camera as a tool to overcome the static nature of such constricted material, Sontag argues that 'filmed theatre' does not even have to necessarily do this to be effective cinema. She is especially complimentary ('a minor masterpiece') about how Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964) makes a virtue of its theatrical qualities, with long and formal dialogue filmed almost entirely in medium shots.<sup>313</sup> Conversely, Altman's stated strategy 'was to put the audience among the characters. In a close-up, you can tell so much about a person'.<sup>314</sup> Technological advances aided Altman in achieving this intimacy, and Charles Champlin, reporting from the set of *Streamers*, described the equipment that facilitated Altman's style: 'a camera mounted on a counterweighted boom, a miniature version of the high-rising studio crane, and the whole unit is on a dolly, allowing for a fluidity of movement vertically and laterally'.<sup>315</sup>

## 1980 – 1982

The seventies were productive for Altman: after the success of *M\*A\*S\*H* in 1970, he was amply backed by the Hollywood studios and directed thirteen features in ten years. Films like *Nashville* and *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971) were championed by critics, their relatively poor returns mitigated by the majors' desire to bask in the reflection of Altman's auteurist prestige, and their fervent hope that another *M\*A\*S\*H* was just around the corner. However, in Altman's later 1970s films, such as *A Perfect Couple* and *Quintet* (both 1979), the critical reception began to match their poor box-office

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<sup>311</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'The Selling of Sam Shepard', *Village Voice*, 10/12/1985, p. 59.

<sup>312</sup> Nigel Andrews, '*Streamers*', *Financial Times*, 23/3/1984, p. 17.

<sup>313</sup> Sontag, p. 28.

<sup>314</sup> David Thompson (ed.), *Altman on Altman* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 133.

<sup>315</sup> Charles Champlin, 'Altman's Getting Back to Basic in *Streamers*', *Los Angeles Times*, 24/3/1983, p. M1.



returns. Hollywood, and audience tastes, were changing and it was the events of 1980 that completed the breakdown of Altman's relationship with the majors. Firstly, *Health* was completed, an ensemble-led comedy in the anarchic, satirical style of *Nashville* and *A Wedding* (1978) that was the last film in a multi-picture deal with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Indicative of how the climate in Hollywood had changed and of a studio's deteriorating relationship with a director they had previously championed, the film was left on the shelf for a year by the new regime at the studio before it was shown in just two theatres, one each in Los Angeles and New York.<sup>316</sup> At the same time, Altman was making *Popeye*, ostensibly his most mainstream project and armed with his largest ever budget. It began at \$13 million but ballooned to an estimated \$20-30 million.<sup>317</sup> Following a long, troubled shoot in Malta, the press was reporting that the film was a disaster in the making. The Hollywood Renaissance auteurs were now acquiring a reputation for profligacy and unreliability and *Popeye* was seen as being the latest in a line of extravagant director-led flops.<sup>318</sup> In fact, *Popeye* eventually registered a reasonable profit, with a domestic gross of just under \$50 million alone, but the damage was already done in terms of Altman's reputation.<sup>319</sup> He needed to work but no-one was returning his calls.<sup>320</sup> Altman had planned that his next film would be *Lone Star*, based on a play by James McClure about a returning Vietnam soldier, and MGM had expressed sufficient interest for a script to be written, and for production plans to have been made. However, Norbert Auerbach, the new studio head, did not like what he was reading about *Popeye*, and dropped the project while Altman was working on pre-production.<sup>321</sup>

This was the background to Altman's decision, in the summer of 1981, to leave California. After selling his studio and post-production facility, Lion's Gate, to a consortium headed by producer,

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<sup>316</sup> McGilligan, *Jumping Off the Cliff*, p. 476.

<sup>317</sup> O'Brien, *Hollywood Survivor*, p. 86; Altman on Altman, p. 124.

<sup>318</sup> McGilligan, pp. 510-512.

<sup>319</sup> 'Popeye', *Box Office Mojo* (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=popeye.htm>).

<sup>320</sup> Jerry Walsh in Zuckoff, p. 363.

<sup>321</sup> David Levy in *ibid.*, p.365; McGilligan, p. 520; Arjan Har Metz, 'Robert Altman Sells Studio for \$2.3 Million', *New York Times*, 11/7/1981, p. 15.

Jonathan Taplin for \$2.3 million, and leasing his Malibu home, Altman moved his family and offices to New York.<sup>322</sup> In 1985, he moved again, basing himself in Paris for remainder of the decade. He had physically and mentally detached himself from the Hollywood machine. However, there are different ways that Altman's self-imposed exile can be understood. As he had stated over the years, Altman never considered himself to be in the same business as the studio system's hit-making machine: 'The movies I want to make are movies the studios don't want. What they want to make, I don't.'<sup>323</sup>

Patrick McGilligan, however, is insistent that his exile was a move born of desperation:

Altman was seeking survival, and retreating to the small format as a last contingency in the downward spiral of his relations with major studios. He was entering a period of heightened isolation and paranoia, writer's block and writer despondency.<sup>324</sup>

McGilligan presents a picture of a man bereft of ideas and willing to do almost anything so long as it paid, but he fails to offer any evidence to this effect. Others offered a more positive perspective such as Stephen Farber who interviewed the director in 1985, and concluded that, 'far from discouraged, Altman feels creatively invigorated by the new direction his career has taken.'<sup>325</sup> The actor and director, Mark Rydell, also praised the director's indefatigability and independence: 'Bob never let the industry beat him. He created his own initiative. He went out and got the money to make his pictures. He rejected the status quo and would not be deterred.'<sup>326</sup> Altman now found himself in a situation where this determination found him having to explore small-scale, low-key opportunities. This was very much of his own making but was also influenced by the changes in the film industry at the turn of the decade. As Justin Wyatt put it, 'Altman's projects, usually lacking stars, an exploitable premise, and an obvious marketing approach, deviated significantly from [the] overall change in the

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<sup>322</sup> Harmetz, p. 15; Kathryn Altman in Zuckoff, p. 367.

<sup>323</sup> Harmetz, p. 15.

<sup>324</sup> McGilligan, p. 518.

<sup>325</sup> Farber, p. 34.

<sup>326</sup> Rydell in Zuckoff, p. 365.

industry.<sup>327</sup> It has already been discussed how 'auteurs' were struggling to find a place in a marketplace that was irrevocably altered by the effects of the 'Spielberg-Lucas Syndrome' but Altman's breakdown in his relationship with the studios was also because he was not willing to concede any control over his work (he always insisted on final cut). Altman was fighting against the prevailing tide and this unwillingness to compromise his filmmaking principles meant, in Wyatt's opinion, that 'Altman falls into the category of auteurs who failed to adapt to high concept.'<sup>328</sup> Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he never even tried to adapt in the first place.

In June 1981, Altman was invited to direct *Rattlesnake in the Cooler* and *Precious Blood*, two one-act plays by up-and-coming playwright, Frank South, at the Los Angeles Actors Theatre. After transferring to St Clements Theatre, off-Broadway, Altman filmed the pair there, under the title *Two by South*, for transmission on ABC's Cable Arts Network in early 1982. The result was that Altman, who invested \$114,500 of his own money, registered a net profit of \$22,501 on the project.<sup>329</sup> These types of opportunities from new revenue streams would provide Altman with a way to keep working on several later occasions in the decade.

Later in 1982, Altman agreed to direct Ed Graczyk's 1976 play, *Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* at the Martin Beck theatre on Broadway. Assembling a formidable cast (all of whom went on appear in the film) that included Cher in her first acting role, as well as Altman regulars Karen Black and Sandy Dennis, the play was a moderate success but was hampered by a scathing review by influential critic, Frank Rich, in the *New York Times*, who described the play as 'a dreary amateur night.'<sup>330</sup> At some point, an aspiring producer, Peter Newman, approached the director about adapting the play for cable television channel Showtime.<sup>331</sup> He had obtained finance,

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<sup>327</sup> Wyatt, 'Economic Constraints', p. 55.

<sup>328</sup> Wyatt, *High Concept*, p. 190.

<sup>329</sup> 'Final Figures: *Two by South*', undated (RAA: box 162). All monetary figures quoted exclude cents.

<sup>330</sup> Frank Rich, 'Stage: Robert Altman Directs Cher', *New York Times*, 19/2/1982, p. C3.

<sup>331</sup> McGilligan, p. 524.

about \$850,000, from Mark Goodson, a successful game show producer.<sup>332</sup> Altman had it in mind to film *Jimmy Dean* all along and only one week after the play closed in spring 1982, shooting was underway. Altman wanted a theatrical release and Showtime reluctantly agreed to let him take the film around the festival circuit. Newman and Altman subsequently took it on a whistle-stop European tour and in just two weeks, the pair attended four festivals and five screenings (as well as three screenings of *Health* that the ever-enterprising director was also trying to sell at the same time).<sup>333</sup> For all this work, and reasonable deals for video distribution from at least six territories around the world, a financial statement from March 1985 shows that the film had still, to that point, only recouped \$737,045 against final costs of just over \$1.8 million.<sup>334</sup>

*Jimmy Dean* is the Altman film from the period that has attracted the greatest amount of focused academic attention, not least because, thematically, it can be aligned with other Altman films, such as *3 Women* (1977) or *Images*, that place female consciousness at their centre. According to Kolker, *Jimmy Dean* can be compared to these films because it 'deals with the crisis of women confronting the oppressions of patriarchy by dissolving them into neuroses.'<sup>335</sup> It tells the story of a group of women reuniting in the small Texas town where they grew up together (and where two of them still live). A mysterious outsider, Jo (Karen Black), is the catalyst for the revelation of the truth about what happened twenty years ago. On the stage, these past events were played downstage, with different lighting and by different actresses; in the film, Altman pulls off what appears to be a technically complex effect in showing the historical scenes play out through the mirror at the back of the eponymous 5 and Dime store. The camera alights on a character thinking about events twenty years ago, then pans across to the mirror where what actually happened is shown (with the same actresses only nominally altered in appearance). The effect is achieved relatively simply by using a

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<sup>332</sup> Newman in Zuckoff, p. 374.

<sup>333</sup> Letter from Denise Breton (European publicist) to Altman, 28/8/1982 (RAA: 104).

<sup>334</sup> MG Cable Productions, 'Outside Participant Report', 31/3/1985 (RAA:104).

<sup>335</sup> Kolker, p. 414.

‘Mylar mirror’, which reflects as a normal mirror, until light is put behind it when you can see through it (like a window).<sup>336</sup> As he would do in almost all the eighties work, Altman cleaves fairly faithfully to the original text of the play. *Jimmy Dean* was Altman’s most acclaimed film for some years although McGilligan claims that Altman was, nevertheless, no happier: ‘the critics ceased to have any real meaning. The director was still scrambling, wretched, vindictive.’<sup>337</sup> Whatever his state of mind, it seems that the experience of directing the play on stage, then filming it inexpensively, set the template for the way he would manage to keep directing for the remainder of the decade.

## 1983 - 1984

In June 1982, Altman had accepted an offer from the University of Michigan to become their Marsh Visiting Professor of Communications and the next year, he directed opera for the first time in a university production of Stravinsky’s *A Rake’s Progress*. He put his own money up so that he could lay on a spectacular production with a cast of one hundred and forty characters and lavish art direction.<sup>338</sup> Meanwhile, *Streamers*, the third play in a ‘Vietnam trilogy’ by David Rabe, had been circulating as a film property since its 1976 production.<sup>339</sup> A winner of ‘Best American Play’ at the New York Drama Critics Circle award under the direction of Mike Nichols, producers Robert Geisler and John Roberdeau obtained the rights to adapt the play for the cinema and invited Altman to direct. Shooting was under way at Las Colinas Studios near Dallas when Altman realised that the pair did not have the funds to make the film. Altman was obliged to pay them \$280,000 plus 5 percent of net profits to acquire ownership, and managed to complete shooting in ‘eighteen days with a twenty-man crew for something under \$2 million.’<sup>340</sup> Altman was saved when his agent found a

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<sup>336</sup> *Altman on Altman*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>337</sup> McGilligan, p. 524.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 527.

<sup>339</sup> The other two are *Sticks and Bones* and *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (both 1971).

<sup>340</sup> Agreement between Landscape Films (Altman) and Lampwick Inc., 8/3/1983 (RAA:142); Paul Rosenfield, ‘Robert Altman: Ever Ready for the Gauntlet or Gantlet’, *Los Angeles Times*, 29/11/1983, p. G4.

financier, Nick Mileti, willing to buy the rights for approximately \$3 million.<sup>341</sup> As with *Jimmy Dean*, Altman travelled extensively to promote *Streamers*, visiting festivals in Chicago, Milan, Rome, London and Cleveland on the search for distribution deals.<sup>342</sup> At Venice, in September, it was in competition and carried away six Golden Lion awards for 'Best Actor' for its ensemble cast. Altman had been willing to dip into his own pocket to make *Streamers*, and would do again on *Secret Honor*, suggesting that Altman's personal financial situation was not as desperate as McGilligan implies, and that his motivation at this time, in the face of ongoing difficulties in raising finance, was to keep busy at all times and to get his art seen rather than the simple necessity of earning a living.

### ***Streamers***

When Altman was promoting *Streamers*, he frequently remarked that he was 'telling the same story' as *M\*A\*S\*H* 'but it just isn't funny anymore.'<sup>343</sup> This made a good sound bite, a way to try to sell *Streamers*, but it is a comparison that only works in the broadest possible terms. In relying on the early hit that made his name in this way, Altman illustrated the difficulty of marketing a film like *Streamers*. In the age of 'high concept,' it was inevitable that a low-scale film, one that takes place in the confined setting of a barracks room and centres around the conversations between four young men awaiting orders to go to Vietnam, would struggle to find an audience on its own terms. Whereas the satire of *M\*A\*S\*H* explored the futility and absurdities of war, its Korean setting could really have been any conflict. According to Philip Kolin, *Streamers* is also more concerned with 'the archetypal theme - the rite of passage into manhood - in the lives of four young soldiers.'<sup>344</sup> Yet the specificity of its setting and the distance of the film from both the events it portrays, and when the play was first performed, offers a more objective hindsight about the events its viewers know will occur in Vietnam shortly after the play's events. The tragic and violent conclusion of the play

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<sup>341</sup> Roy Loynd, 'Mileti Ankles SLM to Solo, Buys *Streamers* for \$3-Mil', *Variety*, 6/7/1983, p. 6, 34.

<sup>342</sup> 'Robert Altman Schedule - *Streamers*', undated (RAA:144).

<sup>343</sup> Quoted in David Robinson, '*Streamers*', *The Times*, 23/3/1984, p. 21.

<sup>344</sup> Philip C. Kolin, 'Rabe's *Streamers*', *Explicator*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Autumn 1986), p. 63.

prefigures the deaths that likely awaited soldiers waiting for orders in 1965 (when the play is set). According to Carol Rosen, the way the play uses the titular song, adapted from the popular song 'Beautiful Dreamer', turns it 'into a universalising song about all meaningless deaths...a motif for *everyone* fallen in lost causes in absurd wars.'<sup>345</sup> Rabe explained that 'our lives are all like streamers, because ultimately, the chute doesn't open - we're all going to die.'<sup>346</sup> But Vietnam itself is not used universally, as Korea was in *M\*A\*S\*H*, but as a specific and recognisable marker for most Americans of such meaningless deaths. *Streamers* is, however, not only about war and some analysts of the play, like Sabine Altwein, argue how it only uses its historical setting as a vehicle to explore its underlying themes of 'racial prejudices, political ignorance, religious hypocrisy, and the rejection of the "Other" in the broadest sense.'<sup>347</sup> In keeping with the wider concerns of this project, however, the following analysis of *Streamers* is far more about Altman's authorship than its interweaving of such themes. As in nearly all the adapted plays, his creative agency rests mostly outside of the written text. My focus is more on how Altman made cinematic a static, constricted and dialogue-heavy piece of theatre.

Whereas writers on the theatre have shown interest in Rabe, and particularly in *Streamers*, scholarly considerations of Altman's career have largely ignored the film.<sup>348</sup> Keyssar justifies this by aligning *Streamers* with *Beyond Therapy* and *OC and Stiggs* as 'the most predictable productions' of the eighties.'<sup>349</sup> While it is true that *Streamers* does not hold such obvious attractions for academics as the female perspective of *Jimmy Dean* or the political resonances found in *Secret Honor*, it is an

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<sup>345</sup> Carol Rosen, *Plays of Impasse: Contemporary Drama Set in Confining Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 251 (emphasis in original).

<sup>346</sup> Quoted in Clarke Taylor, 'Premiere of *Streamers*: Playwright Rabe Cheered at Filmfest', *Los Angeles Times*, 12/10/1983, p. G2.

<sup>347</sup> Sabine Altwein, *The Quest for American Manhood: Issue of Race and Gender in David Rabe's Vietnam Trilogy* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Müller, 2008), p. 23.

<sup>348</sup> Other examinations of the play include Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 275-278 and Gerald M. Berkowitz, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 142-144. The film is paid no attention at all by Kolker and Self, and merits only a few cursory mentions by Keyssar.

<sup>349</sup> Keyssar, p. 317.

adaptation that offers up an accomplished, and in many ways typical, example of the way Altman approached making small-scale films from contemporary plays. The setting is a barracks room, one corner of which is occupied by three young soldiers, awaiting orders to be shipped out to Vietnam. Billy (Matthew Modine), a white college graduate and Roger (David Alan Grier), a working-class African-American, appear to be close friends, having bonded over their fitness regimes and their pride in keeping their 'house' neat and tidy. Richie (Mitchell Lichtenstein), from a wealthy background, affects a camp demeanour and constantly refers to his professed homosexuality. Billy and Roger keep telling each other that Richie is only joking until an outsider, Carlyle (Michael Wright), arrives and disturbs the trio's equanimity. He is a black man from 'the streets' (as he puts it), disoriented by being dragged from his natural milieu, whose volatility and inability to assimilate to an alien environment leads to the violent denouement. Hovering on the fringes of the action, two sergeants, Rooney (Guy Boyd) and Cokes (George Dzundza), old comrades who served together, provide a tragi-comic reminder of the effects of war. They are inebriated throughout, their sense of self shattered by their experiences. By the end, Carlyle has murdered Rooney and Billy for almost meaningless reasons, the unhinged actions of a confused man for whom violence is already an everyday reality. As Christopher Bigsby observed about the play, 'the threat is already on the inside' because these men's 'existence seems to have no purpose beyond its self-justifying routines.'<sup>350</sup> In such an environment, death occurs almost outside of the control of those involved.

In *Jimmy Dean* and later in *Secret Honor*, Altman begins with his trademark mobile camera on the prowl, exploring what will be the film's setting, delving into the dusty corners of the 5 and Dime store or taking in the accoutrements of Richard Nixon's study. *Streamers'* opening (although not its camera style) is quite different but its title sequence, which is mirrored in the end credits, is nevertheless an early indicator of Altman's intervention. The credits play while a group of highly disciplined soldiers carry out their drill. There is no music, only the eerie sounds of their routine from

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<sup>350</sup> Bigsby, p. 275.



boots and rifles, the mood matched by images cast in a blue-grey haze. The shots of a ghostly military precision provide a counterpoint to the disorganised, dishevelled portrayal of the army that will constitute *Streamers*. The film itself then begins with a scene not in the play: the two drunken sergeants are playing a childish game with fuses and firecrackers. As well as introducing this pair much earlier than in the play, Altman does the same with Carlyle, the interloper, in these opening moments. He is seen outside the hut, through the window, looking anxious, before he enters and is intercut with the sergeants' antics, looking around unsurely. The film joins up with the play, mirroring the slow-build-ups initiated by Altman in the other adaptations, only after about five minutes when Richie goes into the bathroom and talks with Martin (Albert Macklin), a suicidal soldier who disappears from the play after this incident (although in the film he makes a brief re-appearance towards the end). Rabe recounted that he did not write these introductory scenes:

No, that was not in the play, strictly the movie. I don't know if it was ever written. I think it was more or less an improvisation; it may have been written after they did it. Or maybe Bob Altman wrote it...I understand the reasons for it and I approve of Bob's impulse to have something to start off with that would be better - in terms of filmmaking - to lead you into the place and story.<sup>351</sup>

His reaction to this indicates that he felt able to accommodate himself to Altman's needs. As would occur with *Secret Honor*, any disruption of the fidelity to the original play's text mostly transpired, according to Rabe, after the filming: 'basically we shot the play and we created the screenplay in the editing room.'<sup>352</sup> The written screenplays confirm Rabe's understanding, with only the 'Script as Shot' incorporating any changes made to the original source text.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> David Rabe, 'Streamers: An Interview', undated and unattributed in BFI cuttings file on *Streamers*, p. 23.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>353</sup> David Rabe, *Streamers*, 'Screenplay' and 'As Shot Screenplay', undated (RAA:144).

The film does excise some fairly large swathes of the play's text and there is some new dialogue worked out on set. Altman said that 'the actors had the right to interpret the roles,' which suggests his customary working practice, where he allows actors freedom to work out their roles for themselves, was applicable in the 1980s work more than is generally supposed because of its close adherence to original sources.<sup>354</sup> Matthew Modine spoke about Altman's directorial style, describing how, when he approached the director for advice on the meaning of one of his monologues, Altman response was, 'I hired you to be an actor. There were things about this role that you could interpret, that you could bring to life. If I was interested in my interpretation I would have played the part.'<sup>355</sup> The removal of dialogue sometimes functions, presumably, to keep the film to a manageable length but is also employed more subtly, showing how cinema can draw attention to emotional response, wordlessly, more easily than in the theatre. This is because a viewer in a cinema is more guided than a theatregoer through the use of techniques such as the close-up and shot-reverse-shot convention. This is particularly noticeable when Cokes and Rooney are telling the young recruits a story about a soldier's death by faulty parachute. The young soldiers' spoken responses are written on the page in lines like "Ohhhhh, geezus", 'un-fuckin'-believable', 'Jesus!' and 'Hey!'<sup>356</sup> All these verbal responses are omitted in favour of silent shots, with close-ups on the individual, differentiated reactions of the characters. These begin with bemusement and contemplation, then are replaced with aghast and unbelieving expressions as Cokes's story becomes horribly absurd. In this way, a camera can pick up minute reactions that a theatregoer, from their distanced viewpoint, will never see.

Altman does not entirely confine the film to the single barracks room with three bunks that is the setting of the play.<sup>357</sup> The film takes place largely in the small corner of a long room where the three soldiers live but the camera often allows us views of the extended space with many rows of bunks

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<sup>354</sup> Brent Lewis, 'Altman on *Streamers*', *Nine to Five*, 2/4/1984, p. 4.

<sup>355</sup> Modine in Zuckoff, p. 383.

<sup>356</sup> Rabe, *The Vietnam Plays: Volume Two* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), pp. 33-35.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

stretching away towards Rooney's office at the far end as well as the washroom that adjoins the barracks. Altman also uses what he called (*à la* Hitchcock) a 'Rear Window' technique, showing activity outside the hut only from within, through filthy windows.<sup>358</sup> These fleeting, unscripted scenes are employed as a symbolic contrast to the traumatic effects of the soldier's confinement with glimpses of the more carefree life that exists outside in the real world, including Cokes and Rooney childishly playing hide and seek and the happy reunion of an engaged couple. This partial unbuckling of the constriction of the single set does not, as might be expected, dissipate the dramatic tensions that derive from the action within. Instead, the claustrophobic effect is heightened by offering a metaphorical outlet that is close yet unattainable. It is the camera style that Altman developed with his regular cinematographer at the time, Pierre Mignot, that allows him to retain this sense of confinement, which is not simply derived from the original theatrical setting but from the subject matter as well.<sup>359</sup> The soldiers are imprisoned by their circumstances and it was important that Altman retained the play's claustrophobic essence in re-imagining it cinematically.

It is the way the camera is employed in *Streamers* that energises the play, transporting the viewer into the action. This strategy illustrates how cinema is different from the theatre because, as Bazin describes it, it can 'free the spectator from his seat and by varying the shots give an added quality to the acting.'<sup>360</sup> The drama and tension in the play comes from long scenes of charged conversation as the protagonists' damaged sense of identity is exposed. Altman heightens this melodrama with his inquisitive camera that allows him to more closely examine the behaviours and reactions of the soldiers as the developing tragedy is visited upon them. Keyssar observes about the 1980s work more generally that 'Altman places the camera in the middle of the single, enclosed space...and wanders about in that space in a manner consistent with, but more subtle than, the promiscuous

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<sup>358</sup> Champlin, 'Altman's Getting Back to Basic', p. M6.

<sup>359</sup> Mignot was cinematographer on nine Altman projects beginning with *Jimmy Dean* and including nearly everything Altman worked on in the eighties.

<sup>360</sup> Bazin, p. 89.

camera work in his films of the seventies.<sup>361</sup> Perhaps the subtle but promiscuous camera is *the* defining characteristic of the 'Altmanesque in exile.'

*Streamers* attracted a mixed reception from the critics, although tending mostly towards the negative, in a pattern that was not too dissimilar to the reviews of Altman's later 1970s films. As Altman would find throughout much of the decade, what these independent films lacked was the distribution and marketing muscle of Hollywood and even the most positive critical reception was unlikely to result in box-office success for a film like *Streamers* because Altman never secured any worthwhile distribution. Although its domestic gross was a paltry \$378,000, not even as much as Altman had been willing to spend of his own money on the film, there remained possibilities, with video and overseas sales, for such small-scale projects to eventually make a profit.<sup>362</sup> Indeed, an undated 'Final Accounting Statement' shows the film eventually registering a net profit of \$383,103.<sup>363</sup> Altman's next step, however, suggested that he remained frustrated by the limited scope of these inexpensive films.

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In 1983, Peter Newman (*Jimmy Dean's* producer) funded the writing of a script based on a *National Lampoon* article, 'The Ugly, Monstrous, Mind-Roasting Summer of O.C. and Stiggs', by Tod Carroll and Ted Mann. The 'teen' comedy was in favour at the time and the project attracted interest from several studios and directors. At this point, Altman suddenly claimed to be affronted to have not been asked to direct and Newman, who still had faith in his 'hero', readily agreed. The pair met with executives at MGM whose 'green light' was only granted when Altman promised, with apparent sincerity, to 'shoot the script' and to not bad-mouth the studio in the press. Armed with a \$7 million 'go', shooting began in Phoenix where Altman proceeded to immediately, wilfully, break both his

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<sup>361</sup> Keyssar, p. 316.

<sup>362</sup> '*Streamers*', *Box Office Mojo* [<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=streamers>].

<sup>363</sup> 'Final Accounting Statement', *Streamers*, undated (RAA:142).

promises, tearing up the script and cutting off all communication with the studio. After a preview, MGM begged Altman to re-edit (he had final cut) but he refused and the studio shelved the film until 1987, when it was released only to clear rights for video release.<sup>364</sup> The film was panned and its domestic gross barely reached a mere \$30,000.<sup>365</sup> Whereas MGM were looking for a 'teen' romp in the manner of *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) and *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981), Altman professed to hate the genre and told himself he could make it as a satire.<sup>366</sup> Unfortunately the satire is barely discernible and it is a struggle to locate any glimpses of the Altman style amongst the puerile humour and uninspired plotting. Altman's involvement and behaviour indicates a tension between a desire to keep working and an unshakeable disdain for Hollywood that manifested itself in him deliberately making promises he knew he would not keep. The difference between 1983 and the 1970s is that his creative capital in Hollywood was now entirely spent. *O.C. and Stiggs* cemented his estrangement and, even when his exile was over, he gravitated to the burgeoning independent market to finance his films.

Later in 1983, Altman was reluctantly dragged along by Bill Bushnell to his playhouse, the Los Angeles Actors Theater, to see *Secret Honor, The Last Testament of Richard M. Nixon: A Political Myth*, a one-man play starring Philip Baker Hall. Altman was captivated by what he saw, especially Hall's 'performance at a Shakespearian level.'<sup>367</sup> He immediately offered to get the play produced off-Broadway and it ran for about forty performances at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York, in October and November. A pattern was now emerging for Altman in the 1980s: this was the third time in recent years he had involved himself in a theatrical project (although not directing this time) and it seemed inevitable that he would now film *Secret Honor*.

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<sup>364</sup> McGilligan, pp. 528-531.

<sup>365</sup> 'O.C. and Stiggs', *Box Office Mojo* [<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ocandstiggs.htm>].

<sup>366</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 134.

<sup>367</sup> Robert Altman, DVD Commentary, *Secret Honor* (Criterion, 2004).

## ***Secret Honor***

*Secret Honor* was written by Donald Freed, a writer and playwright who was no stranger to speculating about outlandish political conspiracies, and Arnold M. Stone, a lawyer allegedly with connections to the murkier corners of American politics.<sup>368</sup> It was, in the words of its original subtitle, 'a political myth' expounded through an extended monologue by a version of the disgraced ex-President. He becomes progressively inebriated as he delivers an unrestrained rant against his perceived enemies and mounts a defence, really a series of excuses and justifications, against a list of imagined charges against him. The revelation he eventually explicates, his 'secret honor', is that he deliberately constructed the Watergate affair to enable him to resign. Nixon's honour means he must extricate himself from, and therefore thwart, a conspiracy in which he was the mere figurehead for all-powerful American business interests who expected Nixon to continue the war in Vietnam and stand for a third term.

*Secret Honor* was made on a 'shoestring', financed entirely by Altman. As he observed, a one-man play set in a single room, about a figure that most Americans wanted to banish from their memories, did not exactly have a 'want-to-see factor'.<sup>369</sup> Altman asserted that 'it cost about \$350,000...I will probably lose \$300,000! I can't afford to do it again for a while, but I'm glad I spent the money.'<sup>370</sup> No doubt he was exaggerating for effect, not only because international and video sales inevitably mitigated the film's losses, but also because, in December 1984, Altman had secured a seven-year distribution deal with Cinecom (who distributed *Jimmy Dean*) for 'sole and exclusive rights' in all domestic markets.<sup>371</sup> It seems apparent that he was, in fact, willing to spend as much money as he could afford to lose, rather, than deliberately keeping the cost down because he judged the film

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<sup>368</sup> Freed provided the story for *Executive Action* (David Miller, 1973) that offers an alternative theory about [John] Kennedy's assassination some eighteen years before Oliver Stone's similarly themed *JFK* (1991). See also Richard Combs, 'In a Lonely Place', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 612 (January 1985), p. 5.

<sup>369</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, 'Secret Honor: Interviews with Donald Freed and Robert Altman', *Cineaste*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1985), p. 14.

<sup>370</sup> Anon, 'Secret Honour [sic]', *New Musical Express*, 9/2/1985, p. 19.

<sup>371</sup> Agreement between Secret Castle Productions and Cinecom International, 11/2/1984 (RAA:137).

would fail. Although he may have seemed to be more concerned with working meaningfully than profitably, he could not entirely separate the two if he wanted his work to be seen. It was entirely unfeasible for Altman to keep financing his own films, however microscopic a budget with which he was able to manage.

One of the more interesting aspects of *Secret Honor* is its unusual production environment. It was predicated on the budget that Altman could afford to spend, but also represents an interesting experiment in film production as teaching exercise by enabling students to collaborate with, and observe at work, one of America's most acclaimed auteur-directors. As a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, he was able to film *Secret Honor* there, using a student residential hall as his location. He employed students to fulfil most of the functions required of a film crew, apart from a few key roles given to professionals (including Mignot, his regular cinematographer and his son, Stephen as production designer). Students who wanted to work on the film filled in questionnaires listing their experience and strengths, as well as if they had a car that they were willing to use, possibly the most important attribute as far as the production team were concerned. The form demanded 'a full time commitment' for the seven days of shooting.<sup>372</sup> As well as students enjoying hands-on experience of making a film, Altman lectured during the process, placed a camera in the room where the filming took place and set up monitors outside it enabling students to observe the shooting as it took place. In keeping with his usual practice of encouraging everyone to watch the dailies, Altman even allowed any students who were so inclined to watch the rough footage at the end of each day.<sup>373</sup> Altman's use of students as an alternative way of making films recalls Nicholas Ray's later years where he similarly collaborated with aspiring student filmmakers on experimental work, as depicted in the documentary, *Lighting Over Water* (1980), that he made with Wim Wenders at the very end of his life.

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<sup>372</sup> University of Michigan Department of Communication Student Questionnaires, January 1984 (RAA.:137)

<sup>373</sup> Combs, 'In a Lonely Place', p. 5; Altman, DVD Commentary.

As we have seen already, Altman scholars, when writing about the 1980s, largely concentrate on thematic connections that develop from the written text, or from the actors' characterisations. This approach to the analysis of Altman becomes problematic when attempting any auteurist interpretation of his 1980s work. On *Secret Honor*, particularly, it does appear initially difficult to ascribe to Altman any significant degree of authorial agency. There was no screenplay and they filmed the entire play, only abridging it in the editing room. A comparison between the film and the published text of the play reveals the film's elisions to be relatively superficial and infrequent.<sup>374</sup> Hall had spoken the same words on many previous occasions and the celluloid recording of his performance might be seen as the culmination of his own contribution to its ongoing authorship. His intensity and physicality are such that he becomes a fundamental part of the film's creative essence. It is no surprise that, according to Altman, Hall 'lost three to five pounds in each performance.'<sup>375</sup> Alongside Hall, there is also the contribution of the play's stage director, Robert Harders, of which Altman was keen to afford a large degree of credit for the 'direction' of his film: 'Philip and Bob [Harders] were responsible for the authorship a lot, they gave it a shape.'<sup>376</sup> However, all the above notwithstanding, the transition from stage to screen is not achieved in a conventional or unimaginative manner. We can acknowledge that authorship is shared more in *Secret Honor* than in almost anything Altman directed but what is interesting is the way he, nevertheless, fashions it into a distinctive Altman film.

Altman asserts his authorial presence from the very beginning. The play starts with Nixon seated, a drink in hand, staring into the fireplace. The film begins quite differently, with a shot of a clock (not mentioned in the play) that will mark the passage of time before, as the credits roll, the camera pans slowly left across the room, taking in the accoutrements of Nixon's study. The camera pulls back and

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<sup>374</sup> Donald Freed and Arnold M. Stone, 'Secret Honor, The Last Testament of Richard M. Nixon: A Political Myth' in M. Elizabeth Osborn and Gillian Richards (eds.), *New Plays USA 2* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1984), pp. 1-32.

<sup>375</sup> Altman, DVD Commentary.

<sup>376</sup> Combs, p. 5



tilts right, as George Burt's orchestral music rises, circling the room before eventually revealing, beneath a portrait of Henry Kissinger, a bank of four CCTV monitors. These are the most significant difference from the original theatrical presentation; the monitors are used frequently throughout the film as cutaways from Hall to fuzzy black-and-white images. The camera advances, framing the right-hand monitor which shows a set of security gates, the next monitor then reveals a man walking towards the camera down a corridor and turning left, before stopping and looking nervously back. The third now shows his back as he approaches a door. The sound of a key turning accompanies the camera panning away from the monitor to the door of the study. Richard Nixon enters tentatively, nervously clutching a briefcase. The camera trails Hall as he pours himself a sherry, prowls the room and stares at the monitors, as if he has never seen them before. He changes his drink for a whisky and he swaps jackets. It is only now, with a medium long shot of Nixon, that the film joins up with the play's opening: 'He lifts out a large box. He opens the box and checks the gun inside.'<sup>377</sup> It is six and a half minutes into the film, and everything seen to this point flows from Altman's imagination and Hall's interpretation of his direction. Altman has set the scene, allowing the audience to become accustomed to the ambience of the setting alongside the time to think about what they already know about Nixon. They must get used to the fact that this 'Richard Nixon' does not really resemble, and will not sound like, the real one. Altman establishes the rhythm for the play's cinematic incarnation by the expedient addition of a silent prologue that introduces its character and establishes the boundaries of the film's *mise-en-scène*. By barely opening up the play, Altman can be seen to be upholding the virtues of Bazin and Sontag's ideas for filming plays effectively; at the same time, he makes use of cinematic techniques not available to a stage director.

The pattern that Altman establishes in these opening moments he carries forward into the film, employing a highly mobile, inquisitive camera, accompanied by extended panning shots and judicious cutting, to energise the drama. Altman takes the viewer into the midst of the action by

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<sup>377</sup> Freed and Stone, p. 5.

allowing his camera to wander languidly amongst the confined settings. Altman (and Mignot) provide relief from Hall's emotional rants with the more distanced, blurred imagery on the monitors and he observed that he 'liked the bad quality of the image, it almost gave the impression we were watching old film of Nixon's appearances.'<sup>378</sup> According to Thomas Monsell, 'through [the monitors] we see Nixon, the windbag, impressing himself.'<sup>379</sup> Altman uses an array of close-ups, shots from every conceivable angle and numerous cutaway shots that are all keenly attuned to the pacing of Hall's monologue. As he becomes mournful and contemplative, the cutting slows down and the camera lingers on the crumpled figure, particularly when he is talking about his mother. When Nixon is ranting, the camera often becomes restless, mimicking his mood. Altman, frequently and characteristically, uses a zoom lens to place emphasis on what Nixon is saying or feeling, or on objects that bear some meaning, such as the gun with which he may commit suicide, or the clock that indicates a form of deadline for that act (will he kill himself at midnight?).

After the extended opening, the film follows its original source faithfully until Altman chooses to extend the ending, making further expressive use of the monitors. Both play and film give us Nixon's angry riposte to the American people: 'They wanted me to stay down. They wanted me to kill myself.' He picks up the pistol and puts it to his head, thinks about it before angrily putting it down. He says, 'If they want me dead, they'll have to do it.' He triumphantly raises his fist to the air and shouts at the top of his voice, 'Fuck' em!<sup>380</sup> This is how the play ends but Altman does not quite finish there. Hall carries on exclaiming the final line over and over, *sixteen* times in total, as Altman pans and cuts from one monitor to the next and the next, and rapidly panning back and forward again. The shots' speed increases exponentially so that Nixon appears to be, in Kael's words, 'splintering right before our eyes.'<sup>381</sup> Behind the ranting, a chorus of a mob chanting repeatedly 'four more years' can be heard getting gradually louder. This chorus continues as the screen goes fuzzy

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<sup>378</sup> Altman on Altman, p. 135.

<sup>379</sup> Thomas Monsell, *Nixon on Stage and Screen* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1998), p. 139.

<sup>380</sup> Freed and Stone, p. 31.

<sup>381</sup> Kael, 'The Current Cinema: Arf', *New Yorker*, 15/7/1985, p. 73.

like a CCTV system gone wrong while the credits start to roll. Altman has taken the blunt sign-off of the play and extended into a crazed final riposte from the disgraced ex-President to all those who have tried to put him down. Keyssar reads this conclusion as a 'visual metaphor' for 'the dissolution of Nixon's speech into inarticulate babble'<sup>382</sup> and the employment of the monitors allows Altman to accomplish a stunningly realised, final evocation of the man's self-delusion. The unhinged, almost fascistic nature of his saluting gesture, the images multiplied by the rapid cutting, satirises the triumphalism of despotic dictators - and, indeed, of victorious American Presidents.

When identifying the position that the film holds in its director's canon, and what it tells us about his career in the 1980s, the plausibility of the political story that the film purports to tell us is not especially relevant. Nevertheless, the content chimes with Altman's leftist view of American politics, and he and Freed both promoted the film in interviews by attesting that large parts of the film were based on proven facts. Most of all it is Hall's mesmeric performance that holds the audience's attention but the writing is provocative and mischievous with its blend of speculative invention and known historical fact, as when Nixon recounts that he is the puppet of a group of wealthy businessmen, a secretive cabal who gather at Bohemian Grove, amongst the redwoods of California.<sup>383</sup> It is a fictional portrait, however, and within this speculative interpretation of Nixon, *Secret Honor* is far more interested in, and interesting about, the essence of its real-life model's character as a vehicle with which to expose the instability inherent in American politics.

*Secret Honor* was shown at an early iteration of the Sundance Festival in 1984 but, failing to acquire adequate distribution, Altman's production company was obliged to secure individual deals with theatres and cinema chains across the country.<sup>384</sup> Despite various deals for video and European distribution, as late as 1989 a report for the Screen Actors Guild (on behalf of Baker Hall) was still

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<sup>382</sup> Keyssar, p. 329.

<sup>383</sup> The Bohemian Grove retreat exists and has been the subject of several books. See G. William Domhoff, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats: A Study in Ruling-class Cohesiveness* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974) for an objective account of the club's history and rituals.

<sup>384</sup> At least thirty different financial agreements between *Secret Castle* and individual theatres and theatre chains (RAA:139).

reporting a gross to date of only \$146,543.<sup>385</sup> The film was warmly received by many critics on both sides of the Atlantic although, unsurprisingly, the controversial, far-fetched political content attracted some criticism in the United States.<sup>386</sup> A largely positive reception, however, did not have the effect it might have had earlier in Altman's career. By 1984, Altman was so far removed from the Hollywood machine, and his profile so reduced, that what the critics said was unlikely to have any effect at all on his career or negate the extent of his Hollywood exile. The lack of distribution arrangements meant that readers will have been mostly unable to act upon the positive reviews by actually going to see the film. Nevertheless, maintaining a certain critical cachet must have helped the director to stay in gainful employment: his next theatrical adaptation would allow him a much larger budget.

## 1985 - 1986

In the second half of the decade, although continuing to insist that he had as little interest in Hollywood as it did in him, Altman was nevertheless constantly trying to get more substantially budgeted films made, but through alternative financial arrangements. The project that came closest to production was *An Easter Egg Hunt*, based on a novel by Gillian Freeman (who had written the screenplay for Altman's *That Cold Day in the Park* in 1979). A dreamy mystery set in a British girls' boarding school, budgeted at about \$6 million, it was 'nearly' financed by a Canadian production company in 1981, then by an American independent producer in 1984, followed by Euston Films in Britain showing considerable interest in 1986. As late as 1994, Altman was writing a fifth draft and his son, Stephen, revised it yet again two years later, with a view to directing it himself.<sup>387</sup> *Biarritz*, from an original screenplay by Altman, was a European thriller set in a hotel in the eponymous

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<sup>385</sup> Screen Actors Guild Report for Philip Baker Hall for quarter ending 31/3/1989 (RAA:138).

<sup>386</sup> For a scathing response to the film's vision of Nixon, see Stephen Harvey, 'Sympathy for That Devil?', *Village Voice*, 11/6/1985, p. 60.

<sup>387</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Draft 24/6/1984; 2<sup>nd</sup> 9/12/1984; 5<sup>th</sup> 24/9/1994; Amendments by Stephen Altman, 15/3/1996. Numerous letters and legal agreements, 1978-1996: for example, letter to Altman from Euston Films regarding director and screenplay fees, 14/10/1986 (all RAA:542).

location that also attracted enough interest to be close to production in late 1984, in 1987 and again in 1995.<sup>388</sup> Other scripts written by Altman in the 1980s which were never made also included *The Feud* in 1983, from a novel by Thomas Berger, and *Across the River and Into the Trees* in 1985, based on a Hemingway novel.<sup>389</sup> Altman also signed on to direct *Heat* in 1986, a generic Burt Reynolds vehicle with a script by William Goldman for which he was clearly unsuited, and he extricated himself from the project before production began.<sup>390</sup>

There was even the chance of a Hollywood redemption from a proposed 1988 sequel to *Nashville*, called *Nashville XIII* (thirteen years after the original) that proposed to reunite most of the main cast and picked up on the characters' lives thirteen years on from the original. Jerry Weintraub, the original's producer, obtained finance from Paramount for \$10 million and five drafts were written by Robert Harders and Altman (individually and together).<sup>391</sup> Although Karen Black and Henry Gibson, from the original cast, were firmly secured, a letter from the producers to Altman's assistant, Scott Bushnell, gives detailed, and individual, advice about what Altman needed to do to try to get eleven of the key cast on board.<sup>392</sup> These were mostly the original line-up and, essentially, what was requested of Altman was to massage egos and make them feel wanted.<sup>393</sup> The efforts to try to coral this all-star cast dragged on for over a year and later drafts were now calling it *Nashville, Nashville*.<sup>394</sup> In 1991, the protracted saga was unhappily concluded with the bankruptcy of Weintraub's production company.

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<sup>388</sup> Numerous letters, telexes and documents, 1984-1995. For example, see Budget Summary (\$2.7 million), 6/11/1984; telex from Thomas Schittler (producer), budget now \$6.7m, 23/6/1987 (all RAA:536).

<sup>389</sup> *Across the River and Into the Trees*, screenplay by Altman, 9/5/85 (RAA:534); *The Feud*, 1st draft screenplay by Altman, 12/1983 (RAA:542).

<sup>390</sup> Letter from Robert Stein (Altman's agent) to Elliott Kastner (producer), 3/2/1986 (RAA:545). *Heat* was made in 1986, directed by Dick Richards, a critical and commercial failure.

<sup>391</sup> 'Budget Recap: *Nashville/Nashville*', Weintraub Entertainment Productions, 14/9/1987. Drafts dated 11/1986, 3/1987, 4/1987, 26/2/1987, 15/3/1987 (all RAA:555).

<sup>392</sup> Letter from David Kirkpatrick, Weintraub Entertainment to Altman, 5/11/1987 (RAA:555).

<sup>393</sup> Letter from Kirkpatrick to Scott Bushnell, 29/10/1987 (RAA:555).

<sup>394</sup> See drafts above (n. 388).

In 1985, after several of these projects stalled, Altman moved his home and operations to Paris. He edited his next feature, *Fool for Love*, there but only shot two films in Paris itself, one for the cinema and one for television, and neither set there: *Beyond Therapy* and *The Laundromat*. Although *An Easter Egg Hunt* and *Biarritz* were unmade projects with European settings, it was not until he made *Gosford Park* in 2002, shot and set in England, that Altman eventually directed his first film not set in the United States. *The Laundromat* was another one-act play, by Marsha Norman, that Altman produced and directed for HBO in 1985.<sup>395</sup> The opportunities for independent production in emerging formats is exemplified in this small-scale television film which cost \$272,259 and generated a net profit of \$601,022.<sup>396</sup> Altman was an American director and, despite the flight to Europe, was still usually drawn to American settings, subjects and themes.

Although Sam Shepard later claimed that he was approached by Altman and agreed only reluctantly to allow *Fool for Love* to be filmed, the playwright actually sent Altman a handwritten letter on 14 January 1983 in which he comments that ‘after seeing your “Jimmy Dean” film, which I thought was amazing, I started thinking you might be interested in this new play of mine as a film of some kind.’<sup>397</sup> He goes on to say he has been reluctant, previously, to allow any film or television adaptation of his work because ‘I just never trusted anyone’s judgement about it but I’d be willing to turn this piece over to you to go in any direction you wanted to try.’<sup>398</sup> At some point, Cannon Films became involved and provided what was, at that time for Altman, a significant budget of \$6 million to adapt Shepard’s play for the screen. Altman immediately wanted Shepard to take the lead role, to which the playwright reluctantly agreed after some persuasion.<sup>399</sup> The difference in scale between this and Altman’s other recent work can be seen in how the combined remuneration for him and Shepard alone exceeded the budgets of any of the earlier adapted plays: Altman received \$750,000,

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<sup>395</sup> Its original title is *Third and Oak: The Laundromat*.

<sup>396</sup> Secret Castle Productions, ‘Statement of Income’, 31/12/1985 (RAA;138).

<sup>397</sup> Shepard in Zuckoff, p. 390.

<sup>398</sup> Letter from Shepard to Altman, 14/1/1983 (RAA:108).

<sup>399</sup> Shepard in Zuckoff, pp. 390-391.

Shepard \$500,000 as actor and \$100,000 for literary acquisition.<sup>400</sup> During the shooting of *Fool for Love*, it seems that Shepard and Altman enjoyed a difficult and distant relationship. The resultant film, nevertheless, is arguably the most interesting, in terms of authorship, of the adapted plays, particularly because of the way Altman made alterations to the play's conception despite almost no disruption to his now habitual fidelity to the original dialogue.

### ***Fool for Love***

Of all the eighties films, *Fool for Love* is the one that is most reminiscent of the more unconventional narrative structures, elusive meanings and unmotivated protagonists of Altman's earlier films. It is therefore surprising that Robert Self's book-length examination of Altman's work as symptomatic of the attributes of the art cinema does not take much account of *Fool for Love* at all.<sup>401</sup> Self earlier had compared Altman's films with art cinema narratives that 'proceed...by a concern with psychological as opposed to sociological realism. They subjectively portray complex characters, enmeshed in frequently aimless plots constructed not on action but inaction and reflection.'<sup>402</sup> This seems a description that might as easily be applied to *Fool for Love*. There are other thematic similarities: Kolker aligns the film with Altman's more female-centric films because it 'is also concerned with the oppressions of patriarchy - quite literally, as it describes the effects of his children on a man who kept two wives.'<sup>403</sup> My interest here, though, is much more about the visual style Altman employs and in his manipulation of the source material, factors that foreground his personal contribution to the film. Altman said during *Fool for Love*'s production: 'I'm not going to alter the content...I've concerned myself with the arena, the environment that the play takes place in - in other words, in

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<sup>400</sup> 'Director's Loan-Out Agreement', 'Actor's Loan-Out Agreement', 'Literary Acquisition Agreement', all dated 16/3/1985 (RAA:108).

<sup>401</sup> Self, *Altman's Subliminal Reality*.

<sup>402</sup> Self, 'The Art Cinema and Robert Altman', p. 30.

<sup>403</sup> Kolker, p. 414.

the stage, the stage that I'm making.'<sup>404</sup> In particular, this analysis examines how Altman created this stage; in doing so, his changes made the play's opaque text yet more ambiguous.

The set-up of *Fool for Love* is a simple one. May (Kim Basinger) is working and living in a run-down motel in the middle of nowhere. She is visited there by Eddie (Shepard), a cowboy type in denim, with the trademark hat and pulling a horsebox trailer. *Fool for Love*'s larger budget enabled Altman to open up the play more than in the other films, expanding its one-seedy-room setting into a downbeat motel complex with a bar, scattered chalets, neon signs and assorted detritus. Whereas many critics like Stanley Kauffmann objected to this expansion that disturbed the play's claustrophobic dynamic ('the play is chattered and movieized away...with a lot of troweled-on artiness'), Neil Norman's assertion that 'the extraordinary circular set of motel shacks lit by garish neon and Shepard's junkyard ambience remain faithful to his conceptual metaphor of America' is a perceptive one because it foregrounds the way Altman reimagined and re-interpreted Shepard's underlying dramatic concerns (by contrast with the closer fidelity of the earlier films).<sup>405</sup> From the very start, as he did in *Secret Honor*, Altman makes his authorial presence apparent. The play opens with Eddie already in the motel room with May, telling her 'I am not goin' anywhere. See? I am right here.'<sup>406</sup> In the film, there is a more elaborate set-up, a long sequence that introduces both the setting and the characters. Beginning with an overhead shot of the desert, the camera pans right to reveal the motel complex. May and the 'Old Man' (Harry Dean Stanton) seem nervous at the prospect of a visitor, shots intercut with those of Eddie in his truck, driving towards them, a photo of May tucked into his sun-visor.<sup>407</sup> The titles overlay these images and the silence is broken first by the Old Man's harmonica and by a country song heard on Eddie's car radio, then as May puts on her

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<sup>404</sup> *Fool for Love*, 'Production Notes', p.4.

<sup>405</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, 'Fooling Around with Love', *New Republic*, 23/12/1985, p. 24; Neil Norman, 'Fool for Love', *Face*, July 1986, p. 93.

<sup>406</sup> Sam Shepard, *Fool for Love and Other Plays* (New York: Bantam, 1984), p. 21. All other quotations from the play are also in the film, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>407</sup> *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984), with an original screenplay by Shepard, also starred Stanton in a role with some similarities to the Old Man. He too is a man who goes on very long walks.



tinny transistor which plays the same tune. Eddie arrives, May hides and Eddie breaks in May's chalet door. They now confront each other and, twelve minutes into the film, they finally speak, with their early exchanges not from the play. It is yet another couple of minutes before the dialogue begins to follow the original text (when Eddie offers to make May tea).<sup>408</sup> This extended opening establishes both the tone of the piece, and its location and protagonists, implying the nature of their relationships to each other in a near-silent prologue. It also seems to be Altman's authorial assertion that he is not producing a facsimile of the stage production; in contrast with the earlier adaptations, he does this by expanding (to a limited extent only) the play's constrictive one-room set. As the languid start makes clear, the film determinedly ignores Shepard's clear instruction at the beginning of the published text: 'this play is to be performed relentlessly without a break.'<sup>409</sup>

This immediate challenge to Shepard's original conception may have been a precursor to the difficult collaboration between director and writer/actor. According to Altman, 'I never talked to him about his own ideas for the play, as he wouldn't tell me, and I had my own ideas.'<sup>410</sup> Shepard later commented that 'I think Bob did a commendable job. But in retrospect I don't think it works,' observing that it lacked the physicality of the stage version. He also complained that he was meant to be involved in the editing but Altman cut the film in Paris without his input.<sup>411</sup> The tension that clearly characterised their working relationship is explained convincingly by Kimball King when he says that 'Shepard is not haughty, but he is aloof and independent, hardly the sort to be molded by a director with an incompatible vision. It is difficult to separate the playwright from the filmmaker from the actor.'<sup>412</sup> Altman's determination to cast a reluctant Shepard in the film only seems to have confused the interaction between writer and director on one hand, and actor and director on the

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<sup>408</sup> Shepard, p. 21.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>410</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 139.

<sup>411</sup> Zuckoff, p. 391.

<sup>412</sup> Kimball King, 'Sam Shepard and the Cinema' in Matthew Roudané (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 211.

other. The various drafts of the screenplay (four plus the 'as shot' version) suggest that some of the alterations, and opening-up, were Shepard's but the substantial differences, particularly the Old Man's role and the ending, only appear in the 'as shot' script.<sup>413</sup> In trying to understand how Altman related to the writers of the filmed plays, it is worth noting that the playwrights with whom he fell out were those where the director altered their original concept in some significant way: Graczyk over the decision to use the same actresses for young and old incarnations in *Jimmy Dean*, Shepard when he altered the pacing of *Fool for Love*, and later Christopher Durang, after extensively rewriting *Beyond Therapy* in 1987 (a sole exception in terms of fidelity to the original plays).

To this point in his cycle of theatrical adaptations, Altman had maintained the constrictions that were inherent in their original settings and utilised his mobile camera as a means to insert the viewer into the action. In *Fool for Love*, the camera is still typically promiscuous, but here he provides a more expansive space in which it can operate. The film was shot by as usual by Mignot, but only after Altman had dispensed with the services of Robbie Müller: 'He's great but he was making a different film to the one I wanted. He was more interested in the composition of the frame...Mignot...understood better the fluid camera movements I like.'<sup>414</sup> These comments are revealing about Altman's personal filmmaking style, showing that the camerawork in his 1980s work was still yoked to many of his characteristic methods. Altman's films were never slick productions, and the lack of concern with the aesthetics of the individual frame, retaining the rough edges that accompany such camera fluidity, is carried forward into *Fool for Love*.

Once Eddie arrives, it is apparent immediately that May and Eddie's relationship is volatile as they bicker and argue like an estranged couple. But the truth is eventually revealed to be that they are

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<sup>413</sup> *Fool for Love*, Screenplays: four Drafts (1<sup>st</sup> undated, 2<sup>nd</sup> 15/4/1985, 3<sup>rd</sup> 19/4, 4<sup>th</sup> 25/4); Shooting Script 25/4; 'As Shot Script' undated (RAA:108).

<sup>414</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 140. It is interesting that Müller was the cinematographer on *Paris, Texas*. While both are written by Shepard, the earlier film's wide-screen imagery of the vast deserts of the American South necessitated a different visual approach. As with the casting of Stanton, one might surmise the hiring of Müller was inspired by the earlier film.

not just ex-lovers, but they also share a father. The trauma of their experiences, how they discovered their sibling relationship after falling in love, forms the central focus of the piece. Hanging about the motel complex, on the look-out for alcohol to steal, is the 'Old Man', an enigmatic character who, it gradually becomes apparent, is their shared father. In the original play, he sits to the side of the stage on a rocking chair and is only seen when the lights go up on him as he speaks. He is a spectral presence, who seems to haunt the protagonists, described by Shepard in the original text as existing 'only in the minds of Eddie and May, even though they may talk to him directly and acknowledge his physical presence.'<sup>415</sup> In the film, his role is still the same but Altman gives him a physical presence in the diegetic world by having him drunkenly wander about and ensconcing him in a barely habitable caravan to which he periodically returns to oversee the goings-on. The fourth character is Martin (Randy Quaid) who arrives half-way through to take May out on a date; it is his presence that provides the catalyst for all the revelations about the family's shared past, as they are revealed to him, and to us.

Armed with an increased budget courtesy of Cannon, Altman not only opens out the play but employs the increased resources to instigate significant changes to the original production. As Frank Caso identifies, Altman's adaptations 'exhibit a progressive awareness of the power of his medium to alter the "text."<sup>416</sup> Altman's assertion that 'the only real difference from the play was my decision to illustrate the monologues' understates the degree and effect of his own interventions.<sup>417</sup> Just as any new production of an existing play will provide a new perspective, so Altman's approach to *Fool for Love* asks its audience to consider the play's meanings in a slightly different way. In the theatre, the past events that characters recall are heard about but not seen. So, the illustration of monologues, to which Altman refers, first occur when the Old Man tells May a story about her childhood and the images differ subtly from the words. Then, quite late on, when May is getting ready to go out with

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<sup>415</sup> Shepard, p. 20.

<sup>416</sup> Caso, *In the American Grain*, p. 195.

<sup>417</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 140.

her date, Eddie takes Martin to the bar, where he tells him the story of the relationship between the father and *his* mother. Martin finds himself a baffled witness to Eddie's mind games in his relationship with his half-sister. Eddie tells Martin about his father, the Old Man, and his peculiar way of life. For years he had regularly disappeared and then re-appeared. Eddie tells how his mother 'was always glad to see him when he came back' but what we see is both mother and child greet his return with stony faces.<sup>418</sup> Eddie finishes his speech by describing the first time he met May, and the teenage May (Sura Cox) is shown looking straight ahead wearing a white dress. As the camera pulls back, young Eddie's face is shown in reflection through the window, alongside the younger May. The camera closes in on Eddie before a seamless cut to the adult May, staring ahead in a white dress exactly like her younger self. It is a striking moment and May now picks up the story and tells it from her, and *her* mother's side. Her story follows more closely the images but still there are differences. When May says about her mother, 'she was holding my hand so tight', we see her trailing behind her mother.<sup>419</sup> Later, she says that 'I was filled with this joy' but we see her looking distraught.<sup>420</sup> These two monologues are spoken according to Shepard's original text but Altman transforms our understanding of their veracity with the discrepancy between words and pictures.

Altman's decision to portray events differently to narrated recollections explores the unreliability of memories, and how we edit our past to conform to what we wish had happened. These differences are also Altman visualising the spirit of May's observation, after overhearing Eddie's version of events, that 'he's told me the same story a thousand times, always changes it.'<sup>421</sup> At the same time, it is imagery that gives some sense to the inherent instability in Eddie and May's relationship. Altman makes visual that which is implied in Shepard's dialogue, that the couple have spent their lives being unable to come to terms with their peculiar relationship. The unfeasibility of

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<sup>418</sup> Shepard, p. 48.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

what is an incestuous relationship is expressed in the distortions of their memories of what might have occurred in their youth, fantasies they use to prolong their trauma. Altman implies it is not simply what they say that is unreliable, but that *any* memory of our distant past is inevitably unreliable as well. What we see is therefore not necessarily any closer to what *actually* happened.

Much of what occurs in *Fool for Love* would seem untenable in a more conventional film presented in a realist mode and with a linear, comprehensible plot. For example, Eddie has supposedly driven thousands of miles to find May yet his jealous lover, 'the Countess', is able to find them, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, firstly to fire a gun at the motel and then to burn it down. Shepard's ambiguous narrative structures and unreadable characters seem to make him a natural fit for Altman's unconventional tendencies. As Keyssar comments, the characters Shepard created in *Fool for Love* 'could walk into any Altman film of the seventies with ease.'<sup>422</sup> Similarly, when Ross Wetzsteon argues that if Shepard's 'plays seem elliptical and disjointed, this is because...he has abandoned the conventions of coherence - traditional means of characterization, narrative, dialogue, structure,' this description could equally be made about Altman's cinematic style.<sup>423</sup> It is such difficulty in precise interpretation that even makes it possible to read the events of *Fool for Love* (the film) as being a visualisation of May's dreams. The re-appearance of Eddie from her past could be as much a figment as the Old Man. Such a reading is encouraged by Altman's other significant change to the play. Whereas the difference in visuals and words is mentioned in most discussions of the film of *Fool for Love* (although to only a limited extent), the other way Altman subtly expands the scope of the play has been missed entirely. The play is a four-hander, but Altman adds some characters who initially seem merely to be background colour. A married couple and a young daughter arrive at the motel. Later, the father drives off and then returns to a joyous welcome from his wife and they leave the girl locked outside while they re-unite properly. An affecting and

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<sup>422</sup> Keyssar, p. 317.

<sup>423</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, 'Introduction' in *Fool for Love and Other Plays*, p. 4.

psychologically rich scene now occurs when May, left alone after Eddie had driven off, notices the small girl who is all alone in the playground, shivering in her pyjamas. After a trademark Altman zoom on the young girl, May goes to her and hugs her before the mother appears and she runs off. Like a child, May herself falls asleep in the playground. The Old Man goes over to May and they observe the family driving off. We now see that the driver is a younger version of Stanton, the family echoes of the past and the little girl May's younger self. This would seem to be a manifestation of May's memories, dredged from her subconscious. The lonely girl, abandoned by her father, is offered succour by her adult self. This complex interaction of past and present interprets Shepard's play in new ways and is a pure example of Altman's authorship: 'it was my idea to bring back the family from twenty years ago into the motel and mix up the time periods.'<sup>424</sup> These traces of past events engage with the content of Eddie and May's monologues about their past, integrating them with Altman's other main disturbance of the play's original structure.

One of the trademark characteristics of the Altman style, that had been subjugated, necessarily, by the restrictions of the *mise-en-scène* in the theatrical adaptations, was his predilection for using windows and mirrors as symbolic signifiers. As Keyssar puts it, they 'are metaphors for viewing and for self-reflection in most of Altman's films.'<sup>425</sup> The Mylar mirror in *Jimmy Dean* was both a tool, and simultaneously a metaphor, for a story that is a reflection on the events of the past. But one of the benefits of the opened-up set of *Fool for Love* was that it enabled Altman to shoot characters and action through windows, often in extended scenes, such as when Eddie watches May inside her chalet, or when the bar's reflecting surfaces provide a myriad of broken images while the camera observes the characters objectively from the outside.

*Fool for Love's* reception in the press was the worst of his adapted plays to date. In the States particularly, many of the reviews were unhappy with the changes made to the original. There was a

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<sup>424</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 140.

<sup>425</sup> Keyssar, p. 323.

sense that Altman had not afforded the well-regarded play enough respect. For example, Andrew Sarris chastised Altman especially for his opening up of the play and, like many of the American critics, he also alighted on Altman's refusal to obey Shepard's 'relentless' instruction.<sup>426</sup> *Fool for Love*'s negative notices only confirmed Altman's marginalisation and the lukewarm reception was matched unsurprisingly at the box-office. Cannon's report from April 1987 shows the film still registering (after two years) losses of \$7,193,202, a figure that even exceeds the original budget because of the cost of distribution.<sup>427</sup>

## 1987 - 1989

After *Fool for Love*, things got only worse for Altman and, in terms of cinematic releases at least, 1987 was Altman's *annus horribilis*. As well as the saga of the *Nashville* sequel, the year also marked the release of two films that are habitually described as amongst the very worst of his entire career.<sup>428</sup> *O.C. and Stiggs* was finally, reluctantly, released by MGM and was resoundingly rejected by critics and public alike. Altman also directed his final theatrical adaptation for the cinema, *Beyond Therapy*, from a play by Christopher Durang. A baffling choice, it is a farce that strives to address such contemporary issues as bisexuality, newspaper dating and the dubious benefits of psychotherapy. Altman made considerable changes to the original dialogue and took a screenwriting credit. According to Durang, the two fell out early on:

The only thing of mine in there is whatever remnants of the play remain, which is why I have a credit at all. Anyway, I wrote my draft of the script which I don't even know if he read. He stopped talking to me because he was so upset that I didn't like his version.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Sarris, 'The Selling of Sam Shepard', p. 59.

<sup>427</sup> Cannon Films Inc., 'Fool for Love Summary', 7/4/1987 (RAA:108).

<sup>428</sup> For example, see McGilligan, p. 548; O'Brien, p. 106.

<sup>429</sup> Craig Gholson, 'Christopher Durang', *Bomb - Artists in Conversation*, Vol. 20 (Summer 1987) [<http://bombmagazine.org/article/950/christopher-durang>].

Even before submitting his first draft, Durang had written a long letter to Altman giving his thoughts about the 'budgetary' script Altman had written. He lists in some detail his objections, most prominently that 'it is "opened up" far more than I expected' and 'what happened to the story and the characters?'<sup>430</sup> The original play, which has six characters who largely interact in long two-way conversations, seems decidedly uncinematic and this may explain Altman's decision to reimagine the play by expanding its cast, and by making alterations to the plot that amplify the story's more farcical aspects.<sup>431</sup> The film was slated mercilessly by the critics and performed poorly at the box-office. Its domestic gross of just \$790,000 barely made a dent in the film's \$8.3 million budget provided by independent production company, New World Pictures.<sup>432</sup>

In 1987, Altman also accepted an invitation from ABC TV to choose a play to direct for their theatre slot. He suggested two short Harold Pinter plays, *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* (both 1957). The two plays were presented on television as *Basements* in May. In *The Dumb Waiter*, John Travolta and Tom Conti played the two assassins and *The Room* has a cast including Donald Pleasance, Linda Hunt and Annie Lennox. Altman claimed that Pinter liked the adaptations apart from complaining about Conti not playing it as 'cockney.' Altman's memory is extremely selective because, in September 1987, Pinter wrote to the director to complain how he was 'deeply disappointed in both films' and refused point-blank to allow any possibility of a theatrical release (as conveyed to his lawyers).<sup>433</sup> He seems to regard his plays' every word as sacrosanct as he objects to, in *The Dumb Waiter*, Conti's 'utterly disgraceful' use of 'more of his lines than of mine,' even though any changes in fact are entirely superficial. In *The Room*, he is incandescent at Altman's decision to

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<sup>430</sup> Letter from Durang to Altman, 17/5/1986, p. 1 (RAA:99).

<sup>431</sup> Durang, 'Beyond Therapy' in *Christopher Durang Explains It All for You: Six Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), pp. 215-297.

<sup>432</sup> 'Production Budget – *Beyond Therapy*', New World Pictures, 23/4/1986 (RAA:99).

<sup>433</sup> *Altman on Altman*, p. 141. According to Altman, Conti used his native Scottish accent whereas, in fact, he employs a broad but dubious Irish brogue and Altman praises Travolta's cockney accent as 'great' which is certainly generous; Letter from Harold Pinter to Altman, 30/9/1987 (RAA:93).



omit the play's final line 'without consultation [which] renders the end of the play quite incomprehensible.'<sup>434</sup>

After the nadir of *OC and Stiggs* and *Beyond Therapy*, 1988 saw Altman demonstrating his ability to keep moving forward. Firstly, he contributed a segment, Jean-Phillipe Rameau's 'Les Boréades', to an anthology film, *Aria*. Next came the television film, *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, an accomplished version of Hermann Wouk's play that is as faithful to its source as the earlier adaptations.<sup>435</sup> Altman uses his trademark mobile camera to convey the tensions and emotions of the trial as Altman again brings out the best from a distinguished cast including Brad Davis, Jeff Daniels and Michael Murphy. Murphy would be the eponymous star of Altman's next project, the ambitious and ground-breaking *Tanner '88*. An 11-part political satire for HBO about a candidate for the Democratic Presidential nomination who interacts with real candidates and leading figures from the political scene, as the series follows the primary race in real time, with hilarious results. *Tanner '88* seems a natural progression from the fictional, unseen politician in *Nashville*, the fictionalisation of a real president in *Secret Honor*, and now the placing of a fictional candidate into a real presidential race. It also is a forerunner of programmes that similarly make their fictional characters interact with celebrities appearing as themselves, such as *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000- ).<sup>436</sup>

As this account has shown, Robert Altman's alleged 'lost decade' continued the prodigious rate of production established in the previous decade, but on a variety of smaller scale films for television and cinema, as well as occasional detours into opera and theatre. The masterful, typically idiosyncratic Van Gogh biopic *Vincent and Theo* (1990), a European independent production, began Altman's return to the mainstream, building on the acclaim afforded to *Tanner*, and leading to the

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<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>435</sup> Wouk adapted the courtroom section of his 1951 novel, *The Caine Mutiny*, for the stage as *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* in 1953. In 1954, the film of the novel, *The Caine Mutiny* (Edward Dmytryk) was released.

<sup>436</sup> It is probably not coincidental that all three series were/are on HBO.

success of *The Player*. Altman never returned to the restricted environments of his 1980s work, but this account has shown that the image of 'a maverick reputation in disrepair' (as in Anthony Quinn's claim that begins this chapter), might be justified by the moderate returns his work generated. However, from an artistic standpoint, films as imaginative and compelling as *Fool for Love* and *Secret Honor* indicate that Altman in the 1980s should not be so easily dismissed by film history, even if his very finest work will always be considered to be those made in his more typical style. The difference between Altman and almost all his peers is how he was willing to explore new markets and independent financing. In this way, the trajectory of his 1980s filmmaking seems to have more in common with young directors like Jim Jarmusch and John Sayles, who were in the vanguard for the successful independent cinema of the subsequent decade, than with the other New Hollywood auteurs. Altman's experience in the eighties tells us that the available options for the Hollywood Renaissance directors were determined by the type of artistic compromises they were willing to make in an era of close studio control and the blockbuster - or indeed, by the efforts they were willing to make to avoid them. Altman's choices belonged firmly in the latter category, finding a way to keep working while still maintaining creative control. In doing so, he was denied - and denied himself - the option of giving in to the 'high concept' diktats of the Hollywood machine.

#### 4. Francis Coppola: Post-Apocalyptic Adventures

The success of *The Godfather* went to my head like a rush of perfume. I thought I couldn't do anything wrong.

Francis Coppola<sup>437</sup>

I don't understand why our art form has to be enslaved. It's big enough, it's broad enough that it can afford to have a little variety and variation.

Francis Coppola<sup>438</sup>

Francis Coppola's career would seem to encompass a mass of contradictions. After the overwhelming success of *The Godfather*, he conceived of grand projects and he spent bewildering amounts of money. Yet he still wanted to make films that were outside the mainstream with 'a little variety and variation' and, repeatedly over the years, he has professed a desire to just make small, personal films that he would write himself from scratch. By 1992 in the midst of directing yet another genre epic, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, his journals reveal how this uncertainty continued to trouble him: 'To what do I apply myself? Am I a writer? If so, a novelist, a short-story writer or a dramatist? Am I a director, a mogul or a screenwriter? Am I a scientist, an entrepreneur? What am I good for?'<sup>439</sup> This inherent contradiction, that finds expression in his films as well as in his actions, can also be discerned in George Lucas's observation that 'all directors have egos and are insecure...But of all the people I know, Francis has the biggest ego and the biggest insecurities.'<sup>440</sup>

Coppola stands front and centre whenever commentators seek to identify the culprits for the studios' retreat from auteur filmmaking. As Geoff King puts it, 'Coppola and Michael Cimino are usually singled out most prominently for blame.'<sup>441</sup> Although *Apocalypse Now* eventually became

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<sup>437</sup> Quoted in Robert Lindsey, 'Francis Coppola: Promises to Keep, the Flamboyant Filmmaker Swears His Best Work Lies Ahead', *New York Times*, 24/7/1988, p. SM24.

<sup>438</sup> David Breskin, 'Francis Coppola', *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), p. 31.

<sup>439</sup> Coppola, 'Journals 1989-1993', p. 26.

<sup>440</sup> Quoted in Dale Pollock, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1983), p. 78.

<sup>441</sup> King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p. 90.

profitable, the hysterical coverage of its troubled and costly production focused largely on Coppola's overdeveloped ego and grandiloquent ambitions. When he followed *Apocalypse Now* with the much derided *One from the Heart*, his centrality in the narrative of auteurs in decline became yet more firmly established. However, what has already emerged from this study is that while many of the reasons for Renaissance directors' commercial woes were similar, their responses were considerably more diverse. While Robert Altman fled Hollywood and remained extraordinarily busy making low-budget theatrical adaptations, Coppola's own 'lost decade' was also highly industrious: he directed seven features and one third of an anthology film, plus a solitary excursion into television. It began with a singular response to industrial change that was, at best, counter-intuitive in light of the inexorable movement towards populist filmmaking. Coppola's solution to the majors' unwillingness to finance Renaissance-style filmmaking was to purchase his own studio, where he would instil an environment of fulsome creativity, offering a more benign and stimulating version of the old system. When Coppola managed to bankrupt himself following the purchase of the studio, quickly followed by the costly failure of *One from the Heart* in 1981, he was obliged to spend the rest of the decade working constantly to pay off his debts and avoid losing his property portfolio to his creditors.

The familiar narrative about Coppola in the decade is one of artistic regression as he laboured as a director for hire. David Breskin's analysis is a good example of how this period has been understood:

By the end of the 1980s, Coppola seemed an irrelevancy: serious people didn't care enough about his movies to argue about them, or even see them. Indeed, in that decade of disappointment and disaster, Francis Coppola lost his artistic instincts and his confidence.<sup>442</sup>

This chapter examines Coppola's 1980s *oeuvre* in a way that shows how such generalisations are inaccurate, or at least incomplete. The dominant discourse about him as *the* superstar-director brought down by his own hubris has tended to overwhelm a more film-focused understanding of

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<sup>442</sup> Breskin, p. 4.

Coppola as a visual stylist. Whereas his confidence may have fluctuated, it is by no means certain that his 'artistic instincts' deserted him (as Breskin claimed). Not only that, some of his 1980s films were, in fact, fairly successful, particularly *The Outsiders* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* while *The Cotton Club* was also seen by reasonable numbers, if not enough to offset its extravagant budget.<sup>443</sup> Even in the films in which he was least engaged, there is still plenty of evidence of Coppola's authorial agency and his keen attention to visual style. However, to understand Coppola's authorship at this time, extra-textual factors cannot be completely elided in favour of a close textual approach because the industrial context, and its inherent external pressures, inform and problematise the idea that these films are the personal artistic statements of a single auteur-director. The financial strictures alone that attached to Coppola after *One from the Heart* make certain that the films cannot be entirely separated from the circumstances of production. For Timothy Corrigan, Coppola represented the peak of the commercial auteur at this time while Jeffrey Chown made a similar point when describing him as the epitome of the director as 'superstar'.<sup>444</sup> Such a focus on the auteur-director as a marketable commodity, however, tends to obscure the consideration of form, style and content in the film themselves.

As a correlative to this focus on Coppola as commercial auteur, my concern here is with how, and to what extent, Coppola's authorship is expressed in the films and how this manifests itself in terms of his particular approach to visual style. The flitting across genres and the lack of a consistent ideological viewpoint means he is difficult to classify as an auteur who maintains a thematic consistency across the body of work. Rather, it is the way that his films' style reflects their subject matter that is a marker of his particular approach to authorship. In the analysis of three specific films that follows, each is approached slightly differently combining assessment of Coppola's directorial influence with other related aspects. *One from the Heart* is discussed in relation to style, genre and

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<sup>443</sup> *The Outsiders*, gross receipts \$25 million; *Peggy Sue*, \$41m; *The Cotton Club*, \$25m. All *Box Office Mojo* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com>).

<sup>444</sup> Corrigan, p. 105; Chown, p. 2.

technology; with *The Outsiders*, there is more emphasis on creative agency, and on style as a reflection of character. Regarding *Tucker*, the film's personal resonances are considered alongside an examination of visual strategies. As with the other single director-focused chapters, the analysis of specific films will be contextualised with a description of Coppola's career arc during the decade.

## 1980-1981

Before *Apocalypse Now* had even been released, at a time when Coppola might have been wise to keep a low profile, he was instead making grand statements about the future direction of the industry. In a notorious speech at the 1979 Academy Awards, an over-excited Coppola told the audience that he foresaw 'a communications revolution...it's going to make the masters of the cinema, from whom we've inherited the business, believe things that they would have thought impossible.'<sup>445</sup> Cowie suggests this display of arrogance may have been the moment when the industry turned its back on its former *wunderkind*.<sup>446</sup> At the same time, he was in the process of taking his overarching ambitions to another level altogether. On 25 March 1980, he paid \$6.7 million to acquire a Hollywood facility of his own, a 10.5 acre site, formerly known as Hollywood General Studios.<sup>447</sup> When Coppola employed one of his heroes, the British director Michael Powell, as 'senior director in residence' at the new studio, it is surely not coincidental that Powell, a somewhat forgotten figure at this time, had co-directed one of Coppola's personal favourites, *The Thief of Baghdad* (Powell, Ludwig Berger, Tim Whelan, 1940) at the very same location.<sup>448</sup> Coppola's intention in running his own studio seems to encapsulate some of the contradictions that run through the whole of his career. He wanted to direct inexpensive films, the costs of which would be controlled by his technological innovations, yet he still anticipated being able to compete on equal

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<sup>445</sup> *The Electronic Cinema* (Documentary, *One from the Heart* DVD).

<sup>446</sup> Cowie, *Coppola*, p. 142.

<sup>447</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 1.

<sup>448</sup> Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie* (London: William Heinemann, 1992), p. 573. Powell credits Coppola and Scorsese's support as the beginning of his belated, reputational rehabilitation.

terms with the other studios. Jon Lewis is very keen in his book about this period to absolve Coppola of most of the blame for his financial downfall. He argues that its main cause was the disavowal of auteur directors by the studios, but especially of Coppola because of his ambitious plans to fundamentally change filmmaking practice.<sup>449</sup> Lewis offers a compelling rationale for the dice being loaded against the director, but his premise is undermined by a number of factors, many of which he elucidates himself, not least Coppola's naivety about what was required to raise finance.<sup>450</sup> The complex nature of the filmmaker's experiences means the allocation of blame should not be reduced to a simple opposition between the system (Lewis) and Coppola's over-developed ego (most other accounts). It is certainly true that Paramount and Columbia should take much of the responsibility for the fact that *One from the Heart* was barely seen, their respective withdrawal of support meaning that the film stood little chance. However, this tells only a fraction of the story of the making and distribution of the film, which is apparent from Lewis's own work, as well as in Lillian Ross's formidable investigation into *One from the Heart*'s troubled production for *The New Yorker*.<sup>451</sup> In any case, even if the motivation behind the studios' decisions on this film were opaque, this was a new era and Coppola was not alone among the Renaissance filmmakers in failing to understand how much the landscape in Hollywood had changed post-*Star Wars*. Like Cimino and Friedkin before him, he was culpable in allowing a modestly budgeted film to become a \$20 million-plus behemoth. *One from the Heart*'s reputation and visibility has suffered as a result of the perception that it was a grandiloquent folly.

Now re-named Zoetrope Studios, the problem for the nascent enterprise was that it did not have a sufficient credit line to fully finance *even one* film all the way from development to release.<sup>452</sup> Coppola seemed to imagine that he would be able to generate his own projects unhindered by

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<sup>449</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 3.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>451</sup> Ross, 'Onwards and Upwards', pp. 48-50 +.

<sup>452</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 10. My italics.

external interference but during its short time-span (1980-1983), Zoetrope Studios was perpetually looking for distribution from one studio or another. As well as films directed by Coppola, there were difficulties securing distribution for all the other Zoetrope productions, particularly *Hammett* (Wim Wenders, 1982), but to a lesser extent, *The Escape Artist* (Caleb Deschanel, 1982) and *The Black Stallion Returns* (Robert Dalva, 1983) as well.<sup>453</sup> The idea of *One from the Heart* as an inexpensive, small film was quickly forgotten when Coppola began spending. Michael Lehmann, the film director who was on the crew on *One from the Heart*, observed that 'Francis always talked about it as being a contained movie...I'm not exactly sure what happened...he kept building more sets. Before too long every stage on the lot had a set under construction.'<sup>454</sup> Coppola, without any deliberate intent to do so at the outset, effectively 'bet the house' on *One from the Heart*, risking not just the studio but his personal wealth as well. His behaviour in spending money he did not have, which he replicated (if not to such a ludicrous extent) at other times during his career, resembles that of a compulsive gambler. At times, he seemed to believe he was operating in a different marketplace to everyone else and it was the epitome of optimism to conceive of building a dream studio at this time. For this reason, Lewis's statement that 'one can hardly blame Coppola for going ahead with his studio project' does not entirely stand up to scrutiny.<sup>455</sup> Coppola himself has rarely been consistent over the years about what type of cinema he really wants to make. Yet even though he has repeatedly returned to the idea that he really just wants to write and make small films like Bergman or Antonioni, most of his long-cherished projects (that he also talks about repeatedly) seem quite the opposite: high-flown, grandiose and probably unfilmable concepts.<sup>456</sup> Some thirty years later, Coppola is still insisting that he envisaged *One from the Heart* as 'something surefire that would be

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<sup>453</sup> Cowie, pp. 149-151; Goodwin and Wise, *On the Edge*, pp. 289-291; Schumacher, *A Filmmaker's Life*, pp. 277-281. The only other Zoetrope originals were *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*.

<sup>454</sup> Quoted in *The Dream Studio* (Documentary, *One from the Heart* DVD, American Zoetrope, 2002).

<sup>455</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 37.

<sup>456</sup> *Megalopolis* ('instead of it being a novel on the written page, it would be written in cinema') and an adaptation of Goethe's *Elective Affinities* are the two 'big' projects that Coppola has repeatedly mentioned over the years. See for example, David Thomson and Lucy Gray, 'Idols of the King', *Film Comment*, Vol. 19, No.



entertaining and popular,' an antidote to the disastrous fate that he anticipated would befall him once *Apocalypse Now* was released.<sup>457</sup>

### ***One from the Heart***

The reputation of *One from the Heart* largely rests not on its intrinsic qualities but on its infamous and decisive contribution to its director's financial collapse, and for it continuing the kind of auteurist excess associated with the likes of *Sorcerer* and *Heaven's Gate*. Its initial critical reception cast the film in terms of Coppola's rampant ego before it had even been released and set in stone a negative perception from which it never recovered.<sup>458</sup> The result has been that subsequent considerations have elided the film itself in favour of foregrounding its contribution to the failure of Coppola's romantic but doomed ambition to recreate the Hollywood studios of yore. In the States, the film was screened only briefly at the time of its initial release, appearing on only forty-one screens on 11 February 1982, grossing \$804,000 against a budget of about \$28 million, before Coppola rapidly withdrew it from circulation.<sup>459</sup> Its initial reputation was largely based on hearsay and a vituperative press response (although there were some exceptions) but not on the actual opinions of actual audiences.<sup>460</sup> Therefore, to dismiss the film's artistic value by dint of its commercial failure is not an argument easily made because it is a film that was given little opportunity to find an audience. Nevertheless, Coppola's determination to make the film exactly as he wanted, predicated on the creative freedom the purchase of his own studio allowed, resulted in a film that challenged the stylistic norms of Hollywood filmmaking in such a way that it would only ever have found a niche audience. In many ways, it is appropriate to think of it as an art film, in the way it offers a difficult

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5 (September-October 1983), p. 74 and Coppola, *Live Cinema and its Techniques* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), p. 72.

<sup>457</sup> Coppola, *Live Cinema*, p. 70.

<sup>458</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 55.

<sup>459</sup> *The Dream Studio*; Francis Ford Coppola, *Live Cinema and its Techniques* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), p. 77. However, it did get some international distribution.

<sup>460</sup> For some broadly positive viewpoints see Sheila Benson, 'One from the Heart', *Los Angeles Times*, 22/1/1982, p. G1, G6 and Carrie Rickey, 'Let Yourself Go! Three Musicals Sing One from the Libido', *Film Comment*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (March/April 1982), pp. 43-47.

blend of a simple, but contemporary, love story that borrows from Hollywood's past with a surfeit of visual style that functions, as Jeffrey Chown observes, 'as contrapuntal commentary on the film's substance.'<sup>461</sup> With the exception of Chown, and some brief but frequently positive assessment in the biographical accounts of Coppola's career, the filmic content of *One from the Heart* has rarely been considered.<sup>462</sup>

The following discussion takes some account of the film's production and use of ground-breaking technologies but my principal interest is how these inform the content, form and style of the film itself.<sup>463</sup> *One from the Heart* is the 1980s film over which Coppola enjoyed the highest degree of artistic control, in the sense that he was able to work entirely without external interference and with a (fatally) unrestricted budget. Coppola employs classical narrative forms to tell a fairy-tale about an ordinary couple who have relationship problems, but in terms that are reflective of specifically contemporary societal norms. Unlike in many of the revisionist films of the Renaissance, his approach to Hollywood genres here seems nostalgic and without irony. What made this approach challenging to mainstream tastes is how Coppola marries this combination of the classical and contemporary with an expressive, exaggerated and determinedly self-conscious style.

Narratively, *One from the Heart* uses structures that recall the traits of not only the Hollywood musical but the romantic comedy as well. The story is a simple one, what Coppola called 'a little musical Valentine.'<sup>464</sup> As the film opens, it is the night before the 4<sup>th</sup> July holiday; Hank (Frederic Forrest) and Fran (Teri Garr) will celebrate their fifth anniversary living together the next day. Each

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<sup>461</sup> Chown, p. 158.

<sup>462</sup> See particularly Cowie, pp. 146-165. One exception is Graham Fuller's sympathetic and astute re-consideration of the film: 'A Second Look: *One from the Heart*', *Cinéaste*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (January 1990), pp. 58-59.

<sup>463</sup> Both have been comprehensively covered elsewhere: on Zoetrope and the film's production/post-production, see particularly Lewis, pp. 41-73; Ross, 'Onwards and Upwards.' On the use of new technology, see Raymond Fielding, 'Recent Electronic Innovations in Professional Motion Picture Production', *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 43-49, 72; Brooks Riley, 'Film into Video', *Film Comment*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (May-June 1982), pp. 45-48; Coppola, *Live Cinema; The Electronic Cinema*.

<sup>464</sup> Quoted in Cowie, p. 152.

has bought the other a gift that, in combination, symbolise the problems in their relationship: he has bought the deeds to their house and she has bought tickets for an exotic holiday. Both have used each other's money to buy what they want for themselves and this duality, that they have different desires, is the problem that the film's narrative must resolve. They argue, make up and make love, and then argue again before Fran storms out. The remainder of the film follows their adventures over the course of the holiday weekend. Their paths keep nearly intersecting, as each conducts a fairy-tale-like romance, with Ray (Raul Julia) and Leila (Nastassja Kinski) respectively. The happy reunion that ends the story comes only after Hank's protracted and increasingly desperate attempts to win Fran back. The conclusion leaves the protagonists reconciled, Fran rejecting the fantasy life that is encapsulated in the travel agency shop window she decorates at work.

The couple are not married, and their modern living arrangement is the first indicator of how *One from the Heart* employs classical form to tell a contemporary story. The distinction is apparent with the manner in which the film begins. After a brief opening scene that evokes the spectacular first shots in *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Marcel Carné, 1946), with Fran at work amidst the vibrant Las Vegas streets, there is a cut to her arriving home, struggling unsuccessfully to balance a huge pile of shopping and laundry, and dropping half of it on the street. Hank now arrives and grumpily picks up what she has left behind. The song that plays over this scene is a duet that riffs on the silent on-screen events and establishes some sense of their relationship before they even speak. As the male singer (Tom Waits) observes, 'looks like you spent the night in a trench/And tell me, how long have you been combin' your hair with a wrench', the female comeback (Crystal Gayle) is, 'the roses are dead and the violets are too/And I'm sick and tired of pickin' up after you.'<sup>465</sup> This is a contemporary couple who live in a house that resembles their relationship: in need of some loving attention. The furniture itself is illustrative of their essential differences, as well as the impermanence of their relationship. Hank sits on a battered old car seat like he is still at work, while Fran is on a deck chair

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<sup>465</sup> Tom Waits and Crystal Gayle, 'Picking Up After You.' All songs in the film are composed by Waits.

as if on holiday. These are contemporary representations of a couple's incompatibility, an updating of a simple but effective mode of storytelling. This contemporaneity becomes even more pronounced in how the couple's adventures play out, with their sexual desires more frankly expressed than would have been ever possible under the strictures of the Production Code. One example is when Fran has to break the mood to fetch her birth control device (although the more traditional Hank seems to want to start a family).

In structural terms, however, the narrative is not contemporary at all, conforming, in many ways, to the basic form of the Hollywood musical where, according to Rick Altman, 'each separate part of the film recapitulates the film's overall duality.'<sup>466</sup> Coppola makes the parallel between what happens to each protagonist unmistakable and 'the partners' separation provides an excuse for still more parallel scenes.'<sup>467</sup> So when Fran leaves Hank, she escapes to her best friend Maggie (Lainie Kazan) and we see Fran telling her about the break-up. At the same time, Hank goes to see Mo (Harry Dean Stanton) and does the same. Coppola uses a theatrical device to make the parallel even more blatant. In a ten-minute take (of which more later), Coppola makes the transitions from Mo's house to Maggie's apartment (and back and forth) using painted scrims, thin gauze screens that, when lit from the front resemble a painting but from behind become transparent. Carrie Rickey calls the use of the scrim here as like 'a movie screen receiving emotional projections from each side' and they enable Coppola to seamlessly show what is happening with each of the dislocated pair.<sup>468</sup>

Coppola calls *One from the Heart* 'a musical fairy tale', but it is one without the characters singing diegetically.<sup>469</sup> Instead, the lyrics provide narration, often in place of dialogue, with songs written specifically for the film by Waits. Coppola's tendency to improvise and spend more and more money extended to the music as well, with Waits commenting to a Zoetrope employee that Coppola 'was

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<sup>466</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 32.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>468</sup> Rickey, p. 44.

<sup>469</sup> Francis Coppola, DVD Commentary, *One from the Heart* (American Zoetrope, 2003).

the most indecisive man I have ever met.<sup>470</sup> Excepting a few instrumental fills, the distinctively gruff vocals from Waits accompany Gayle's graceful tones, duets that comment and underscore the events happening on screen. Although, as in the integrated musical, the songs tell the story as much as the dialogue, the use and style of music is of a more contemporary hue. A suite of songs, derived from modern popular music styles, that provides a narrational voice is a strategy that had been used during the Renaissance period, as with Altman's use of Leonard Cohen songs in *McCabe and Mrs Miller*. Their prominence is much greater here and Waits' particular and idiosyncratic style was not, perhaps, ever likely to appeal to a wide demographic, even though here he is at his most accessible and melodic. While the songs often function to elide the need for dialogue, they do not disturb the narrative flow by having characters burst spontaneously into song. The film does use extravagantly staged scenes that seem primarily to function as spectacle, but they are integrated smoothly into the diegesis. For example, in the extravagant dance number that develops as Fran and Ray spill out onto the Las Vegas strip, the scene begins as a seduction by dance in Fran's travel agency. Although the singers often seem to closely resemble Hank and Fran, they are not simply expressing the couple's feelings. Coppola compares them to 'Zeus and Hera somehow peeking through the clouds and commenting on the action.'<sup>471</sup> From Gayle's 'old boyfriends lost in the pocket of your overcoat/ like burned out light bulbs on a Ferris wheel' to Waits' advice that 'you can't take back the things you said man/cause you can't unring a bell,' the musical narrators do often seem more perceptive about human behaviour than their earthbound counterparts.<sup>472</sup> Reviving the style of classic musicals was not enough, according to Justin Wyatt, for *One from the Heart* to be able to sell itself to a general viewership. If successful 'high concept' films rely on three ways to promote themselves, 'the look,

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<sup>470</sup> Barney Hoskyns, *Lowside of the Road: A Life of Tom Waits* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 244.

<sup>471</sup> Coppola quoted in *Tom Waits and the Music of One from the Heart* (Documentary, *One from the Heart* DVD).

<sup>472</sup> Waits and Gayle, 'Old Boyfriends' and 'You Can't Unring a Bell.'

the hook, the book,’ then *One from the Heart* illustrates how just having ‘the look’ cannot sell a film alone.<sup>473</sup>

*One from the Heart* has traces of another favourite Hollywood genre, the romantic comedy. More specifically, with the pair having been together for five years and the manner in which the narrative proceeds, it is reminiscent of what Stanley Cavell called the ‘comedy of remarriage.’<sup>474</sup> Cavell identifies commonalities in a series of 1930s and 1940 Hollywood comedies; Hank and Fran not being married only emphasises how *One from the Heart* is a modern re-imagining of classical forms. Although *One from the Heart* is not a comedy *per se*, it is light-hearted and frequently comic, and its structure can persuasively be compared with Cavell’s ideas. Hank’s final desperate act to try to get Fran back, when he attempts valiantly but tunelessly to sing to her as she boards a plane with Ray, recalls how comedies of remarriage position their heroes as virtuous when they are willing to suffer ‘a certain indignity’ to win back their estranged partner.<sup>475</sup> His extreme act of self-effacement is the catalyst for Fran to realise how much she loves Hank. Another way *One from the Heart* resembles a comedy of remarriage is how the action moves from ‘a starting place of impasse’ to a ‘green world, a place where perspective and renewal are to be achieved.’ Cavell is citing here Northrop Frye’s work on Shakespeare’s comedies and Coppola’s ‘green world’ is, as in Shakespeare and Hollywood comedies, a ‘mythical location’ where Hank and Fran can disappear into fantasy, a space that eventually offers them the opportunity for ‘renewal’: it is a studio-bound, extravagant but pointedly artificial version of Las Vegas.<sup>476</sup> The Vegas of *One from the Heart* is shown as even more hyperreal than the real thing, and building it entirely on studio lots was, according to Coppola, ‘our own fantasy of Las Vegas, which for me is a metaphor for America itself.’<sup>477</sup> The sets are lavish, a panoply of neon,

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<sup>473</sup> Wyatt, *High Concept*, p. 22, p. 30.

<sup>474</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>477</sup> Coppola quoted in Ross, ‘Onward and Upward’, p. 64.

their overblown absurdity most strikingly realised in the backlot of Hank's breaker's yard where retired motel and casino signs bestride an otherwise barren landscape.

The difficulties of marrying an uncomplicated story with a complicated style might point us towards why the film attracted such critical opprobrium. The film is dominated by its production design of artificial excess and by its dazzling use of symbolic colour. Vittorio Storaro, the director of photography, made extensive use of a modern lighting board used in the theatre to make intricate adjustments to lighting levels and to facilitate his expressive use of colour.<sup>478</sup> Storaro uses unnaturally vibrant colour washes to indicate emotion and character: he told Cowie that he 'had the idea to use the physiology of the colour itself to establish the mood of the film.'<sup>479</sup> The duality between the protagonists is enhanced by giving them colour motifs that reflect their characters: Fran in red and Hank in green. So, Hank's scenes with Leila are bathed in a blue-green glow whereas Fran's romantic adventures are characterised by a profusion of red, in the lighting at moments of high passion and with a series of dresses. Coppola's use of scrims, rear-screen projections that are comically artificial and these outlandish lighting patterns all contribute to a film that overtly acknowledges its own sense of theatricality. Although theatricality could be said to be generic in any self-reflexive musical, Coppola's use here takes it in a new and unusual direction.

Coppola conceived of Zoetrope Studios as a creative hub of actors, technicians as well as other artists and visionaries. These included three of his heroes, who all worked on *One from the Heart*, and their contributions and inspiration are evident in the film. Employed as head of Zoetrope's musical division, Gene Kelly advised Coppola on the spectacular dance number mentioned earlier. The scene's sheer exuberance, the Las Vegas streets seemingly peopled by thousands dancing, evokes Kelly's much-loved MGM musicals, particularly *On the Town* (Kelly, Stanley Donen, 1949).<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Coppola, DVD Commentary.

<sup>479</sup> Quoted in Cowie, p. 153.

<sup>480</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 296. Although his influence is obvious in the film, Kelly fell out badly with Coppola during production and insisted his name be excluded from the credits and later press releases. See *ibid.*, p. 317.

Then there is the scene in Hank's scrapyard when the couple wake up in the morning and Leila is wandering about and happens upon a giant ruby ring which she tells Hank is the 'all-seeing eye'. This is an *homage* to Michael Powell, an overt reference to the 'all-seeing eye' from *The Thief of Baghdad*.<sup>481</sup> Powell's bold, experimental 1940s films in Technicolor are an influence on the look and style of *One from the Heart*, not least the luscious colours of the similarly studio-bound *Black Narcissus* (1947). The two scenes where Hank fantasises about Leila before his date with her, also display a Powell-like visual exuberance and ambition. Hank imagines Leila dancing in a giant cocktail glass in the reflection of a bar; a few minutes later, he is gazing up at an enormous neon sign of a woman's face when it magically transforms into Leila's face, lit in deep blue, singing Waits's song, 'Little Boy Blue.' What follows is an extravaganza of dazzling effects and rapid editing that resembles, and arguably prefigures, the style and ebullience of an MTV pop video (the influential channel having only just been launched in August 1981).<sup>482</sup> Lastly, Jean-Luc Godard, who fascinated Coppola because of 'his resolute rejection of traditional studio methods', assisted Coppola on background process plates of Vegas scenery.<sup>483</sup> It is Godard's unwillingness to compromise as well as his innovative use of music and colour that had an influence over the film's idiosyncratic style. The accumulation of influences and references to favourite films and filmmakers indicates both how *One from the Heart* was a personal experiment, but also it can be connected to the films of the Renaissance which were often similarly allusive.

Costs surged when Coppola kept building more and more sets, yet over thirty-five years later he is still insisting his actions were justified by his original idea to make the film in a radical way that he calls 'live cinema', a method that necessitated the elaborate construction of interconnected sets. Coppola has recently returned to this concept, conducting workshops in 2016 and 2017 for a semi-biographical project, *Distant Vision*. The idea follows the example of television from the late 1950s,

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<sup>481</sup> Coppola, DVD Commentary.

<sup>482</sup> *History of MTV* (<http://www.mtvhistory.10001mb.com/?i=1>).

<sup>483</sup> Cowie, p. 146.



with the work of John Frankenheimer particularly influential, with live performances shot on sets arranged in order of the scenes' progression.<sup>484</sup> Coppola wanted (and still wants) to recapture the immediacy and vibrancy of these early television plays. Coppola built the sets to facilitate this methodology but a decision - 'one of the few regrets in my long life' - to abort this plan was made largely because Storaro begged Coppola to reconsider because he felt unable to adequately light a film made in this way.<sup>485</sup> The inherent problems with making a feature-length film according to these methods were considerable in the early 1980s, not least because of the limits imposed by having to change reels, meaning that ten minute takes would place restrictions on Coppola achieving the immediacy of 'live' performances.<sup>486</sup> This initial idea can still be discerned in the film's aesthetics. In those scenes where Coppola takes advantage of his elaborate set construction, there is a fluidity to the progress of the action. The scene described earlier, that flits from Mo's place to Maggie's and back again, is shot in a continuous ten-minute take. Coppola directs the characters to use the space flexibly, their movements within elaborately constructed homes accompanied by a camera in constant movement. The 'live cinema' concept ran alongside the other advanced technological methods used in the making of all the Zoetrope Studio productions during its brief existence. Pre-visualisation techniques, the use of electronic storyboards, and the use of 'video assist' were all ahead of their time. Indeed, in both of Brooks Riley and Raymond Fielding's examinations of Coppola's 'electronic cinema', grand claims are made about how pre-visualisation systems would save 'millions of dollars.'<sup>487</sup> Such a notion now seems absurd considering how the budget spiralled wildly out of control. However, these alleged benefits of 'electronic cinema' do, perhaps, give us some indication of why Coppola felt able to continue spending money with such conviction.

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<sup>484</sup> Coppola, *Live Cinema*, p. 75. The book describes in detail the two workshops conducted in 2015 and 2016.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69, 76.

<sup>486</sup> Coppola's task would have been more difficult than Hitchcock's similar experiment on *Rope* (1948) because Hitchcock confined himself to a single set and limited character numbers.

<sup>487</sup> Riley, p. 46; Fielding, p. 45.

The implications of Coppola's experiments with technology discouraged the studios from supporting it - or even, as Lewis alleges, led them to sabotage it - and the difficult circumstances of its adverse critical reception, well before a general release, played a significant part in its failure. However, when trying to understand the ongoing value of the film itself, and its place in Coppola's body of work, this does not tell the whole story. This discussion has shown that, even if the film's journey onto cinema screens had been smoother and more conventional, it was always going to divide audiences - after all, we have to give the contemporary critics *some* credit for their opinions. However, what also has been shown is that *One from the Heart* was a personal experiment that featured what Cowie called 'some of the most imaginative special effects ever seen in a Hollywood movie.'<sup>488</sup> Coppola's romantic dream of an idealised version of an 'old' Hollywood were insufficiently grounded in the harsh realities of 1980s filmmaking in the 'new' Hollywood but it is important that this does not blind us to the aesthetic qualities of the film and the ambition of Coppola's personal vision.

## 1982-1983

The fallout from *One from the Heart* led Coppola to agreements to repay his debts at roughly 30 cents on the dollar so that he could keep his homes and his production company (the original American Zoetrope in San Francisco).<sup>489</sup> To make his payments, Coppola was obliged to keep working and he concluded that what was needed next was something simple and inexpensive. In March 1980, Coppola had received a letter, accompanied by a petition signed by anywhere between 30 and 108 students from Jo Ellen Misakian, a high school librarian at the Lone Star Junior High school in Fresno, California.<sup>490</sup> She requested that Coppola consider making a film of her students' favourite book, *The Outsiders*, a novel for teenagers that had become a publishing sensation. Written by Susan

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<sup>488</sup> Cowie, p. 152.

<sup>489</sup> Lindsey, p. SM25.

<sup>490</sup> Goodwin and Wise (p. 322) and Schumacher (p. 317) both say 30 but Chown puts it at 108 (p. 163).

Hinton (who published as S. E. Hinton) in 1967 when she was only 16, the book has sold 10 million copies in North America alone.<sup>491</sup> His decision to escape Los Angeles for Oklahoma to work on a project for which he was not obviously suited was based, according to the director, on 'the idea of being with half a dozen kids in the country and making a movie seemed like being a camp counsellor again...I'd forget my troubles and have some laughs again.'<sup>492</sup>

### ***The Outsiders***

When Hinton requested a mere \$5000 dollars for the rights to the book, such was the perilous financial situation at Zoetrope that they had to persuade her with a down payment of only \$500, a percentage of future profits and a role in the film.<sup>493</sup> Coppola intended to make the film on location in Tulsa, Oklahoma where the novel is set but, even with a relatively modest projected budget of \$10 million, Coppola's reputation for financial irresponsibility and Zoetrope's problems meant funding the project was not simply achieved. When Coppola left for Tulsa on 1 March 1982 to begin preproduction, he still had not got the finance in place but nine days later, he managed to secure a distribution deal with Warner Brothers. On that basis, Coppola was able to borrow about \$10 million dollars from Chemical Bank, but only if he secured a completion guarantee. Completion bonds are a guarantee to provide the funds, if required, to complete a film's production and to satisfy banks and distributors that it will be completed on schedule. The company charges a fee (usually 5% of the film's total budget) in exchange for their promise. They have no interest in the film's commercial success, so their risk is not about marketability, and often not about distribution as well (if it will be sold on a pick-up basis); their abiding concern is simply to ensure that the film is made on budget, and on time. *The Outsiders* was financed by Chemical Bank on the basis of the guarantee provided by Film Finances Limited, a private British company, who specialise in completion bonds (not the

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<sup>491</sup> S. E. Hinton on Location in Tulsa (Documentary on DVD of *The Outsiders: The Complete Novel* [Studio Canal, 2011]).

<sup>492</sup> Arjan Harmetz, 'Making *The Outsiders*: A Librarian's Dream', *New York Times*, 23/3/1983, p. C19.

<sup>493</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 323.

National Film Finances Corporation that Lewis and others cite).<sup>494</sup> Film Finances' decision to approve support for Coppola was part of a strategy to raise their profile in the United States. Indeed, when principal photography was completed, they took out their own advertisements in the trade press which congratulated Coppola, cast and crew for completing principal photography on schedule and on budget.<sup>495</sup> However, they put in place severe restrictions on Coppola to mitigate the risk in allying themselves with such a notoriously reckless director and Coppola was obliged to agree to their terms to get the funds he needed from the bank. Film Finances' archives reveal the extent that their strictures restricted the director's actions. The important point here is that Film Finances had no interest in the nature of the film's content only in the director's efficiency in the timely completion of each stage of filming. Although Lewis argues that *The Outsiders* was a Zoetrope film in name only and argues that Warners controlled the production, in fact (until post-production) it was rather that Film Finances' conditions controlled Coppola's spending but the arrangement still enabled him to make the film his own way.<sup>496</sup> The restrictions included Coppola deferring his directing and writing fee (\$1.5 million), script and cast approval and an obligation to provide daily progress reports by telex (that reported on whether the film remained on schedule) as well as weekly cost statements.<sup>497</sup> Coppola had commitments to meet in terms of managing his debts, and could only earn anything at all from *The Outsiders* by completing it in a timely and efficient manner. Coppola recognised his perilous situation and maintained a tight control over the production, coming in largely on budget and on schedule (as he would also do with his next film, *Rumble Fish*).<sup>498</sup>

By the time the film was audience tested, Warners did make their presence felt and encouraged Coppola to reduce the 2-hour running time, place more emphasis on the melodramatic elements and foreground Matt Dillon's (the notional star) character arc by editing out scenes that concentrated on

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<sup>494</sup> 'The Outsiders' files, Film Finances Limited Archives, London (hereafter referred to as FFA).

<sup>495</sup> Draft of *Variety* advertisement, June 1982 (FFA).

<sup>496</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>497</sup> Telex from Film Finances Limited to Robert Spiotta, Pony Boy Inc. c/o Zoetrope Studios, 2/3/1982 (FFA).

<sup>498</sup> Letter from Kurt Woolner (Film Finances' representative) to Film Finances Limited, 26/4/1982 (FFA).

the characterisation of the Curtis family. In 2005, Coppola restored these scenes in a new version for DVD, now called *The Outsiders: The Complete Novel*, and much closer to Hinton's book. It now ran to 114 minutes compared with 90 in 1983. Making a qualitative comparison between the two is outside my purview here but, suffice to say, there are merits in both versions. What is important is that Coppola, under pressure admittedly, made the original decisions himself and for his own reasons as well (even if he claims to regret them now). He excised those scenes that produced an adverse reaction at test screenings, particularly those that attracted giggling at the more potentially homo-erotic scenes.<sup>499</sup> His decision to second-guess himself (remembering that he had final cut in 1983) and blame others, seems characteristic of his restlessness and suspicion about his own commercial successes. As well as placing culpability on Warners for the edit, he reluctantly now questions the value of his late father's melodramatic score, replacing it with rock n'roll music from the time the story is set, the presence of which is often overbearing in a way that the original score is not.<sup>500</sup> In fact, his father's traditional score seems more appropriate to this evocation of the 1950s teen drama. Coppola's denial of his father's contribution is certainly not what he thought in 1983 when he told Thomson and Gray that 'the key in *The Outsiders* is the score; the fact that it's this schmaltzy classical movie score indicates that I wanted a movie told in sumptuous terms, very honestly or carefully taken from the book without changing it a lot.'<sup>501</sup> In this frequent re-visiting of his past, Coppola always seems to be striving to convince himself - and others - that he is a sophisticated auteur and is a reflection of his constant need for (self) affirmation.<sup>502</sup>

When *The Outsiders* is remembered today, it is usually for its remarkable casting, a 'who's who' of Brat Pack actors and future superstars. In varying degrees, Tom Cruise, Patrick Swayze, Matt Dillon,

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<sup>499</sup> *Staying Gold: A Look Back at The Outsiders* (Documentary on DVD of *The Outsiders*, 2011)

<sup>500</sup> Coppola, DVD Commentary, *The Outsiders* (Studio Canal, 2011).

<sup>501</sup> Thomson and Gray, p. 61.

<sup>502</sup> Coppola's continuing tendency to second-guess himself has also resulted in various versions of *The Godfather* trilogy, a recent third visit to *Apocalypse Now*, *Final Cut* (2019) following *Redux* in 2001, and a new version of *One from the Heart* for DVD in 2003 which features a few superficial, and arguably unnecessary, alterations. As I complete this project, a new Blu-ray release of the third 1980s film that Coppola has re-edited, *The Cotton Club Encore* (2019), which runs 13 minutes longer than the original.

Ralph Macchio, C. Thomas Howell, Emilio Estevez and Rob Lowe would all go on to have significant careers, an ensemble that Jonathan Bernstein calls 'a platform that would introduce an entire stud farm of fresh young acting talent into the national consciousness.'<sup>503</sup> But when Lewis talks about a 'number of bankable young male stars' and Justin Wyatt argues that *The Outsiders*' key high-concept marker was its 'cast of teen idols,' this misrepresents the situation at the time.<sup>504</sup> Before *The Outsiders*, only Dillon could be said to have any 'star' status, having appeared in five films already, including the lead in the just-completed Hinton adaptation for Disney, *Tex* (Tim Hunter, 1982). Cruise, who only has a small supporting role, was cast in his breakthrough film, *Risky Business* (Paul Brickman, 1983) while making *The Outsiders*. Swayze, Macchio and Lowe, who would all become leading actors in a few years' time, were making their feature film debuts after just a few appearances in television movies. Howell, the main protagonist in *The Outsiders*, was the youngest but had at least appeared in a small role in *E.T.* Coppola then can take some credit for his prescience in gathering such a talented ensemble.<sup>505</sup> His use of an extended rehearsal period, which formed part of his pre-visualisation methods, enabled the teenagers to form bonds that are reflected in the relationships depicted on screen. Admittedly the cast were already bankable enough to have featured in the pages of teen magazines, presumably because of their appearances on children's television, and this appeal to its target audience may provide a small clue to the film's success.<sup>506</sup>

The story was inspired by Hinton's own experiences growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma but she portrays a male-dominated milieu where mothers are significant characters by dint of their absence. *The Outsiders* focuses on the Curtis household, three brothers who live together in a small rundown

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<sup>503</sup> Jonathan Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), p. 114.

<sup>504</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 98; Wyatt, *High Concept*, p. 192.

<sup>505</sup> Those who took part in a massive and unconventional audition process, but did not make the cut, included Mickey Rourke (who would star in *Rumble Fish*), Dennis Quaid, Kate Capshaw and Val Kilmer. See *The Casting of The Outsiders* (Documentary on DVD of *The Outsiders*, 2011).

<sup>506</sup> Five articles appeared in five successive issues of *Tiger Beat* magazine (Goodwin and Wise, p. 352). A special edition of *16 Magazine* in December 1982 was devoted to *The Outsiders*' young cast. See 'The Outsiders Production Files', Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles (AMPAS hereafter).

house on the north side of a town where the well-off live on the south side.<sup>507</sup> The Curtis boys are orphans whose parents were both killed in a car accident some years ago. Darrel (Swayze) is a 20-year old who had to give up the opportunity to go to college to look after his brothers.<sup>508</sup> The good-natured Sodapop (Lowe) dropped out of school and works at a gas station and Ponyboy (Howell), the film's main protagonist, is 14, an intelligent, intense boy who, as Darrel remarks in exasperation, spends all his time thinking about movies and books. There is little possibility that the Curtis family will ever be able to transcend their environment and *The Outsiders* tells a melodramatic, overheated story based on a novel written by a 16-year old for a teenage audience. Coppola's presentation of such melodrama in a hyper-stylised setting was not well received by critics, many expressing a view that such over-dramatised emotion belonged to an earlier era. The subsequent discourse surrounding the film has been dominated by the cast and the origins of the project, but it is at its most interesting when considering how its visual style is attuned to the protagonist, and to its generic roots.

The film portrays teenage lives with barely an adult to be seen, where adolescent experience becomes overwhelming for these troubled young men. The film's visual style is a reflection of these lives and is filtered through the prism of Ponyboy's imagination. Hinton wrote all her young adult novels with a first-person narrator and it is Ponyboy in *The Outsiders*. Coppola recreates this perspective, by depicting the story, as Hinton also does in the novel, as a school assignment Ponyboy is writing.<sup>509</sup> The film begins with Ponyboy sitting at his desk and picking up his pen to describe the events that comprise the film and the audience experiences the events of the past through Ponyboy's eyes. Coppola also employs a circular structure that brings the story to a close by taking us all the way back to the beginning. By the end of the dramatic story, that culminates with the death of

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<sup>507</sup> The Tulsa setting is not actually mentioned in the film.

<sup>508</sup> Swayze was 30 at the time (and looks it). The others were all about 10 years younger with Howell the youngest at 16.

<sup>509</sup> S. E. Hinton, *The Outsiders* (London: William Collins, 1967), p. 128.

two of the Curtis's closest friends, it is the act of recalling the events that led to this tragic conclusion that prompts the proto-novelist, Ponyboy, to set down his story - which, in turn, forms the narrative that has just concluded. It is this structural frame that identifies how we see the film's events through Ponyboy's eyes. Alongside the deprived familial environments and societally determined poverty is a world of dramatic sunsets and sunrises, and of evocative landscapes, that exaggerate and foreground the expressive beauty of the natural world. These can be read as visual expressions of Ponyboy's romantic imagination. When Darrel tells him, 'You don't ever think and you've always got your head in a book,' we can see how Ponyboy is very different from his peers and that he sees the world differently. How Ponyboy's poetic inclinations make him stand apart from his peers is reflected in one of Hinton's central messages, that the world is equally beautiful for the deprived and the privileged alike. This is epitomised in Ponyboy's conversation with Cherry (Diane Lane) when he asks her, 'can you see the sunset from the south side?' When she replies, 'sure,' he says that 'you can see it from the north side too.' The division between the rich kids who include Cherry - the 'Socs' (pronounced 'Soshes' and short for 'socialites') - and the Curtis brothers and all their friends - 'Greasers' who live on the wrong side of town - necessarily alienates them from each other. Yet Ponyboy instinctively recognises that Cherry is the type of person who looks at sunsets. They have much in common but can never be friends, and their relationship is governed by the tribal and elitist behaviour that is encoded in their social environment. In fact, it is Cherry and a friend chatting with Ponyboy and Johnny at the drive-in (after Cherry has fallen out with her very drunk boyfriend, Bob [Leif Garrett]) that prompts the Socs to attack the two boys later in the evening. Johnny kills Bob with a knife because he believes the Socs are about to drown Ponyboy. With the help of their doomed older friend, Dallas (Matt Dillon) who has been in prison and will be killed by the police by the end, Johnny and Ponyboy go on the run and hide out in the Oklahoma countryside.

During the boys' adventure in rural surroundings, a key connection is established between the look and content of the film. As a representation of Ponyboy's imagination, *Gone with the Wind* is a



key reference point for the visual style of the film, Coppola drawing inspiration from plot details. Ponyboy and Johnny pass the time in their rural hideout reading a battered copy of the novel to each other. Among a number of scenes that visually recall the earlier film is when they set off and a train (carrying the boys) traverses the breadth of the screen. Captured in silhouette, behind the train is the first of a number of spectacular sunrises and sunsets. For Coppola, they represent the perfect metaphor for the film, 'even as we look at a sunset, we are aware that it is already starting to die. Youth too is like that: at its very moment of perfection you can already see the forces that are undoing it.'<sup>510</sup> The centrality of the *Gone with the Wind* as a symbol of their formative experience together in alien surroundings, is underlined later when Johnny is dying in hospital after having rescued some children from a fire (that he probably caused) and he asks Ponyboy to get the book for him. When Johnny dies, he leaves the book and a note for Ponyboy telling him to finish it. Coppola promoted the film, with his customary penchant for high-flown lyricism, by calling it 'Gone with the Wind for 14-year old girls' which, although ignoring his potential *male* audience, does make sense in the way *The Outsiders* evokes an epic grandeur in its aestheticisation of the Oklahoma countryside.<sup>511</sup>

As Coppola did in *One from the Heart* (and would do in *Rumble Fish* and *Tucker* as well), *The Outsiders* borrows stylistically from other forms of cinema, using such influences not as pastiche or ironically, but reverently, as a jumping-off point for his aesthetic experimentation. *One from the Heart* evoked the Hollywood musical and the height of classicism, employing an Academy ratio (an almost square 1.37:1) to evoke the glorious past and to give emphasis to horizontal planes and detail. In *The Outsiders*, Coppola turns towards the 1950s melodrama, and its combination of widescreen ratios and Technicolor. Because Coppola wanted to imbue the characters with a certain heroic dimension, he decided to film in a wide-screen anamorphic format (a ratio of 2.35:1).<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> Quoted in 'Production Information: *The Outsiders*', 25/3/1983 (AMPAS), p. 3.

<sup>511</sup> Quoted in Goodwin and Wise, p. 322.

<sup>512</sup> 'Production Information: *The Outsiders*', p. 11.

Stephen Burum, the film's cinematographer, described what they were trying to do by using the wider ratio:

It's how you play the borders...We have to get beyond the idea of the frame as a proscenium arch and feel free to tilt the camera if that's more organic to the subject matter...We composed from the character's point-of-view; everything is distorted though somebody's eyes but geared to Ponyboy since it's his story.<sup>513</sup>

The teen drama's hallmark text is *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) and Coppola's use of Panavision and an expressive, often unnaturalistic, colour palette invokes that film. Coincidentally or not, Macchio also bears a certain facial resemblance with Sal Mineo's character in the earlier film and both actors play the well-intentioned but fated 'best friend' role. Yet it is the prevalent sunsets and sunrises that remain the most obvious marker of a visual sensibility influenced by 1950s Hollywood, for all the *Gone with the Wind* allusions. They also encapsulate the visual style of the same director as *One from the Heart*, one that is not geared to an obviously naturalistic mode. Whereas Jon Lewis may insist that it was 'a calculated and very conservative attempt to make a commercial picture' such a perception of *The Outsiders* as a conventional teen drama peopled by a profusion of Brat Pack stars has undermined consideration of the film's unusual and interesting style.<sup>514</sup> In terms of critical legacy, it always suffers from the understandable comparisons made with Coppola's next film, *Rumble Fish* (shot back-to-back with *The Outsiders* in Tulsa), because on one hand they are both Hinton adaptations and on the other, they are so completely different. *The Outsiders* is not as conventional as it seems when it is compared directly with *Rumble Fish's* dazzling adventure in stylistic experimentation, a European art film in all but name.

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<sup>513</sup> Quoted in *The Outsiders: The True Story*, booklet accompanying DVD release of *The Outsiders* (2011).

<sup>514</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 100.

While shooting *The Outsiders*, Coppola was encouraged by Matt Dillon to read Hinton's later, more complex book, *Rumble Fish*, written in 1975 when Hinton was 27. He immediately decided to make it by shooting it back-to-back with mostly the same crew in the same location. This ability to make two such different films so quickly in this way was facilitated by the sophistication of his electronic equipment.<sup>515</sup> Coppola followed the same route regarding finance, getting a completion guarantee from Film Finances, funds from Chemical Bank but, of course, he struggled to secure a distribution deal. The budget of \$10.5 million for *Rumble Fish* was also similar to its predecessor but Warners were disinclined to support another teen film, thinking it might crowd the market at the expense of *The Outsiders*.<sup>516</sup> They also had other issues with Zoetrope over their involvement in *Hammett*. In June 1982, after the production had marked time for almost six weeks in Tulsa, Coppola obtained a distribution deal from Universal as part of a two-film agreement with Abel Gance's silent epic, *Napoleon* (1927) for which Zoetrope now owned the rights.<sup>517</sup> *Rumble Fish* is the one Coppola 1980s film that has seen its reputation gradually improve over the years. Largely derided for its self-conscious artiness on release, it has since become a staple of university film courses.<sup>518</sup> The ubiquitous Matt Dillon played Rusty-James, the slightly dim narrator of the novel.<sup>519</sup> The other central role is played by Mickey Rourke as Rusty-James's older brother, only ever known as The Motorcycle Boy. Supporting actors included Dennis Hopper, who plays the boys' alcoholic father and Diane Lane, returning from *The Outsiders*, as Rusty-James on-off girlfriend.

As befits a novel that is very different from *The Outsiders*, albeit still with similarly excluded, working-class protagonists, deprived surroundings and lack of parental role models, it is a very different sort of film. It is an even more extreme exercise in self-conscious stylisation, one that is in

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<sup>515</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 343; Cowie, p. 165.

<sup>516</sup> 'Production Budget', *Rumble Fish*, undated (FFA).

<sup>517</sup> Memo from Robert Spiotta (Zoetrope) to Barry Hirsch (lawyer), 7/6/1982 (FFA); Goodwin and Wise, p. 350.

<sup>518</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 108; Chown, p. 167.

<sup>519</sup> S. E. Hinton, *Rumble Fish* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975).

complete contrast to its predecessor: a black-and white, expressionistic and dystopian view of a city and its inhabitants. The world portrayed in *Rumble Fish* is yet bleaker than *The Outsiders*, a colourless *mise-en-scène* used as a reflection of both the social environment and the existential angst of the Motorcycle Boy, a character who we learn is unable to see colours. *Rumble Fish's* continuing position as a text worthy of academic study probably derives mostly from its most particular aesthetic palette. Indeed, for Cowie, it has 'more technical experimentation (and more visual imagination) than in any American movie of the decade.'<sup>520</sup> Whereas *The Outsiders* seems to have been consciously constructed to attract a similar adolescent audience to its literary source, *Rumble Fish* is a more adult interpretation of teenage experience, its 'arthouse' stylings not necessarily conducive for mainstream appeal. Whereas influences from Hollywood's past were predominant in the earlier 1980s films, here Coppola turned far more to earlier European cinema for inspiration. The black-and white imagery, the use of canted angles, and the predominance of shadows all recall the German Expressionist films of the 1920s although Thomson and Gray sense other slightly later influences, observing that 'it looks and feels like Welles and Cocteau.'<sup>521</sup> The film failed to find much of an audience, making barely \$1 million in its first year of release.<sup>522</sup> In stark contrast to *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish* provided Coppola with no relief at all from his financial woes.

## 1984-1986

By the time Coppola completed his Oklahoma sojourn, his financial situation had become yet more perilous and it all came to an ignominious close when, on 10 February 1984 and less than four years since its purchase, the studio lot was auctioned off to the highest bidder for \$12.3 million.<sup>523</sup>

Coppola, under pressure to maintain payments to service his debt, now began the first of three films originated by others. The first of the three, *The Cotton Club*, re-united on paper the team behind *The*

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<sup>520</sup> Cowie, p. 169.

<sup>521</sup> Thomson and Gray, p. 61.

<sup>522</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 384.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

*Godfather*: producer Robert Evans, writer Mario Puzo and Coppola. However, the collaboration was an illusion; by the time the film wrapped, only Coppola still retained an active role. Evans, who had been in charge at Paramount when making the *Godfather* films, was now an independent producer. He had been developing the drama about Harlem's famous jazz club for some years and planned to direct the film himself. By the time Evans contacted Coppola begging him to re-write Puzo's screenplay for \$500,000, pre-production had already been underway for about six months and the whole enterprise was now in trouble.<sup>524</sup> Once on board, it was not long before the other producers, and the star Richard Gere, were lobbying for Coppola to take over directing duties. By the time, the film was eventually completed for a conservative estimate of \$47 million dollars, it stood little chance of turning a profit.<sup>525</sup>

The entire production from start to finish was a soap opera, involving Machiavellian sub-plots, the involvement of shady gangster figures and a real-life murder enquiry with (tenuous) links to the production and numerous court hearings.<sup>526</sup> Although Coppola can be absolved of much of the blame for the overspend, once he came on board he brought his own brand of organised chaos to the project. Coppola used the production's many issues to finesse a \$2.5 million fee, 10 percent of the adjusted gross and final cut.<sup>527</sup> He dispensed with Puzo's version and enlisted novelist William Kennedy to collaborate with him and they ended up producing something like forty or fifty drafts (so many they lost count).<sup>528</sup> Despite his late arrival, there is much in the film's style that does seem distinctly 'Coppola-esque'. The musical numbers are spectacular and imaginative, the direction is sure-footed, and the film is grounded in a historicised and complex web of racial oppression and violence. However, the film struggles to marry the extravagance of the club scenes with a narrative

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<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357; Schumacher, p. 339.

<sup>525</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 391.

<sup>526</sup> The film's production history has been extensively covered. See particularly, Daly, 'The Making of *The Cotton Club*', pp. 40-62, Goodwin and Wise, pp. 359-413 and Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, pp. 111-142. Robert Evans offers his own extremely partial account in his memoir, *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (London: Aurum Press, 1994), pp. 327-351.

<sup>527</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 379.

<sup>528</sup> Cowie, p. 179. Puzo ended up with only a 'Story' credit.

that the scriptwriters, for all their many drafts, never really managed to work out satisfactorily. Given the troubled nature of its production, it can only be regarded as a compromised enterprise for the errant auteur.<sup>529</sup>

The next for-hire film Coppola directed, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, was his most successful of the decade and the director's involvement in the production was considerably less dramatic, as he came in both on time and under budget.<sup>530</sup> *Peggy Sue* is, however, also the 1980s film in which Coppola seems to have had the least personal investment. Chown contends that 'the point is we are not in auteur territory with *Peggy Sue*, however entertaining the film finally is or whatever similarities it may have to other Coppola films. We cannot categorically ascribe whatever is in a film to its director.'<sup>531</sup> Coppola only came on board as third choice director (after Jonathan Demme and Penny Marshall), and only after casting and script were complete.<sup>532</sup> When Ray Stark, the veteran producer, approached him in the autumn of 1984 to rescue the troubled production for his usual fee of \$2.5 million, Coppola accepted because he needed the money. He remarked in a radio interview in 1987 that *Peggy Sue* 'was not the kind of film I normally would want to do' but that he was due to pay 'millions of dollars' shortly.<sup>533</sup> Waiting for Kathleen Turner, shooting eventually began in late August 1985 and was completed near the end of October, ahead of schedule.<sup>534</sup> As with *The Cotton Club*, there is still evidence that indicates the presence of a dedicated stylist: the film's sense of fantasy is bolstered by moments of surreality that recall his earlier 1980s work. Although any cohesion across Coppola's career is more stylistic than thematic, the exploration of family dynamics is an abiding concern. *Peggy Sue*'s final message about the importance of family values, then, is familiar and, according to Lee Lourdeaux, he often concludes his films with 'an idealized Italian sense of natural

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<sup>529</sup> The recent re-edit is a very different film. Some of the film's obvious problems have been addressed but, arguably, has the effect of creating others.

<sup>530</sup> Schumacher, p. 380.

<sup>531</sup> Chown, p. 201.

<sup>532</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 149.

<sup>533</sup> Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>534</sup> Schumacher, p 380.

beauty and family unity.<sup>535</sup> *Peggy Sue* was Coppola's most successful film of the 1980s generating returns of \$41 million domestically alone.<sup>536</sup> Tri-Star Pictures, the company behind *Peggy Sue*, had seen enough that they immediately offered Coppola the opportunity to direct *Gardens of Stone*, based on a novel by Nicholas Proffitt. The subject matter brought the director back to the subject of the Vietnam War and, although bearing no other similarity to *Apocalypse Now*, it seems likely that they chose Coppola for this very reason.

In the break between agreeing to direct *Peggy Sue* and Turner becoming available, Coppola made a brief (and his only) foray into directing for television. He was approached by Shelley Duvall in November 1984 to direct *Rip van Winkle* for her 'Faerie Tale Theater' series for HBO.<sup>537</sup> Coppola was attracted by the opportunity to use videotape (which formed an essential component of his pre-visualisation techniques) to experiment with his ideas for the type of 'live' shooting he had originally envisioned for *One from the Heart*. He recruited the Japanese designer, Eiko Ishioka, who had done some radical work on Paul Schrader's *Mishima* (which Coppola and George Lucas had co-produced), to build a theatrical *mise-en-scène* that foregrounds surreal imagery and playful means of exposition. As ever with Coppola's more *outré* enterprises, *Rip Van Winkle* divides opinion: Goodwin and Wise call it 'Coppola's first unqualified artistic success since *Godfather II*' while Cowie insists that it is 'a prisoner of its artifice, a perfunctory scribble in the margins of Coppola's career.'<sup>538</sup> Coppola's comment, made apparently without irony, that he enjoyed the miniscule budget (\$650,000) and tight schedule and that 'the bigger the budget, the less freedom you have,' once again reminds us of the irresolvable dilemma of choosing between artistry and ambition that seems to haunt Coppola.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Lourdeaux, p. 178.

<sup>536</sup> 'Peggy Sue Got Married', *Box Office Mojo* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=peggy sue got married.htm>).

<sup>537</sup> Coppola's episode was not shown until March 1987.

<sup>538</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 416; Cowie, p. 189.

<sup>539</sup> Quoted in Goodwin and Wise, p. 407.

## 1987-1989

*Gardens of Stone* is part of a late eighties cycle of Vietnam films but differs from films like *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* because it does not depict the horrors of combat directly. Comparing Coppola's film to the others, William Palmer suggests that '*Gardens of Stone* is the most austere and symbolic in its representation of the nihilism of the Vietnam War'<sup>540</sup> In fact, rather like Altman in *Streamers*, the film deals with the war in the far-east as an overbearing background presence, a place of dread from which both films' young soldiers are unlikely to return. Whereas most films about Vietnam (including *Apocalypse Now*) tend to be both anti-militarist and anti-war, *Gardens of Stone* is shot through with a respect for the Army as an institution while simultaneously rejecting the Vietnam conflict as an unspeakable folly.

Once again, Coppola accepted the job because he needed the money. However, he seems to have also discovered an affinity with the subject matter: he had been fascinated by army ritual since attending military academy as a teenager.<sup>541</sup> Many of Coppola's films, even those made as hired hand like *Peggy Sue*, revolve around themes of familial loyalty and he related to Gene Phillips that he wanted to portray the Army as a quasi-family where its 'members are bound together by a traditional code of honor and by mutual loyalty and affection.'<sup>542</sup> The film tells the story of the Old Guard who perform the ceremonial burials at Arlington National Cemetery and Coppola had to accede to various script changes demanded by the Army in return for their permission to film at the genuine locations. Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Gardens of Stone* is the spectacle of the burial ceremonies and there is a grace in their ritualistic precision enacted in strikingly beautiful settings. *Gardens of Stone* is a somewhat forgotten film, one that was received rather indifferently by critics and performed limply at the box office. If remembered at all, it tends to be because of the tragedy that occurred during its making. During a break in filming to celebrate Memorial Day, Gio, Coppola's

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<sup>540</sup> Palmer, *The Films of the Eighties*, p. 52.

<sup>541</sup> Cowie, p. 199.

<sup>542</sup> Gene Phillips, 'Francis Coppola', *Films in Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (March 1989), p. 159.



eldest son who had been working with his father since he was 16, was killed in a speedboat accident. Coppola carried on filming almost immediately, telling others that 'Gio would have wanted it that way' and principal photography was completed in only eight weeks, and only a mere seven percent over budget.<sup>543</sup> Such was the eerie parallel between the tragedy and the film's narrative that Coppola was filming funeral scenes only three weeks after his son's death. For all Gio's tragic death inevitably distorted the film's reception, it is, in any case, a sombre story and is particularly lacking in action for a film about soldiers. Any evidence of a lack of focus from the grief-stricken director can only really be seen in an occasional jarring transition: it would be entirely unsurprising if Coppola's usual close control of the edit was compromised by his personal circumstances. In any case, the film which opened to little fanfare in early 1987 did not do fare well at the box-office, making only just over \$5 million (against a budget of \$13 million).<sup>544</sup>

Following *Gardens of Stone*, Coppola returned to an idea that had been gestating since at least 1976 when he had acquired the rights to the story of Preston Tucker, an automobile pioneer who, immediately after World War II, manufactured a revolutionary car, the 'Tucker Torpedo', but whose radical plans for change were thwarted by the established Detroit manufacturers. When he was a child, Coppola had been excited when his father had put his name down for a Tucker but remembered his subsequent disappointment when the car never materialised and he was told Tucker was a 'crook'.<sup>545</sup> Over the years, the project had mutated. According to Coppola, it was originally conceived as 'a dark kind of piece...a sort of Brechtian musical in which Tucker would be the main story, but it would also involve Edison and Henry Ford and Firestone and Carnegie.' Leonard Bernstein even agreed to write the score.<sup>546</sup> The project stalled as the Zoetrope debacle unfolded. By the mid-1980s, it occurred to Coppola that his old friend, George Lucas (who, like

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<sup>543</sup> Goodwin and Wise, p. 432.

<sup>544</sup> '*Gardens of Stone*', *Box Office Mojo* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=gardens%20of%20stone>); Goodwin and Wise, p. 426.

<sup>545</sup> Steve Oney, '*Tucker: The Director Finally Makes the Picture of his Dreams*', *Premiere*, August 1988, p. 69.

<sup>546</sup> Lindsey, p. SM26.

Coppola, also owned one of the rare Tucker cars) might be interested in collaborating to make Tucker's story. Their relationship had soured over the years, but Lucas admitted he was unable to resist his old friend: 'he has charisma beyond logic.'<sup>547</sup> Lucas agreed to produce the film, the project thus becoming the mirror image of *THX1138* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973) with producer and director's roles reversed, and Lucas now the one seemingly more likely to be able to raise the finance.

### ***Tucker: The Man and his Dream***

Possibly the most frequently made observation about Coppola's *Tucker* is how closely the eponymous hero's story resembles the director's own. Stéphane Delorme insists that it 'is clearly a self-portrait' and Jill Kearney reported from the film set how the parallels between the two men were being discussed on set by both cast and crew.<sup>548</sup> However, it is also true, as Lewis insists, that the project existed long before many of the biographical similarities had 'taken shape.'<sup>549</sup> Lewis, however, fails to take account of how little we know of the earlier conceptions of the project. Many of the parallels may have only come through in the final version of the story. After all, as with the Brechtian musical concept, earlier iterations of the project may have borne little similarity to the completed film. However conceived, the biographical echoes and the personal resonances are undeniable and make *Tucker* seem, arguably, Coppola's most personal film. He may have long regarded Preston Tucker (Jeff Bridges) as a kindred spirit, an impulsive gambler who was unafraid to reach for his dreams and there are both real-life biographical similarities, as well as others that come through more in the characterisation and relationships as enacted on screen; on both levels the similarities pile up. Tucker was an innovator whose ideas anticipated many of the components of car design that are used routinely today. Seatbelts, fuel injection, shatterproof glass and rear motors

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<sup>547</sup> Quoted in Pollock, *Skywalking*, p. 79.

<sup>548</sup> Delorme, p. 68; Jill Kearney, 'The Road Warrior', *American Film*, Vol. 13, No. 8 (May-September 1988), p. 23.

<sup>549</sup> Lewis, *Whom God Wishes*, p. 151.

were first used in the Tucker car. Coppola's ideas for his 'electronic cinema' were certainly not as obviously influential as Tucker's, arguably only because of the advances made in digital technology which rendered his video-based systems redundant. However, in 1988 at least, Coppola was, much like Tucker, ahead of his time. As the film tells it, Tucker was thwarted by the might and influence of Detroit's 'Big Three' (Ford, Chrysler and General Motors). They worried that his innovations were sufficiently inventive, as the hostile senator (Lloyd Bridges) says in the film, 'to cost billions to keep up with them.' This seems close to Lewis's assertions about how the Hollywood studios operated to ensure the failure of *One from the Heart*.

Coppola's familiar theme of the importance of familial unity is ever-present throughout *Tucker* and there are discernible similarities between the Coppola and Tucker family dynamics. Tucker's eldest son, Junior (Christian Slater) nervously tells his father that he wants to turn down a chance to go to Notre Dame and learn how to build cars instead. Gio, Coppola's son for whom he was still grieving, had said almost exactly the same thing when he told his father he would not go to college but be a filmmaker instead.<sup>550</sup> To this request, Tucker tells his son, 'sure you can stay with me. I'm gonna depend on you' and hugs him: the scene is moving anyway, even before one considers the personal resonances. A further connection between *Tucker* and Gio is that it was when the latter was washing one of his father's Tuckers, that it occurred to Coppola (senior) to revive the project in the first place and he dedicates the film is to his son's memory, 'who loved cars.' The Tucker family is a solid, loving family unit where the others revel in their father's eccentricities. The portrayal of Vera, Tucker's wife (Joan Allen) could even be read as a tribute to Coppola's long-suffering wife, Eleanor. Not only is Vera tolerant of her husband's eccentric, wild decisions and recklessness with money, but she punctuates his vanity as well, as when she chastises him for admiring himself in the mirror. At one point in the film, when Tucker is on the road promoting the car and the board try to cancel most of the innovations, Vera confronts the elderly members to good comic effect. The chairman,

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<sup>550</sup> Oney, p. 70.

Bennington (Dean Goodman), the epitome of stuffiness, tries to fob her off, telling her that she should contact his wife who 'deals with all social arrangements.' It is the manner in which she stands up for herself that resonates as something Eleanor might have done as well.<sup>551</sup> The Tucker family all seem to be involved in some way with the family business and Coppola, too, always involved as many of his family as he could in his films. On *Tucker*, this extended to others' families as well. Susan Landau, co-star Martin's daughter, was the unit publicist and according to Kearney, 'most of the camera crew seem to be nephews of Vittorio Storaro.' Cynthia Tucker, Preston's granddaughter, also worked on publicity.<sup>552</sup> In fact, the familial harmony of the Tucker family is idealised to an extent that may seem rather *too* perfect for some tastes but it does add to the sense that the film, as many have observed, is a type of 'Capra-esque' fable.<sup>553</sup>

It is the manner of the film's conclusion with the triumph of the little man against the system, as well as its relentless optimism, epitomised by the effusive Bridges, that makes *Tucker* most resemble a Frank Capra film. The film rarely allows the darker forces bearing down on Preston to have much effect on his sunny demeanour. Nonetheless, as Cowie observes, it does manage largely to avoid Capra's 'whimsy and folksiness.'<sup>554</sup> The film's climax ends in a courtroom with our hero allowed (somewhat implausibly) to make the final statement himself in his own defence.<sup>555</sup> He has been charged with defrauding dealers into investing in a car that did not exist. Like James Stewart in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), Tucker makes an impassioned appeal for the ordinary working man and evokes the spirit of the 'American Dream' when he exclaims 'rags to riches...that's what this country's about.' When he says, 'if Benjamin Franklin was alive, he'd be arrested for flying a kite without a licence,' it is not difficult to discern Coppola's own beliefs about Hollywood stifling creativity reflected in Tucker's words. In reality, although Preston was, indeed, found not guilty of

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<sup>551</sup> For an insight into Eleanor's personality and relationship with her husband, see her *Notes: On the Making of Apocalypse Now* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

<sup>552</sup> Kearney, p. 26.

<sup>553</sup> For example, see Lewis, p. 152.

<sup>554</sup> Cowie, p. 215.

<sup>555</sup> Although, in reality, Tucker was indeed acquitted, he did not make his own closing address. See Oney, p. 69.

fraud, his story is not really about success at all. As with *One from the Heart* and the debate about culpability between Coppola and the studios, it is questionable how much it was Tucker himself, and how much it was the Detroit manufacturers that were responsible for the failure of the enterprise.<sup>556</sup> Only fifty cars were ever built and when Tucker arranges for them all to be driven to the courthouse, Coppola provides us with the final showpiece sequence of the film as the cars (mostly the nineteen real Tuckers borrowed for the film) are depicted gliding serenely through the traffic in formation, their iridescent colours gleaming in the sunshine.<sup>557</sup> The film ends with a caption that tells us that 46 of the 50 cars made are still running but that Tucker died six years after the court case. The parallels with Coppola's story fortunately end there but the wayward optimism of Jeff Bridge's portrayal, of a man with too many ideas and a reckless disregard for money, makes the comparison with the film director irresistible.

*Tucker* is an unconventionally stylised film and bears little similarity to a traditional biopic, providing a snapshot, a small segment of a man's life, as well as of post-war American society and the corrosive power of big business as well. The film begins with a certain panache, the viewer plunged into the late 1940s as the credits play out across a promotional film for the Tucker car that Coppola uses as a means of introducing the protagonist. A narrator helpfully fills in some of the early details of Tucker's life prior to the events of the film. The use of an off-screen voice, who describes the proto-hero as a 'dreamer, inventor, visionary, a man ahead of his time' is accompanied by a flurry of montage in a manner that recalls the style of another 'larger-than-life' director Orson Welles with whom Coppola has frequently been compared. The montage sequences evoke *Citizen Kane* but an astute and more persuasive comparison is made by Cowie about *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) when he observes that both films revel 'in the nostalgia for vanished times and the notion of

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<sup>556</sup> Arvid Linde, *Preston Tucker and Others: Tales of Brilliant Automotive Inventors and Innovations* (Dorchester: Veloce Publishing, 2011), pp. 29-47.

<sup>557</sup> Kearney, p.27.

an auto inventor being spurned.<sup>558</sup> It is a distinctive marker of Coppola in the 1980s that his films offered a self-conscious surfeit of style that is keyed to the subject matter, and through which he made frequent allusions to past films and filmmakers. *One from the Heart*, *The Outsiders*, and *Rumble Fish* all share, with *Tucker*, a theatricality, a sense of experimentation and a denial of a literal realism that aligns Coppola's approach to visual style with that of Welles. As Cowie puts it, both Coppola and Welles 'adhered to the tradition of Méliès, rather than Lumière - the fantasy rather than the realistic, documentary approach.'<sup>559</sup> Today, Coppola continues to bemoan Hollywood's dependency on naturalism wryly observing that 'there are any number of styles one is able to choose in the movie business - as long as it's *realism*.'<sup>560</sup>

The self-conscious theatrical devices that Coppola used liberally in *One from the Heart*, many of which were initiated as part of Coppola's original conception of that film as 'live cinema', are occasionally employed in *Tucker*. Both films foreground this theatrical tone from the beginning: as *One from the Heart* opens with a pair of stage curtains parting, so *Tucker* starts with an advertisement declared as being courtesy of 'the Public Relations Department of the Tucker Corporation.' Three-sided sets built adjacent to each other are used to facilitate long takes that travel across different diegetic locations. In one scene on Preston's promotional tour, he is in black tie at a formal function as he passes a column but when he appears on the other side of it, in a continuous shot, the setting has changed to daytime and Tucker is now in a bright grey lounge suit, maintaining his high-wattage grin as he strides purposefully through the sequence. In another scene, by dollying the camera between two sets, Coppola shows Tucker talking to his wife on the phone both in the same frame, depicting events taking place hundreds of miles apart. Preston is captured in a medium shot that allows reaction shots of his adviser, Abe (Landau), to be seen, but Coppola

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<sup>558</sup> Cowie, p. 213.

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>560</sup> Coppola, *Live Cinema*, p. 84 (italics in original).

privileges Vera's reaction by filming her in profile, and in close-up. It is a striking and stylised moment that underscores the pair's instinctive harmony.

An important link to the visual style of *One from the Heart* comes from both films sharing the same cinematographer, Vittorio Storaro. A key Coppola collaborator, who also shot *Apocalypse Now* and Coppola's segment of *New York Stories* (1989), Storaro's approach to distinctive colour patterning is apparent elsewhere in his work including the renowned films he made with Bertolucci (notably *The Conformist* in 1970) and especially in the expressive primary colours of *Dick Tracy* (1990) for Warren Beatty. On *Tucker*, he and Coppola do not go as far as they did on *One from the Heart* with that film's hyperreal expanses of colour-coded symmetry that function to symbolise character. Nevertheless, this expression of meaning by means of colour washes and stylised palettes is employed much more subtly in *Tucker*. When Preston and Abe visit Bennington at his office, everyone is dressed in various shades of brown, matching the wood-panelled offices and leather-bound furniture, giving the setting an atmosphere of quiet affluence but also a serenity, an entitlement that is borne out of indolence and unchallenged power. Earlier when Abe and Preston hatch their plans for the first time, they chat in the semi-darkness and a diffused blue light - the moonlight is very blue - pierces the gloom, an appropriate, almost magical setting for the creation of a magical enterprise. Storaro's attention to colour design is matched with Dean Tavoularis's production design that gives the 1940s fashions and set decoration an effervescence that complements the ever-smiling Tucker's unbridled energy.

Because this examination is about Coppola's authorship and his personal relationship to the content, it is worth concluding on *Tucker* with a brief examination of the nature of Coppola's relationship with Lucas in making the film and how the way it was understood at the time may have distorted a balanced understanding of the film's authorship. Most writers have tended to accept at face value the narrative that Lucas and Coppola themselves promoted about the making of the film. Lucas, although notoriously publicity-shy, spent considerable time alongside Coppola publicising

*Tucker* and there was a consistent theme in their interviews: that Lucas had reined in Coppola's wilder tendencies and that Coppola allowed himself to be led by Lucas because the latter had a better sense of what an audience wants.<sup>561</sup> When Coppola declared that Lucas 'wanted to candy-apple it up a bit, make it like a Disney film,' Lucas was telling the same interviewer that 'Francis needed someone to hold him back. With *The Godfather*, it was Mario Puzo, with *Tucker* it was me.'<sup>562</sup>

The nature of their collaboration was repeatedly promoted like this, but we really have only Lucas and Coppola's word for how their respective influences manifested themselves in the film. Their assertions have been jumped on with alacrity by critics and biographers, as they retrospectively uncovered 'evidence' in the film to support the pair's claims. It was remarkably easy to find it superficially but is much harder to substantiate definitively. One point certainly runs contrary to this discourse: Lucas, who provided the initial funds, was unable to secure distribution from several studios before Paramount (after production had begun) agreed to get involved. According to Jill Kearney, Paramount's overriding motivation to do so was because they were again courting Coppola to make a third *Godfather* instalment.<sup>563</sup> It reflects the fickle state of the industry that that studios seemed to remember the Lucas who had produced the infamous *Howard the Duck* in 1986 (Willard Huyck), rather than the one who made *Star Wars*. Another aspect of *Tucker*, that is often attributed to Lucas's influence, the film coming in on budget, does not take account of how Coppola had managed to do so on all but *The Cotton Club* since *One from the Heart*. In fact, this budget was an extravagant \$25 million, giving Coppola plenty of licence, even though such an amount spent on this type of film was unlikely to yield a profit in the 1980s marketplace. It is not necessarily certain then that Coppola's creative agency was subjugated by Lucas's involvement. It was certainly a personal film, one largely unhindered by studio interference, and it is possible to argue that the expansive

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<sup>561</sup> For example, see Lindsey; Kearney; Brent Lewis, 'Coppola's Coup', *Films and Filming*, No. 410 (November/December 1988), pp. 6-8; Michael Sragow, 'Hot-rodding Down the Street of Dreams', *L.A. Herald-Examiner*, 10/8/1988, p. B-1, B-4.

<sup>562</sup> Lindsey, p. SM27.

<sup>563</sup> Kearney, pp. 26-27.



director of *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now* is a discernible authorial presence in the quite different but equally idiosyncratic stylings of *Tucker: The Man and his Dream*.

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Immediately following *Tucker*, Coppola contributed a short film, 'Life without Zoe', to the 1989 anthology, *New York Stories*, with the other segments directed by Scorsese ('Life Lessons') and Woody Allen ('Oedipus Wrecks'). Starring and co-written by his daughter, Sofia, it is a slight but charming fable, a gently fantastical children's story in the vein of *The Black Stallion* and *The Escape Artist*. From the set of *New York Stories*, Coppola told Robert Lindsey that not only was he now financially secure because of recent property inflation but that *Tucker* would be his last Hollywood movie as he would, from now on, finance his projects himself: 'I'm really quite wealthy and can afford to do what I want.' Asked if his net worth exceeds \$20m, he replied, 'that would be conservative.'<sup>564</sup> Around the same time, he also told Cowie that he would not, under any circumstances, contemplate making *Godfather Part III* for Paramount.<sup>565</sup> Yet, only a few months later, Coppola's grand statements came back to bite him. He was sued for \$3 million by Jack Singer, who had loaned him this sum to help finance *One from the Heart*.<sup>566</sup> His wealth was tied up in his five homes and his vineyards, so he was obliged once again to accept Hollywood's dollar and earn a fortune making *Godfather Part III* (released in 1990).<sup>567</sup> It was not until 1997 and *The Rainmaker* that Coppola did finally bid farewell to Hollywood. After a ten-year hiatus, his long-standing desire to make inexpensive films in his own way was finally realised in the first decade of the new century when he returned with three idiosyncratic, inexpensive and uncommercial films that were released to little fanfare: *Youth without Youth* (2007), *Tetro* (2009) and *Twixt* (2011).<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> Lindsey, p. SM27.

<sup>565</sup> Cowie, p. 223.

<sup>566</sup> Schumacher, p. 415.

<sup>567</sup> In Napa Valley, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Belize. See Lindsey, p. SM25.

<sup>568</sup> For an interesting analysis of the three, see Calum Marsh, 'Small Change: The Late Films of Francis Ford Coppola', *Cinéaste*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Summer 2015), p. 32+.

The ability of Francis Coppola to keep working in the 1980s, while still remaining largely within the Hollywood system, seems to indicate that the industry still saw some occasional value in the director's ability to attract publicity, a commercial auteur who retained some degree of marketability and might even provide a modest hit like *Peggy Sue*. Their nervousness and reluctance to support him most of the time was occasionally set aside because he seemed the best available option at the time. In some ways, the studios' behaviour towards Coppola seems as conflicted as his own ongoing personal battles between artistry and power. The tension between ego and aesthetics continually haunted his decision-making. What has become apparent from this discussion is that it not sufficient to characterise the 1980s Coppola as, in Stephen Prince's words, 'a journeyman director for hire, compelled to craft less audacious works.'<sup>569</sup> In terms of his overall career, the 1980s stand as significant because, despite all the external pressures that disturbed his authorial voice, he still used the decade to experiment and develop his style. These ten years of filmmaking provide us with an opportunity to learn how such a director was able to function in Hollywood in the 1980s, what were the limits imposed on him by the system, but also how and what he somehow managed to force Hollywood to allow him to produce on his own terms.

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<sup>569</sup> Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 229.

## 5. William Friedkin: Ambiguity and Anti-Heroes

A filmmaker who wants to do other than just entertain in some very superficial way has got a lot of problems today. He's got to disguise his themes.

William Friedkin<sup>570</sup>

They hated Billy...really hated him. They were thrilled when he started bombing.

Walon Green<sup>571</sup>

William Friedkin's career has been largely defined by the fame and influence of two films, *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*, that he made consecutively in 1971 and 1973. As Larry Gross, observed in 1995, 'it's tough now even to grasp how completely Friedkin's two early successes helped create the idiom of serious/popular Hollywood filmmaking over the last twenty-five years.'<sup>572</sup> His work never again reached anything like this level of importance and, like Coppola, Altman, Cimino and others, his reputation and subsequent ability to get films made in Hollywood was seriously undermined by a single catastrophic failure. *Sorcerer*, a remake of Henri Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* (1953) made in 1977, preceded both *Apocalypse Now* and *Heaven's Gate*, and the difficulty of marketing Renaissance-style filmmaking in the late 1970s was brought into sharp relief when *Sorcerer* was released on exactly the same day as the first *Star Wars* film.<sup>573</sup> Moving forward into the 1980s, at first glance, Friedkin's filmography seems to indicate that he found it more difficult than either Coppola or Altman to keep working because he directed only four films for the cinema in the decade. However, he also helmed two feature-length television films, an episode in a television series and was involved in a handful of prestige music videos. In any case, Friedkin was never as prolific as Altman and Coppola, and his output in the 1980s is broadly comparable with the amount of work he completed in other decades (in the 1970s, for example, he only directed five feature

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<sup>570</sup> Friedkin speaking in June 1982, quoted in Claggett, *Films of Aberration, Obsession and Reality*, p. 278.

<sup>571</sup> Walon Green (writer of *Sorcerer* and *The Brink's Job*) talking about the Hollywood studios. Quoted in Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 413.

<sup>572</sup> Gross, 'Whatever Happened to William Friedkin?', p. 14.

<sup>573</sup> Segaloff, p. 170.

films<sup>574</sup>). It was the type of work available to him that was different for Friedkin in the 1980s as he contended with reduced choices, limited budgets and a lack of box-office success. His assertion at the beginning of this chapter that filmmakers with a serious intent were now obliged to hide their themes relates to contemporary audiences' preferences in the 1980s for simple narratives and unambiguous heroism.

Many Renaissance filmmakers suffered in the post-*Star Wars* period because of a breakdown in their relationships with decision makers at the major studios. Those who remained steadfast (and often obstreperous) about being allowed to work without interference were no longer tolerated by cautious studio heads. When Walon Green opined how much studio executives 'hated' Friedkin, he echoed the director's own observation when he told Biskind that 'I burned a lot of bridges...Those people I snubbed on the elevator going up, were the ones I met going down. There was a lot of resistance to my doing films at some of these studios.'<sup>575</sup> Friedkin's problems with the majors were further exacerbated by a determination, like Altman, to work (if at all possible) on projects that he had generated himself. Friedkin's solution to the problem, however, was neither as practical nor as drastic as Altman's exile and willingness to work with micro-budgets. He remained in Los Angeles and strove to carry on working on a Hollywood-like scale. Like Altman though - and, to a lesser extent, Coppola as well - he turned to the burgeoning independent sector to enable him to make films on his own terms. Of course, this meant that he had to manage with limited financial resources while still, to some degree at least, having to repair relationships with the majors in order to secure distribution. In the 1980s, as Friedkin discovered himself, when the collapse of the Dino De Laurentiis Group scuppered *Rampage* in 1987, independent film production was an inherently risky business.

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<sup>574</sup> *The Boys in the Band* (1970), *The French Connection*, *The Exorcist*, *Sorcerer* and *The Brink's Job* (1978).

<sup>575</sup> Quoted in Biskind, *Easy Riders*, pp. 413-414.

Friedkin's creative agency was, arguably, at its greatest in the 1980s because in three of the four films, he wrote the scripts himself (and without collaborators).<sup>576</sup> This period was the only time in his career where Friedkin took any screenwriting credit although this is not to say that he was not closely involved in the screenwriting process on other films, it being notoriously difficult for a director to be given any writing credit from the Screenwriters Guild. Justin Wyatt relates Friedkin's lack of commercial success in the 1980s to his scriptwriting when he argues that his failure was due 'in part due to the narrative ambiguity of films such as *Cruising* and *To Live and Die in L.A.* which both carry the high concept style without the linear, recuperable genre narratives.'<sup>577</sup>

I particularly focus on this ambiguity because it is a manifestation of an unwillingness to conform to expected norms while still operating in familiar Hollywood genres. For example, *Rampage* manages to blend a serial-killer horror narrative with a courtroom drama, while bearing almost no resemblance to any other slasher film or legal thriller ever made. It is this difficult engagement with conventionality that makes Friedkin's 1980s work both interesting *and* uncommercial. He seems psychologically disinclined to conform because of what Gerald Petievich (the novelist of *To Live and Die in L.A.*) calls 'his self-destructive bent...where he is almost pathologically incapable of offering an uplifting ending...Billy loads his films with a really dark side of human nature.'<sup>578</sup> This chapter discusses these films as expressions of Friedkin's particular approach to thematic content and visual style, as well as how he developed both subject matter and form that is reflective of the era in which they were made, and of the director's personal beliefs at the time. Some of the more persistent attributes can be discerned throughout his career such as the morally compromised protagonists who frequently seem to challenge audiences to try to identify with them in spite of - not because of - their behaviour. These exclusively male anti-heroes (unfortunately Friedkin, like so many of his

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<sup>576</sup> Although *To Live and Die* is credited to Friedkin and Gerald Petievich, Friedkin was the sole writer (discussed later). He was also co-writer on *The Guardian* (1990).

<sup>577</sup> Wyatt, *High Concept*, p. 191.

<sup>578</sup> Segaloff, *Hurricane Billy*, p. 276.

peers, tends to relegate women to supporting roles) all feature in present-day settings as Friedkin, who started out in documentaries, explores contemporary issues with a cynical eye, in contrast with Coppola (and to a lesser extent, Altman) whose work tended more to the fantastic or historical. At the same time, I also use untapped sources to offer a fresh perspective, using Friedkin's papers, lodged with the Academy's Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles, to contextualise the circumstances of production within 1980s Hollywood filmmaking. They allow a deeper understanding of Friedkin's thought processes as he underwent the writing of different drafts of his screenplays.

## 1980-1982

After *Sorcerer's* commercial and critical failure, a dejected Friedkin accepted a 'for-hire' assignment in 1978 to direct *The Brink's Job*, a conventional comedy about a famous real-life heist. Although the film only performed moderately, it did, according to Segaloff, re-establish Friedkin's reputation for bringing in a project on budget and on time, so that 'as usual, he had his choice' of new projects, indicating that the reputational damage from *Sorcerer* was somewhat limited.<sup>579</sup> One indicator of this relative freedom was that, between *The Brink's Job* and *Cruising*, he turned down the opportunity to direct William Peter Blatty's *Exorcist* sequel, *Legion*.<sup>580</sup> It was not until the 1980s, after the release of the highly controversial and divisive *Cruising*, along with the studios' accelerated withdrawal from auteur filmmaking after *Heaven's Gate*, that Friedkin found his options becoming significantly reduced.

For a while, Friedkin had been considering making his first foray into directing for the stage. In late 1977 he had preceded Altman's interest in David Rabe's *Streamers* when he agreed to direct it at the Westwood Playhouse in Los Angeles. Nothing came of it, but he went on to work with Rabe

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<sup>579</sup> Segaloff, p. 190.

<sup>580</sup> Clagett, p. 274. Blatty eventually directed it himself as *The Exorcist III* in 1990.

developing Thomas Thompson's true-crime book, *Blood and Money*, either for the stage, or as a possible mini-series for CBS.<sup>581</sup> The seeds of what would become his next project were sown on a trip to Houston to research *Blood and Money*. On the flight, Friedkin was captivated by the stories Randy Jurgensen, a former policeman who had advised him on *The French Connection*, told him about his experiences working undercover in New York's gay leather clubs.<sup>582</sup>

### ***Cruising***

Some years previously, Friedkin had been approached by *French Connection* producer, Philip D'Antoni about making a film from Gerald Walker's 1970 novel, *Cruising*. The story, inspired by a series of unsolved murders in 1969, was about a policeman who becomes a murderer himself when overwhelmed by his own homosexual urges after going undercover in New York's affluent gay community to investigate a serial killer. Friedkin has said, 'I didn't think much of it...I wasn't compelled to make it into a film at that time.'<sup>583</sup> D'Antoni then managed to get Steven Spielberg interested but this came to nothing, so he sold the property to Jerry Weintraub. In 1979, Weintraub returned to Friedkin again who now had some fresh ideas about how he could combine the novel with the stories Jurgensen had told him. Jurgensen had gone undercover in the 1960s to investigate uniformed men, possibly police officers, who were blackmailing, and in all probability murdering, homosexuals.<sup>584</sup> Friedkin had also just read a January 1979 piece by Arthur Bell in *Village Voice*, 'Another Murder at the Anvil', which described two murders in four months at a gay club in New York's meat-packing district.<sup>585</sup> He reversed his earlier decision because he could now see how he could transpose Walker's novel to the underground leather scene, as depicted in both Jurgensen and

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<sup>581</sup> Segaloff, p. 190, 213. *Blood and Money* was not made.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>583</sup> Alex Simon, 'Cruising with Billy', *Venice*, September 2007, p. 69.

<sup>584</sup> Claggett, pp. 238-239. They were caught, convicted for extortion but no murder was proved. They *were* men in uniform, but boat crew not policemen.

<sup>585</sup> Arthur Bell, 'Another Murder at the Anvil', *Village Voice*, 22/1/1979. William Friedkin Papers (WFP hereafter), Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences: item f.168.

Bell's accounts.<sup>586</sup> Warners were interested but dropped out when Al Pacino was cast, put off by his \$2 million fee.<sup>587</sup> Weintraub now secured backing from Lorimar, an independent company known more for television production (including *Dallas* and *The Waltons*) who were in the process of trying to make inroads into feature film production (also backing Hal Ashby, as discussed in Chapter 2).<sup>588</sup> Pacino and Friedkin seem to have worked well together up until the former saw the completed film. Pacino was incensed because he said he would have played the role differently if he had known that Friedkin would implicate his character as a possible murderer.<sup>589</sup> In subsequent years, Pacino would effectively erase the film from his career and Friedkin seemed to be getting his own back when he said, 'I feel, in retrospect, that the addition of Pacino meant nothing...He was too old for the part.'<sup>590</sup> Both views are, of course, highly partial and a more objective assessment might be that Pacino seems eminently suitable for a role that matches the intensity of his similar character in *Serpico* (Lumet, 1974).

*Cruising* is a disturbing story of violent murder amongst a gay sub-culture based around leather and sado-masochism, practised in specialist clubs and the dark corners of Central Park in New York. According to Mark Kermode, the film 'broke all the existing taboos of mainstream cinematic sex with its frank, tactile portrait of an exotic, erotic underworld.'<sup>591</sup> To understand this scene's febrile atmosphere, Friedkin carried out extensive research and even went 'cruising' himself. He observed of his experiences: 'I wasn't bothered that much... I was just another fat Jew in a jockstrap.'<sup>592</sup> His Bacchanalian depiction of this life was always likely to be controversial, but the filmmakers never could have anticipated the extraordinary level of opprobrium that the film attracted. Nevertheless, its extraordinarily frank depiction of the highly sexualised scene seems a deliberate act of

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<sup>586</sup> Friedkin, *The Friedkin Connection*, p. 361.

<sup>587</sup> Clagett, p. 240.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>589</sup> Lawrence Grobel, *Al Pacino: The Authorized Biography* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>590</sup> Clagett, p. 259.

<sup>591</sup> Mark Kermode, 'Cruise Control', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 8, No. 11 (November 1998), p. 22.

<sup>592</sup> Segaloff, p. 199.



provocation; Friedkin even admitted to Linda Ruth Williams that *Cruising*'s graphic depiction of sado-masochistic practices was calculated to 'get away with stuff most people weren't getting way with - I wanted to see how far I could push the envelope.'<sup>593</sup>

*Cruising*'s portrayal of one small section of homosexual society as an environment that fosters murderers attracted a range of objections from homophobes and homosexuals alike but, of course, for very different reasons. It achieved notoriety even before principal photography was complete when protests dogged the filming on the New York streets. Almost every day, reports of demonstrators filled the pages of broadsheet newspapers on both sides of the continent.<sup>594</sup> It seems that the protests had some impact on the film: a few lines were clearly intended to mitigate any impression that the sub-culture depicted is representative of gay society. The detective in charge, Edelson (Paul Sorvino), tells Pacino's character, Steve Burns, when sending him undercover, that both victims 'were not in the mainstream of gay life. They were into heavy leather, S & M. It's a whole different way of life.' A more obvious attempt to appease protesters was to begin with an ill-advised disclaimer: 'The film is not intended as an indictment of the homosexual world. It is set in one small segment of that world, which is not meant to be representative of the whole.'<sup>595</sup> Once completed, the film managed to still appear regularly in the newspapers because of a very public, protracted row after the film's initial run between Weintraub and Friedkin on one side and the censors on the other. On 4 January 1980, just before its release date and after protracted negotiations, the film was given an R-rating ('under-17s must be accompanied by an adult'). The film's extremely frank depiction of graphically sexual acts in the club scenes was pushing against the limits of acceptability of that time and a number of theatre chains objected to the film's lenient rating, either refusing to show the film at all or explaining to their customers that it contained X-

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<sup>593</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, 'No Sex Please, We're American', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2004), p. 19.

<sup>594</sup> For example, Les Ledbetter, '1000 in "Village" Renew Protest Against Movie on Homosexuals', *New York Times*, 26/7/1979, p. B2; Fred Ferretti, 'Filming of *Cruising* Goes More Calmly', *New York Times*, 7/8/1979, p. C7; Dale Pollock, 'Friedkin Film *Cruising* into a Storm of Protest', *Los Angeles Times*, 4/2/1980, p. G1, G8.

<sup>595</sup> Segaloff, p. 194. The disclaimer has now been removed.

rated content. These included the country's largest chain, General Cinema Corp (GCC), who refused to show *Cruising* because their policy was to never show X-rated films.<sup>596</sup> The objections of a group as powerful as GCC may have prompted the row, largely conducted in the press, between Richard Heffner, the Chairman of the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), and Friedkin and Weintraub. Heffner claimed that the print of *Cruising* in cinemas was not the same as the one which had been rated, arguing that the required cuts had not been made.<sup>597</sup> Friedkin and Weintraub went on the offensive after Heffner implied, in a piece by Dale Pollock in the *Los Angeles Times* on 4 May, that they had 'mislead [sic] the board.'<sup>598</sup> On 17 June, they took to the press directly publishing a statement that concluded:

Members of the MPAA have charged that we agreed to make certain changes in *Cruising*...to obtain an 'R' rating, and then did not make the changes. This is false...we did not release a different version (other than to delete scenes) than the one that was submitted for rating.<sup>599</sup>

Eventually, Friedkin made the minor cuts that Heffner demanded for subsequent releases although about two minutes being excised was estimated to have cost about \$200,000.<sup>600</sup> But, for all the public debate, Stephen Prince's assessment, that the board's reaction was cursory and the changes 'were cosmetic rather than substantive,' seems accurate. He is also the only one to suggest a causal link between the reactions from major exhibitors and the censors' belated response.<sup>601</sup>

Feelings ran high about the film and Arthur Bell, who had provided one of the inspirations for the story in the first place, regularly attacked the film in his 'Bell Tolls' column in *Village Voice*. Vito Russo

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<sup>596</sup> Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 346.

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345-347. For more on the rating dispute, see also Arjan Harmetz, 'How *Cruising* Received Its "R" Rating', *New York Times*, 16/2/1980, p. 12; Segaloff, pp. 204-205; Pollock, 'Cruising: The Battle Continues', *Los Angeles Times*, 27/6/1980, Part VI, p. 9; Anon, 'Cruising Gets a New "R" Label', *Variety*, 10/6/1980. WFP: f.167.

<sup>598</sup> Edgar Gross (Friedkin's business manager), File Memo, 12/5/1980. WFP: f.167; Pollock, 'R- Rated *Cruising*: The MPAA Seal of Disapproval', *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, 4/5/1980, pp. 1, 6-7.

<sup>599</sup> 'Statement of William Friedkin and Jerry Weintraub Relative to *Cruising* and its "R" Rating', 17/6/80. WFP: f.167.

<sup>600</sup> File memo by Gross, 7/3/1980 (WFP: f.167).

<sup>601</sup> Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*, p. 347.

in his 1981 survey of homosexuality in cinema, was equally disdainful of *Cruising*'s representation of gay life and argues that 'the audience is left with a message that [Pacino] is not only contagious but inescapably brutal.'<sup>602</sup> This wave of negativity has dominated the film's public discourse but obscures how more balanced views were also expressed at the time. The February 1980 issue of gay magazine, *Mandate*, pointed out that the 1600 gay extras in the film was a significantly larger number than those who had protested about its making.<sup>603</sup> The obvious delight of these extras on-screen is reflected by number of grateful letters to Friedkin from those who worked on the film; one particularly effusive example praised the way the film represented 'freedom of artistic expression.'<sup>604</sup> Support for the film also came, in the face of all the protests, from the New York authorities and Friedkin wrote to Mayor Koch personally to thank him 'for the support...[that was] not necessarily the most politically expedient.'<sup>605</sup>

Reviews were almost unanimously negative, frequently tending towards to the hostile. For example, Vincent Canby called it 'exceptionally unpleasant, not necessarily because of the subject matter but because it makes no attempt to comprehend it.'<sup>606</sup> The tone of the reviews was so extreme that a college professor, George Grella, who doubled as a film critic for his local paper, was prompted to send Friedkin his positive review in which he concluded that *Cruising* 'constructs some of the harshest, subtlest, and most complex metaphors for our life and time that I have ever seen.'<sup>607</sup> Grella told the director that 'I wanted you to see that at least *someone* reviewed *Cruising* as a movie instead of as some sort of perverse ideological statement.'<sup>608</sup> Friedkin took the trouble to write back, telling Grella that 'I'm grateful to you for going against the grain.'<sup>609</sup> Largely unavailable for years, it was only in 1998 with a brief re-release in cinemas, and in 2007 with a DVD version, that the film has

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<sup>602</sup> Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, p. 259.

<sup>603</sup> Jason Bailey, 'Making Sense of *Cruising*', *Village Voice*, 21/3/2018, pp. 1-5.

<sup>604</sup> Letter from Keith Williams to Friedkin, 14/8/1979. WFP: f.113.

<sup>605</sup> Letter from Friedkin to Mayor Koch, 9/10/79. WFP: f.113.

<sup>606</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Screen: Pacino Stars in Friedkin's *Cruising*', *New York Times*, 15/2/1980, p. C6.

<sup>607</sup> George Grella, '*Cruising*: Artful, Shocking', *Rochester-City Newspaper*, unknown date. WFP: f.113.

<sup>608</sup> Letter from Grella to Friedkin, 11/4/1980. WFP: f.113.

<sup>609</sup> Letter from Friedkin to Grella, 17/6/1980. WFP: f.113.

enjoyed something of a critical rehabilitation.<sup>610</sup> Of course, societal attitudes towards homosexuality have changed immeasurably in the last twenty-five years and this contributed to this re-appraisal. According to Paul Burston, 'the film is now part of queer film history and a testament to how a frightened Hollywood treated a disenfranchised minority... reactions to *Cruising* say as much about the time when they were written as about the film itself.'<sup>611</sup> Although this aspect of the film, and how it was received, plays an important part in understanding *Cruising* in its historical context, the film is much more than a *cause célèbre* because its complexities make it an especially interesting example of Friedkin's particular authorship.

Of all the contemporaneous responses, the most learned came from Robin Wood. He avowed 'to do some justice to *Cruising*...it has received none so far,' in an article for *Movie* in 1980 (reprinted in his 1986 book).<sup>612</sup> He analyses the film in terms of it being what he calls an 'incoherent text' (not necessarily a pejorative term in his use). Wood finds *Cruising*'s 'interest lies partly in [its] incoherence' but also credits Friedkin with 'a certain level of distinction' because he 'exhibit[s] a large degree of involvement.'<sup>613</sup> Wood's deconstruction of the film's incoherence is one way of beginning to make sense of *Cruising*'s many ambiguities and confusing narrative progression. In a more recent article, Bill Krohn builds on Wood's analysis and goes further by reaching for a definitive explanation to make sense of the film's many inconsistencies.<sup>614</sup> Whereas Wood is happy to accept the incoherence as intentional but not necessarily explicable, Krohn insists that 'ultimately, only a supernatural interpretation...can resolve those contradictions.'<sup>615</sup> Although this does (sort of) make credible that which seems impossible, this is certainly outside of the author's intention. Friedkin has said himself that 'all the films I've made are enormously ambiguous...I make a film to explore

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<sup>610</sup> There has also been a recent 2019 Blu-ray release.

<sup>611</sup> Paul Burston, 'So Good It Hurts', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 8, No. 11 (November 1998), p. 24.

<sup>612</sup> Wood, 'The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 70s' reprinted in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, pp. 41-62.

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>614</sup> Bill Krohn, 'Friedkin Out', *Rouge*, No. 3 (2004), pp. 1-12 ([www.rouge.com.au/3/friedkin.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/3/friedkin.html)).

<sup>615</sup> Krohn, p. 5.

something, and in the course of that exploration, my attitudes get formed.’<sup>616</sup> The development of what would eventually become the completed film, through various drafts of the script and the director’s impulsive, contradictory divergences once on set is such that Friedkin’s ‘exploration’ became progressively more uncertain and puzzling.

The basic premise of *Cruising* is of a policeman going undercover into an alien environment to catch a serial killer. Before this occurs, however, the film begins with an arm being pulled from the Hudson river, which is revealed, promptly, as one of a series of unsolved so-called ‘torso’ murders. Only the police lieutenant, Edelson, makes any connection between the discovery of body parts and the killings linked to the leather scene that provide the film’s main plotline. It is one of a number of ways that *Cruising* fails to match generic expectations as, by the end, no further evidence is offered to gather these two killing sprees together. When Friedkin chooses to make the very last shot of the film match up to the first, with a trawler once again making serene progress along the river, there is a sense that any minute, the trawler might find another body part, because the city’s effluence, a symbol of a degenerate society, will inevitably rise to the surface. The film moves swiftly onto the first murder when the victim is picked up in one of the leather bars and is taken back to a hotel and murdered by a man in sunglasses who speaks in a distinctive deep voice. At this point, Edelson calls in Pacino’s Burns to go undercover into the gay scene. Burns is told that this is the second such murder and that he has been chosen because he bears a resemblance to both victims. Another murder, apparently committed by the same person, is then depicted. By the time we get to the end, after Burns has traced and caught the supposed killer, Stuart Richards (Richard Cox), the solution of these murders has ostensibly been solved, Stuart’s fingerprints supposedly found on the knife that killed one of the victims. But, this pleasing solution, one that would conform to convention where the detective always catches the killer, is undermined by yet one more murder. The film ends with

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<sup>616</sup> Quoted in Janet Maslin, ‘Friedkin Defends His *Cruising*’, *New York Times*, 18/9/1979, p. C12.

the putative hero apparently achieving his goal and returning in triumph to his girlfriend, Nancy (Karen Allen) - yet many questions remain, not least of which is, has Burns become a killer himself?

*Cruising* then is far from an easily digestible genre piece and Friedkin adopts a series of unsettling strategies that undermine any notion that the film can be easily explained or understood. In the various drafts of the screenplay written before filming, the killer's identity is clear, unambiguously identified in murder scenes as Stuart.<sup>617</sup> By the time, Friedkin had completed principal photography, the script (as shot) now describes both murders seen on screen as being committed by 'The Killer.'<sup>618</sup> The first point of confusion in the film comes with the actors playing the roles. Richard Cox, as Stuart, appears a couple of times in the first half, but appears to be more an observer than participant until his identity is revealed later. However, in both cases, the murderers, faces hidden behind dark glasses, are clearly *not* played by Cox. Even more confusingly, the second victim, Eric, appears to be played by the actor who committed the first murder (Larry Atlas). The whole identity issue is deliberately disorienting. Whereas thrillers often confuse and provide more questions than answers as they proceed, conventionally all will be satisfactorily resolved by the end but in *Cruising*, the situation becomes progressively more confusing. Once Stuart is in custody, although he denies murdering anyone, another violent death, of Burns' neighbour when he was undercover, Ted Bailey (Don Scardino), further muddies the water. One suspect is Ted's roommate, Gregory (James Remar) who is extremely jealous but there is also a suggestion that the killer might be Burns. The viewer is keyed to this possibility by his violent reactions when confronted by Gregory but particularly by Edelson's reaction when he learns the victim is Burns's neighbour. Cutting straight from this scene, Friedkin completes the pattern of confusion when he inserted a single unscripted shot, a repeat of one from near the beginning which apparently showed the killer on the way to pick up his victim. A

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<sup>617</sup> *Cruising* scripts 26/4/1979; 1/6/1979; 25/6/1979; 29/6/1979. WFP: f.85; f.90; f.92; f.97.

<sup>618</sup> Scripts, both 14/2/1980. WFP: f.103; f.104.

man in the full leather uniform and sunglasses (probably played by Larry Atlas) crosses a deserted street and enters the club where the first victim is picked up.

The killer/killers may look different, but he/they always sound(s) the same and the voice seems to provide irrefutable evidence of Stuart's guilt. The final versions of the script identify this as the 'Voice of Jack' (Stuart's father's name is Jack) and Friedkin endorses one with a hand-written remark that 'killer's voice to be the voice of the father throughout.'<sup>619</sup> This distinctive voice seems to definitively link the two murders depicted and, when we learn that this is the voice of Stuart's dead father, surely he must be the killer. One scene makes all this apparent: Stuart meets his father in the park, and he appears to be receiving his instructions to carry out the murders, as his father tells him, 'you know what you have to do.' Stuart's father sounds like the murderer and the screenplay notes that 'his most striking feature to us is his voice.'<sup>620</sup> As Stuart talks to his father, Friedkin chooses to intercut point-of-view shots of the murders happening, as if Stuart is recalling his actions. The message seems clear: that he is motivated by unresolved father issues to become a murderer. When Burns breaks into Stuart's flat, he finds dozens of unopened letters to his father whom we later learn has been dead for ten years. In the second draft, Friedkin inserted Stuart's father into the story for the first time but at this stage, he was alive. In this version, Stuart is unable to perform in a sexual encounter with an older woman (Barbara) followed by a scene in his father's office where it becomes clear Barbara is his father's mistress.<sup>621</sup> Stuart is trying to exact revenge, but his sexual failure implies he is in denial about his homosexuality, his feelings confused by his dysfunctional relationship with a controlling father. But in a revised fourth draft of the script, Friedkin moves the encounter to the park, excises Barbara and makes the father a fantasy.<sup>622</sup> As he developed the story, Friedkin made the narrative yet more oblique during both the shooting and editing of the film. The switching of

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<sup>619</sup> Script 14/2/1980. WFP: f.104.

<sup>620</sup> Script 2<sup>nd</sup> draft, 26/4/1979. WFP: f.85.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>622</sup> Script revised 4<sup>th</sup> draft, 29/6/1979. WFP: f.92.

identity, the different actors, the Ted Bailey murder at the end and the way that all the victims and killers seem to resemble each other, seem to suggest that Stuart is not the murderer at all and in fact, seems to indicate the presence of *at least* two killers. The perplexing repeat shot of the putative killer crossing the street certainly indicates that the murders will continue.

There is then too much inconsistency to be able to make complete sense of all this, but it is Friedkin's oft-repeated preference to avoid giving audiences easily digestible solutions that may offer some explanation, not least for the film's enigmatic ending. The final scene is in Burns and Nancy's apartment. Burns tell her the job is finished and he is back for good before going to shave off his disguise in the bathroom. Meanwhile, she finds his leather gear and tries on the cap and sunglasses for herself, yet another simulacrum of the killer's image. The last shot (before the trawler on the river) is of Burns staring at himself in the mirror nonchalantly before his gaze moves to the left and he appears to see something in the mirror. Presumably this is Nancy in her new attire and his closing expression is perplexing, unreadable, leaving the audience to speculate what he is thinking. Wood and Krohn each offer an alternative reading. Krohn's is all about what Burns sees in the mirror: 'it could be his own image as a bisexual man, or as The Killer, or it could be an image signifying that his relationship with Nancy has been irrevocably contaminated with the S&M games he has been playing.'<sup>623</sup> Wood's analysis is more apocalyptic: 'Burns, now irredeemably disturbed, is about to murder Nancy when he sees her dressed in leather, *her* body will be found in the river. Or less specifically...while the culture continues as it is, the patterns of violence will continue, spreading everywhere.'<sup>624</sup> Such diverse views show how the scene's meaning is elusive, and Friedkin's impulses towards the ambiguous seem an attempt to achieve the type of complexity that characterises the type of cinema he most admires. He has discussed previously the influence of the 'unpredictable' work of Antonioni and one of the striking and original features of much of the Italian auteur's work is

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<sup>623</sup> Krohn, p. 12.

<sup>624</sup> Wood, p. 61.



his penchant for baffling, but thought-provoking, endings.<sup>625</sup> *Cruising*'s final scene, with a glance that seems freighted with meaning, but which cannot be easily explained, or even understood, recalls the way Antonioni concludes *L'Avventura* (1960): in both films, the question of what will transpire in the respective lovers' relationships is left to the viewers' imagination. In mainstream Hollywood in 1980, such a lack of resolution was now anathema, unlike in the previous decade where the influence of European art cinema, and its fondness for equivocal conclusions, had been more welcome.

Stimulated by a strong opening resultant from the swirling controversy, the film performed reasonably at the domestic box-office, realising just under \$20 million domestically, but its long-term chances were not helped by its persistent morbidity and the swirl of negative publicity it attracted - how difficult it was to understand also undoubtedly played its part.<sup>626</sup> As the new decade dawned, *Cruising* indicates that the Renaissance auteurs were still (with difficulty) able to impose their particular artistic sensibilities on their work but now had to rely on the independent sector for their seed money. Distribution from the major studios continued to be available but as Coppola's experiences also showed, it was not granted on the basis of the commercial auteur's allure alone. In the case of *Cruising*, the money followed the star not the director: once Pacino was on board, the film became much more marketable. Friedkin's own final downbeat summation of *Cruising* in his own book has considerable resonance with my thesis here, that Renaissance directors, in the 1980s, were pushing back against the prevailing tide:

My timing was off. It was the beginning of the Reagan era, a feel-good period. The ambiguous films I revered and the ones I made were passing out of vogue. It happened

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<sup>625</sup> Steven Gaydos, 'William Friedkin and *To Love and Die in L.A.*' in Jerry Roberts and Steven Gaydos (eds.), *Movie Talk from the Front Lines: Filmmakers Discuss Their Work with the Los Angeles Critics Association* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 1994), p. 252. See also documentary *The Directors: William Friedkin* (Robert J. Emery, 1995).

<sup>626</sup> '*Cruising*', *Box Office Mojo* ([https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0080569/?ref\\_=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0080569/?ref_=bo_se_r_1)).

quickly...Audiences wanted reassurance and superheroes, not ambiguity. *Cruising* was another defeat, on a par with *Sorcerer*.<sup>627</sup>

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The relative failure of *Cruising* was put into perspective when, on 6 March 1981, Friedkin suffered a serious heart attack. Remarkably, Friedkin was back in work by June, when he accepted a chance to finally make his theatrical directing debut. Seemingly rejuvenated by the novelty, he told the *New York Times* that 'I feel excited as though I was just starting out.'<sup>628</sup> The play was Tom Kempinski's *Duet for One* with Anne Bancroft and Max von Sydow, which opened at the Royale Theatre on Broadway in December 1981, but closed after only 20 performances and 12 previews.<sup>629</sup> In the summer of 1982, Friedkin signed up to direct *Deal of the Century* with a script by Paul Brickman, who had just written and directed *Risky Business*. It was deemed a 'hot' property with Hollywood insiders apparently calling it 'the funniest and most erudite screenplay anyone had read since Preston Sturges.'<sup>630</sup> A comedy that satirises the arms trade was a complete change of pace for Friedkin after the dark and downbeat *Cruising*; he might also have considered it a relatively calm way to return to the stressful business of directing a feature film following his heart attack.

## 1983-1985

*Deal of the Century*, eventually released in November 1983, was Friedkin's only studio production in the decade and the only time he did not write the screenplay. It is puzzling that Warners chose Friedkin for such a project, given his previous uninspiring track record on comedies with *The Night*

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<sup>627</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 376.

<sup>628</sup> Quoted in John Corry, 'Broadway: Chodorov-Panama Mystery to Star Claudette Colbert', *New York Times*, 12/6/1981, p. C2.

<sup>629</sup> Tom Kempinski, 'Duet Closing Saturday', *New York Times*, 29/12/1981, p. C7.

<sup>630</sup> Carrie Rickey, 'Has Success Spoiled Paul Brickman?' *Wall Street Journal*, 4/1/1984, p. 20.

*They Raided Minsky's* (1968) and *The Brink's Job*. In any case, it was a sign of the reduction in creative control for directors when Friedkin's autonomy was quickly undermined by Warners insisting on their under-contract actor, Chevy Chase, in the main role. Jack Nicholson had been mooted to play the role and the original idea was a black comedy in the vein of Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964) but the casting of Chase meant that such a tone clashed with his trademark 'madcap' style.<sup>631</sup> Friedkin's hopes to achieve his customary authenticity were undermined when the loan of aircraft failed to materialise.<sup>632</sup> An internal memo reveals that the production had proceeded under a false impression because of 'a misquote about approval by Department of Defence and Department of Navy. Neither did in fact.'<sup>633</sup> In the end, neither Chase, nor his co-stars Sigourney Weaver and Gregory Hines, could rescue a film that is an uneasy mix of satire and the broadest of broad humour. Its domestic box-office of just over \$10 million was underwhelming for a big-budget, star-led studio picture, and its release was largely restricted to North America.<sup>634</sup> No-one seems to have had anything good to say about *Deal of the Century*. Brickman complained that 'Friedkin didn't make the movie I wrote' and Chase called it 'a piece of shit.'<sup>635</sup> Friedkin himself told Segaloff that 'at a certain point, I realised how sick the whole arms business was and it no longer seemed funny to me.'<sup>636</sup> Such is his apparent disregard for the film, he ignores it completely in his autobiography.

After *Deal of the Century*, Friedkin became involved in what was a burgeoning artform, the pop music video, when he directed a film to promote Laura Brannigan's 'Self Control'. Friedkin described it as being 'like an X-rated video...it was censored all over the world.'<sup>637</sup> The filmmaker then made a return to the small screen when he was approached by Philip deGuere, who was resuscitating *The*

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<sup>631</sup> Clagett, p. 277.

<sup>632</sup> Bud Yorkin, File memo, 18/8/82: 'The Navy turned it down. No F-14. The Army Air has turned us down...AT THIS TIME WE HAVE NO AIR FIELD, NO PLANES, NOR ANY COOPERATION FROM ANY OF THE ARMED SERVICES (capitals in original),' WFP: f.213.

<sup>633</sup> Memo from Yorkin to Bob Shapiro (Warners), 25/8/82. WFP: f.291.

<sup>634</sup> 'Deal of the Century', *Box Office Mojo* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=deal%20of%20the%20century>)

<sup>635</sup> Clagett, p. 277.

<sup>636</sup> Segaloff, p. 220.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

*Twilight Zone*, the series created by Rod Serling about the supernatural from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Friedkin had started his career in television and at this time, it was considered a rite of passage - and a one-way street - for directors to progress from television to the cinema. It was a sign of the times, therefore, when Friedkin joined Altman (and on one occasion, Coppola) in seeking employment in television. Friedkin chose 'Nightcrawlers' from the available options, a story that is more horror than science-fiction. The twenty-minute episode tells the story of a guilt-ridden Vietnam veteran whose nightmares about his experiences come to life, resulting in a neighbourhood diner being attacked by troops conjured up from the soldier's imagination. DeGuere valued the prestige of having secured the participation of Friedkin and allowed him greater freedom than his other directors. As Friedkin claimed to Segaloff, even the head of network television's Standards and Practices was impressed enough to give the go-ahead to 'the most intense television he'd ever seen.'<sup>638</sup> Another assignment accepted by Friedkin was a video for Barbra Streisand's version of *West Side Story*'s 'Somewhere' for her 1985 *Broadway Album*. The co-producer of the video, Cindy Chvatal recalled how the pair, both famously controlling and stubborn, surprisingly indulged in 'a charm contest' when they met to decide how the film would be made.<sup>639</sup>

Sometime in 1984, Friedkin was sent the galleys for a new novel, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, that fictionalised the experiences of its author, Gerald Petievich, who had worked for the US Secret Service, a division of federal law enforcement charged with the incongruous dual duties of providing security for the nation's leaders (including the President) and ensuring the integrity of financial systems.<sup>640</sup> This includes the investigation of the trade in counterfeit currency that formed the novel's main plotline. Friedkin was particularly interested in 'the kind of surrealistic life of a Secret Service agent, about which almost nothing is really known.'<sup>641</sup> This quest for fiction grounded in real-

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<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>640</sup> Roderick Mann, 'The Director Behind the Crime', *Los Angeles Times*, 27/10/1985 (AMPAS Production File).

<sup>641</sup> Gaydos, p. 235.

life experience, as his earlier exploits in New York's leather bars attested, is a thread that runs through most of Friedkin's work and can be traced back to his background in documentaries. On this occasion, the thoroughness of his research was enough to worry the actual Secret Service, who insisted on interviewing everybody involved with the film and unsuccessfully demanded to pre-screen the film.<sup>642</sup>

### ***To Live and Die in L.A.***

When Friedkin was approached in July 1984 by Irving H. Levin, who had previously distributed *The Boys in the Band*, about making a film for his new enterprise, SLM Productions, he chose *To Live and Die*.<sup>643</sup> The recently formed company comprising Levin, Sam Schulman, and Angelo Marquetti, had secured a ten-picture distribution deal with 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox worth some \$100 million. However, when Fox was bought by Rupert Murdoch, SLM took against the newly installed executives and took the deal to MGM.<sup>644</sup> Initial budgets for the project, marked as 'tentative' and 'proposed', from late 1984, were only between \$5.6 and \$5.8 million.<sup>645</sup> A 'Cost Summary' for the completed production reveals it was actually finalised at \$7,133,189 and, in the end, this was exceeded with the final cost listed as \$10,333,796.<sup>646</sup> Even taking account of the overage, this still seems surprisingly inexpensive given the large number of expensive locations, the seemingly high production values and a technically complicated car chase sequence. The most obvious explanation for this lies in the modest above-the-line costs. Friedkin's fee was only \$407,498 but he retained 50/50 ownership of the project with Levin, who acted as line producer, so the film had the potential to be extremely lucrative for him - but only if it was a success.<sup>647</sup> Its domestic return of about \$17 million, while not disastrous, failed to meet Friedkin and SLM's expectations although overseas sales, as well as

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<sup>642</sup> Claggett, p. 291.

<sup>643</sup> Will Tusher, 'Friedkin to Direct and Write *L.A.*', *Variety*, 25/7/1984 (AMPAS).

<sup>644</sup> Segaloff, p. 225.

<sup>645</sup> 'Tentative Proposed Budget', *To Live and Die*, 12/10/1984; 'Projected Shooting Budget', 14/11/1984. WFP: f.939.

<sup>646</sup> 'Cost Summary', 22/11/1985. WFP: f.951.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid*; Letter from Levin to Friedkin, 1/3/1984. WFP: f.959.

extended afterlife on video, DVD (and recently Blu-ray) presumably has now reaped a reasonable return.<sup>648</sup> The film's lack of star names was even more of a budgetary factor. Even though Friedkin claimed at the time, 'if I'd been offered the biggest stars in America, I wouldn't have changed one member of our cast,' there were clear financial restrictions that influenced his decisions.<sup>649</sup> The two male leads, William Peterson (Secret Service agent, Richard Chance) and Willem Dafoe (counterfeiter, Rick Masters) both secured roles immediately afterwards that established their reputations: *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986) and *Platoon* respectively. Before *To Live and Die*, however, both were complete unknowns with only a handful of bit parts between them. The other main part was taken by John Pankow, as Chance's partner Vukovich, another fledgling film actor recommended to Friedkin by Peterson. Peterson and Dafoe were each paid only \$50,000 (for ten weeks), Pankow just \$35,000.<sup>650</sup> The eventual total for the cast amounted to a mere \$946,767.<sup>651</sup> To understand this in context, on *Cruising* Pacino alone was paid more than double this amount. The budget was mostly expended on filming and on post-production. So, for example, the expenditure on locations was more than \$200,000 above estimate at \$812,531 and the total cost of post-production of \$1,884,655 was more than two and a half times over budget.<sup>652</sup>

*To Live and Die in L.A.* was marketed as a Los Angeles *French Connection*, an idea that Friedkin at one time rejected, observing that it was only the theme of 'the thin line between the policeman and criminal' that was similar.<sup>653</sup> It is not just at a thematic or narrative level, however, that there are interesting points of comparison, but neither is *To Live and Die* simply a West Coast version of the earlier film. A better way to understand the relationship between the two is as a series of dichotomies. Firstly, both are set in December which immediately points to the settings' inherent differences. The hard-bitten, scruffy New York policemen follow suspects on the streets, clad in

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<sup>648</sup> 'To Live and Die in L.A.', *Box Office Mojo*, ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=toliveanddieinla.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=toliveanddieinla.htm))

<sup>649</sup> Quoted in Mann, 'The Director Behind the Crime'.

<sup>650</sup> 'Cast Deal Memos', 1984. WFP: f.944.

<sup>651</sup> 'Cost Summary', 22/11/1985. WFP: f.951.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>653</sup> Segaloff, p. 224.

heavy coats and shivering in the winter cold; in *To Live and Die* everyone drives and dresses in light, elegant clothing, and the city is depicted, in Friedkin's words, 'as a violent, cynical wasteland under a burning sun.'<sup>654</sup> Masters, *To Live and Die*'s antagonist, appears to take great pleasure in his counterfeiting craft and boasts about its exceptional quality to his clients. He is somewhat urbane, like Charnier (Fernando Rey) in *The French Connection*, but while they are both ruthless, Masters seems to derive pleasure in his violence. Both of these villains' behaviour away from crime is in stark contrast with the unreconstructed protagonists who oppose them. Charnier eats at nice restaurants on the waterfront and is solicitous towards his chic wife. Masters is a painter, a man apparently so sensitive and dedicated to 'art for art's sake' that he burns his paintings once they are completed. Friedkin foregrounds this artistic side when Masters is introduced for the first time immediately after the credits. He performs what appears to be a sort of ritualistic ceremony when he destroys his latest work. Even the spectacular car chases, the most obvious and least subtle way the two films are similar, are also representative of the different cities. In New York, the cop chases a man escaping on the over/underground railway whereas in Los Angeles, where everyone drives, it has to be a pursuit along the absurdly busy four-lane freeways (Chance and Vukovich escape by going against the traffic). A final dichotomy is one of timeframe as *The French Connection* and *To Live and Die* are both firmly grounded in their respective decades in terms of both *mise-en-scène* and style. *To Live and Die* sees Friedkin adapting his style towards an aesthetic that seems very much of its time. The contemporary chic and rapid pacing are complemented by what now feels like its most distinctively 1980s characteristic: the synthesiser-dominated soundtrack from British electronic duo, Wang Chung, could only be from that decade. They were very much a personal choice of Friedkin's, who had heard the group at an obscure venue in Twickenham and liked their 'interesting hip sound.'<sup>655</sup> As he had done on *Sorcerer* with Tangerine Dream, Friedkin asked the group to write a soundtrack, of

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<sup>654</sup> Friedkin *Connection*, p. 384.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

which they had no experience at all, based only on the script and then used what he liked from the sixty minutes of music that they sent him.<sup>656</sup>

It would therefore seem, at first glance, given the obvious comparisons, that Friedkin must have been attracted to Petievich's novel because he saw it as an opportunity to return to the same themes and character types as *The French Connection*. However, this presumption is not necessarily borne out by the available evidence.<sup>657</sup> The various drafts of the screenplay, and their relationship to the source novel, indicate that Friedkin came to many of the similarities between the two films through a process unrelated to duplicating aspects of his early hit. The first drafts take a narrative structure from the book that differs in significant ways from the finished product. In the film, Jim Hart (Michael Greene) is Chance's partner and friend and is on the verge of retirement when he is murdered by Masters. Chance swears revenge and along with his new partner, Vukovich, sets about catching Masters. By the end, Chance is shot dead before Vukovich kills Masters. In the book, however, Hart investigates Masters separately from Chance and Vukovich (who are already partners at the beginning) and Hart is still alive at the end.<sup>658</sup> Given nominative determinised names by Petievich that make more sense in the novel and early scripts, Hart is positioned as 'good-hearted' and Chance is a real 'chancer' who is certainly more immoral than in the final film. The original conclusion in the book sees Chance shot by his informant, Ruth, for the money stolen from an FBI agent earlier; Hart arrests Masters and Vukovich goes to jail.

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<sup>656</sup> Clagett, p. 292.

<sup>657</sup> There was some disagreement about the authorship of the screenplay. Friedkin said that 'I put Gerald Petievich's name on it because he did create characters and situations. I used a lot of his dialogue...even though I wrote the entire script.' Petievich, on the other hand, claimed that they 'worked on it together.' All the drafts are marked 'screenplay by William Friedkin (based on a novel by Gerald Petievich).' The change to the joint credit appears only on the shooting script. See *To Live and Die in L.A.*, undated handwritten scripts. WFP: f.890 and f.892; 1<sup>st</sup> Draft, 25/4/1984. WFP: f.893; Script, 8/11/1984. WFP: f.974.

<sup>658</sup> Gerald Petievich, *To Live and Die in L.A.* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984).



Friedkin early drafts are reasonably faithful to the novel with two separate lines of investigation of the same criminal by different agents.<sup>659</sup> At some point, presumably between April and October 1984, Friedkin contacted William Peter Blatty, the writer of *The Exorcist*, for help with the screenplay and Blatty's undated reply offers his help because 'I see you floundering and uncertain of your judgements' and 'it is the least I owe a man who...made me a multimillionaire.'<sup>660</sup> By the time of the third draft, it appears that Blatty's advice has influenced the changes to the story, and contributed to a leaner and more conventional structure.<sup>661</sup> Blatty, who offers his services in an unofficial capacity, tells Friedkin that 'if you want a commercial hit, major work must be done' and is most concerned with Chance's character.<sup>662</sup> He suggests quite forcefully that Friedkin 'must narrow Chance's motivations to putting Masters away and Masters, ideally...should be a truly bad motherfucker.' By repositioning him as the main protagonist, by giving him a clearer and singular goal, he suggests the audience will then feel some affinity with Chance despite his dubious behaviour.<sup>663</sup> Blatty makes no reference to precise specifics but Friedkin's reaction seems to have been to adopt a more familiar Hollywood-style structure where the hero is motivated by revenge for the murder of his partner or family member (it is always men). Had the film concluded with Chance exacting his revenge by capturing or killing Masters, it would have been yet more conventional and Friedkin's final draft, indeed, does have Chance surviving the shoot-out with Masters and his accomplice (Vukovich perishing in this scene).<sup>664</sup> On set, Friedkin changed his mind and killed off Chance in a manner that mirrors Hart's violent demise as he is blasted by the shotgun of Masters' silent accomplice. Editor, Bud Smith, recounts how Friedkin came up the idea of killing Chance rather than Vukovich 'on the spot.'<sup>665</sup> Vukovich confronts and shoots Masters as he is engulfed by the flames from the fire he lit

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<sup>659</sup> Undated Scripts. WFP: f.890, f.892; 1<sup>st</sup> Draft. 25/4/1984; Friedkin's handwritten notes on undated script. WFP: f.935.

<sup>660</sup> Undated letter from William Peter Blatty to Friedkin, p. 1. WFP: f.950.

<sup>661</sup> Script, 1/10/1984. WFP: f. 916.

<sup>662</sup> Blatty letter, p. 2.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>664</sup> Script, 8/11/1984.

<sup>665</sup> Clagett, p. 289.

himself. The final scene, where Vukovich visits Ruth (Darlanne Fleugel), Chance's informant and occasional lover, and appears to have inherited his partner's immorality and demeanour, was written while Friedkin was already in principal photography. This ending with the (anti-) hero violently killed was vehemently opposed by Levin. To appease him, Friedkin shot an alternative, light-hearted ending although it was only ever a ploy to appease SLM without ever intending it to be used. In this version, Chance and Vukovich, both heavily bandaged from their injuries, are shown to have been transferred to Alaska and are watching their former boss on the television, taking credit for the counterfeiting arrests.<sup>666</sup> Although it tested much better, the happy ending that Levin wanted was not supported by MGM's management and Friedkin's preferred version prevailed.<sup>667</sup>

The film, in its final form, comprises many scenes, some present in the original source material, that have been liberally moved around, firstly at script level, and then further juxtaposed in post-production. This use of 'modules' recalls how Friedkin played around with the structure of *Cruising*. A particularly striking example is how each draft begins differently, all with scenes that appear in the final film but end up placed elsewhere. In the undated handwritten early draft, it is the printing of the counterfeit currency sequence that comes first but in the next version, it begins with Hart at the airport watching Falcone (later renamed Cody), an associate of Masters.<sup>668</sup> The final draft starts with Masters destroying his painting, eventually the scene that follows the credits.<sup>669</sup> Finally, the film itself has an unscripted pre-credits sequence that fulfils two purposes. Firstly, the Secret Service's dual responsibilities, which fascinated Friedkin, are illustrated through a sequence with Hart and Chance on Reagan's security detail, ending with them confronting a Muslim bomber who is trying to assassinate the president. This scene places the film firmly in its historical context as Reagan can be heard, in the background, declaring 'death and taxes may be inevitable but unjust taxes are not.' At

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<sup>666</sup> Segaloff, p. 233.

<sup>667</sup> Clagett, p. 290.

<sup>668</sup> Undated handwritten script; script, 25/4/1984.

<sup>669</sup> Script, 1/10/1984.

the same time, this successful but stressful assignment establishes both Chance and Hart's close friendship and Hart's imminent retirement. This enables Friedkin to enact a slightly hackneyed story of a detective (or similar) needing to crack that one last case before he retires. This idea is carried forward into the next scene in which the pair feature when Hart tells Chance he is doing this last 'small' job alone. All this set-up is different to the novel (excepting Hart's love of fishing and coming retirement) and Friedkin is playing on generic expectations. When Hart refuses Chance's help because it is a straight-forward job, we can surmise it is not going to end well. This set-up conforms to Blatty's advice to Friedkin to give Chance a more identifiable reason to break rules so flagrantly. As Krohn explains Friedkin's methods, 'every shot, scene, sequence in a Friedkin film is a module which can be potentially displaced, eliminated, added or even duplicated' but in *To Live and Die*, this does not have the effect of stimulating incoherence as it does in *Cruising*.<sup>670</sup> There are only occasional small inconsistencies that arise from this technique such as when Masters brings Serena home as a sexual gift for his girlfriend Bianca (Deborah Feuer); yet, a few scenes earlier, Serena and Bianca were seemingly already involved. While Friedkin retooled the narrative to make Chance's character and motivation more identifiable, his changes to the ending conform to a preference for leaving audiences with as many questions as answers. Some years later, Friedkin said that 'the ending in the book is much better...I don't know why I changed it, I was going toward some metaphysical horseshit that didn't come off.'<sup>671</sup> What is apparent is that these enigmatic last shots, which Ian Mantgani (in a recent article specifically about the film's ending) interprets as 'a spectral transference of Chance's corrupt spirit on to the personality of Vukovich,' complete a typically downbeat conclusion.<sup>672</sup> Doyle is merely left frustrated in *The French Connection*, in *Cruising* the audience suspects Burns may be a murderer, but in *To Live and Die*, Friedkin serves up the ultimate punishment for his anti-hero - only the ghost of his former self survives.

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<sup>670</sup> Krohn, p. 6.

<sup>671</sup> Gaydos, p. 248.

<sup>672</sup> Ian Mantgani, 'Ending...*To Live and Die in LA*', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 26, No. 11 (November 2016), p. 112.

Friedkin's films usually have a strong sense of place, from the grubby New York streets in *The French Connection* to the same city's leather bars and parks in *Cruising*, the Georgetown district of Washington in *The Exorcist* or the south American jungle of *Sorcerer*. In *To Live and Die in L.A.*, this tendency is at its most pronounced (as foregrounded in the title) because Friedkin chooses to portray the city as a reflection of the false and duplicitous characters who 'live and die' there. There was a conscious attempt to portray the city in a different way to the predictable and familiar way it is usually seen. According to Smith, their approach was influenced by a book called *24 Hours in Los Angeles*, with the expanses of downtown and 'chichi' Beverly Hills eschewed in favour of the rundown and industrial areas of Wilmington and San Pedro, as well as the arid landscapes to the east in the Mojave desert.<sup>673</sup> Michael Wilmington aptly describes it as 'a Darwinian world, dogged with trash hard as brick, soaked with evil.'<sup>674</sup> The film's very first shot, before the prologue, is unmistakably Los Angeles, the Hollywood hills in the background and a row of palms trees in the fore with the sun just rising above the horizon casting the hazy image in an orange glow. Just before the film closes, Friedkin, and cinematographer, Robbie Müller, offer a near-repeat of the same shot but now the sun appears to be setting, about to disappear below the horizon as if the events of the film have comprised but a single day.

This doubling of the image, two different shots which seem identical but are not, seems at one with the film's dominant theme. *To Live and To Die* is essentially about betrayal and illusion: no-one can ever be really trusted, and nothing can be taken at face value. At any given point, someone is betraying someone else. The levels and degrees of deceit are pervasive so that the only really sincere relationship, between Hart and Chance, can only last long enough for Hart to be swiftly dispatched. Masters is ripped off by a client whom he immediately murders. Cody (John Turturro) betrays Masters who tries to have him killed, as Cody also deceives Chance by escaping from his custody.

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<sup>673</sup> Clagett, p. 288.

<sup>674</sup> Michael Wilmington, 'Live and Die Chases French Connection', *Los Angeles Times*, 1/11/1985, p. G4.

Grimes (Dean Stockwell), the lawyer, betrays his client Masters, and Chance and Vukovich double-cross Masters. Deception as a motif begins with the counterfeit trade, what Segaloff calls the film's 'constant illusion,' which functions, in essence, as a continuous doubling of an image.<sup>675</sup> One other example of illusion comes early when Bianca appears for the first time. Shot from the back, she is in masculine attire, so Masters appears to be passionately kissing another man. Only when she turns around and takes off her wig, does it become clear it is a woman. Nothing and no-one can be taken at face value, even the director himself who cheated by using a male stand-in for the rear angle.<sup>676</sup>

When Richard Lippe and Florence Jacobwitz examine the film in terms of its relationship to contemporary representations of masculinity, the motifs and codes they identify also underscore this dominant theme. When they observe how 'the code of rage/violence is all-pervasive' in articulations of masculinity in contemporary cinema, in *To Live and Die*, it is betrayal that provides its fuel. They also show the importance in the film of the 'Buddy Honor Motif [where] male bonding/love/eroticism is legitimized through male "friendship" in the personal realm and "partnerships" in the professional.'<sup>677</sup> However, the film pushes back against this tendency much more than Lippe and Jacobwitz allow because the honour code is repeatedly shown to be untenable. Chance must kill Masters to avenge his 'buddy' yet, in the final confrontation, he fails miserably as he is killed himself - and not even by his nemesis.<sup>678</sup> When Lippe and Jacobwitz use Cody refusing to inform on Masters as a prime example, they miss that in the very next scene, he has reversed his decision.<sup>679</sup> The final scene puts the seal on deceit as the film's most pervasive theme. Chance's manipulated informant, Ruth, who has been effectively prostituting herself in exchange for her freedom, suffers the final betrayal as she is denied an escape from her degradation as a vessel of institutional and patriarchal power. Vukovich visits her (as Chance had done before) and informs her

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<sup>675</sup> Segaloff, p. 236.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>677</sup> Lippe and Jacobwitz, 'Masculinity in the Movies', p. 38.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

in no uncertain terms that she is now *his* informant; whether she will be expected to continue her sexual favours is left unanswered.

*To Live and Die* is a fascinating exercise in genre manipulation that is also, aesthetically, very much of its time. It played some part in launching the careers of its unknown lead actors and its reputation has gradually improved. Why it failed to make much of an impact in its time is less clear although perhaps a clue can be found in its critical reception. It had its admirers but the ever-acerbic Canby thought it 'so relentlessly nastily trendy that it comes close to self-parody.'<sup>680</sup> David Denby in *New York* magazine said it 'is a sleek piece of trash with dispensable heroes thrown onto the garbage heap with everything else.'<sup>681</sup> This suggests that it was its cynicism, its portrayal of a world without hope, that caused the film to be out of step with audiences and critics. Once again, it seems, Friedkin's tendency to explore the darker side of humanity had resulted in a film too cynical to be embraced by a mainstream mid-1980s audience.

## 1986-1989

After *To Live and Die*, Friedkin was increasingly finding it difficult to generate new projects which may be why he gravitated back to television again, making two feature length films about an elite squad of law enforcers that had its origins in a real-life unit organised by Gerald Petievich. Continuing the relationship established on *To Live and Die*, Petievich is the credited writer of the first film, *C.A.T. Squad*, which Friedkin directed in late 1985 for NBC. Budgeted at £4 million, about twice the usual cost for a made-for-television film, it aired on 27 July 1986 and tells a well-worn story of a gang of specialists and outcasts, like a cross between *The Dirty Dozen* and *The A-Team*, who carry out dangerous and difficult missions.<sup>682</sup> The dialogue is hide-bound by cliché and if Petievich was the sole writer as credited, this seems to support Friedkin's claim that he wrote *To Live and Die's* screenplay

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<sup>680</sup> Vincent Canby, 'How *Live and Die* Hooks Its Viewers', *New York Times*, 17/11/1985, p. H17.

<sup>681</sup> Quoted in Gaydos, p. 232.

<sup>682</sup> Segaloff, p. 248.

without Petievich. Ratings were sufficiently strong for Friedkin to direct a sequel, *C.A.T. Squad: Python Wolf*, shot in Autumn 1987 and aired on 23 May 1988.<sup>683</sup> The second film, with a different writer, Robert Ward (and story credits for both Friedkin and Petievich), is better written and benefits from a more complex narrative than its predecessor. The *C.A.T. Squad* films are amongst the most predictable work of Friedkin's career and anticipate Friedkin's more decisive move towards mainstream action filmmaking with *Rules of Engagement* (2000) and *The Hunted* (2003). Between directing these two television films in 1986 and 1988, Friedkin wrote and directed his most obscure work, the largely unseen *Rampage*, which might seem to be a return to his fascination with horror and the nature of evil, yet remains, in many ways, his most unusual and uncharacteristic film.

### ***Rampage***

Friedkin's first film was *The People vs. Paul Crump* (1962), a documentary about a man on Death Row, made at a time when Friedkin was vehemently opposed to the death penalty. Crump was reprieved but since has admitted his guilt and by the 1980s, Friedkin's own views about the death penalty had become less certain.<sup>684</sup> This was the background to his decision to option the rights to William Wood's 1985 novel, *Rampage*, a polemic about the death penalty and the fault-lines in the American, and specifically the Californian, legal system. It was based on both personal experience, Wood having served as a Deputy District Attorney (like the book and film's protagonist) until 1981, and on a real-life case.<sup>685</sup> With his background in documentaries, Friedkin was particularly attracted to Wood's inside knowledge, as had been the case with Petievich and Jurgensen. The book was not an obviously commercial prospect because it relegates the serial killer himself mostly to the role of spectator in a procedural about the vagaries of the Californian approach to questions of legal sanity, and its impact on a possible capital verdict. The making of such a film became a possibility when Dino

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<sup>683</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>684</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262; Claggett, p. 307.

<sup>685</sup> William Wood, *Rampage* (London: Star Books, 1985).

De Laurentiis, who had produced *The Brink's Job*, approached Friedkin about making another film for him. As he tells it in his autobiography, Friedkin wrote an initial draft in four weeks and took it to De Laurentiis who expressed the view that, 'if made inexpensively,' the film might attract a similar audience to his recent, offbeat hit, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). On paper, at least, De Laurentiis's idea makes sense because both stories depict the evil lurking behind the white picket fences of small-town America.

For its lack of obvious commerciality, it is not surprising that *Rampage's* budget was initially agreed at only \$5 million.<sup>686</sup> Eventually, it was set at \$7 million but it was probably Friedkin's personal stake in the film's fiscal arrangements that focused his mind sufficiently to bring it in for just above six (\$5,184,239 on production and \$1,050,120 on post).<sup>687</sup> The financing, in a similar arrangement to Coppola's on *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*, was a reflection of the times with a \$7 million loan from European American Bank contingent upon the provision of a completion guarantee. This was provided by Film Finances' new branch, located on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, who provided their services on condition that the Dino de Laurentiis Group (DEG) and Friedkin each provided a contingency of \$250,000.<sup>688</sup> Friedkin's overall fee was \$1.5 million (plus a writer's fee of \$175,000) but the structure of the project's ownership reflected the perilous prospects for this type of low-concept filmmaking.<sup>689</sup> DEG and Friedkin (Rampage Productions) owned the property equally, on a 'negative pick-up arrangement whereby Friedkin...was responsible for the budget until its delivery to DEG.'<sup>690</sup> Shot in only thirty-six days, *Rampage* had a largely unknown cast much like *To Live and Die* (although this is confused by hindsight because of the subsequent success of the earlier films' stars). Neither of *Rampage's* protagonists, Michael Biehn (as

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<sup>686</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 398.

<sup>687</sup> On costs, letter from Ken Ryan, Rampage Productions, to European American Bank, 3/1/1987. WFP: f.566. On budget, letter from Thomas Hansen (lawyer) to Steve Ransohoff (Film Finances Inc.), 16/10/1986. WFP: f. 580.

<sup>688</sup> Letter from Friedkin to Film Finances Inc., 2/10/1986. WFP: f.580.

<sup>689</sup> 'Director Agreement', 15/8/1986; 'Writer Agreement', 14/7/1986. WFP: f.580.

<sup>690</sup> Segaloff, p. 267.



Deputy District Attorney Tony Fraser) and Alex McArthur (as the killer Charles Reece) became stars subsequently. Friedkin had initially wanted William Peterson for the lead, but, in fact, it was Biehn who was the most famous of all the actors on *Rampage* or *To Live and Die* because of his major supporting role in *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984). This is apparent in his remuneration, \$200,000 for 8 weeks, compared with the \$50,000 that McArthur (as well as Peterson and Dafoe) earned.<sup>691</sup> The most significant name attached to the project was the composer, Ennio Morricone, most well-known for his work for Sergio Leone, who was paid \$137,500 for music that Friedkin imagined would be 'a similar high-energy track' to his famous Western scores.<sup>692</sup> In fact, what he provided was an understated score suited to the subject matter, that Friedkin acknowledged was 'haunting' although not what he had envisaged when he hired the famous composer.<sup>693</sup>

*Rampage* was screened on the last night of the 1987 Boston Film Festival on 24 September, at the USC Coliseum on 19 November and then received an extremely limited release in Europe.<sup>694</sup> In the United States, the release date kept being pushed back before it disappeared from the schedule altogether. De Laurentiis's company was in trouble and in June 1988, European American Bank called in their loans; by August, the company had filed for bankruptcy.<sup>695</sup> It was only in 1992 that *Rampage* finally achieved a domestic release when Miramax stepped in and agreed to distribute the film. After a year-long negotiation including a disappointing preview, Friedkin made changes that not only responded to commercial concerns to make the film more easily understood but also reflected his ongoing, malleable opinions about the death penalty.<sup>696</sup> *Rampage's* box-office return, when it was released domestically in November 1992 to a mixed reception, was only \$796.368.<sup>697</sup> The film had little impact on public consciousness and is now largely forgotten. Friedkin's conclusion in his

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<sup>691</sup> 'Cast Deal Memos', 1986. WFP: f.567.

<sup>692</sup> 'Music Agreement Ennio Morricone', 22/1/87. WFP: f.581; *Friedkin Connection*, p. 400.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>694</sup> Clagett, p. 311.

<sup>695</sup> Anon, 'Bank Files Action Over *Rampage* Funds', *Variety*, 6/6/1988;; Segaloff, p. 268.

<sup>696</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 401. Only the 1992 version is available today.

<sup>697</sup> '*Rampage*', *Box Office Mojo* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=rampage.htm>).

autobiography was 'that it was *too* serious, not what audiences expected from the director of *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection*.'<sup>698</sup> In most other countries, including the United Kingdom, it was never released at all, perhaps because the vagaries and complications surrounding the question of legal sanity and its impact on the possibility of a capital sentence remain peculiar to non-American audiences. The sight of expert psychiatrists with opposing opinions, who are used to shore up both the prosecution and defence is, however, familiar from cinema and television but what *Rampage* does that is more unusual, is expose the machinations and corrupt practices that determine their behaviour.

The portrayal of these 'experts' in the courtroom had personal resonance for Friedkin at the time because he was in the middle of a bitter custody battle for his son with ex-wife, the British actress, Lesley Anne-Down. Friedkin observed about the case: 'I feel our case was decided by psychiatrists and not the courts, and that this shrink's methods were no more valid than a witch doctor's.'<sup>699</sup> Friedkin's anger about this state of affairs fed directly into *Rampage* where all the psychiatrists are venal and self-serving. The first expert seen in the film is a weaselly type employed by the prosecution to support their contention that Reece, the murderer, is legally sane and therefore able to receive the death penalty. He declares unconvincingly after meeting Reece that 'it's possible' that Fraser can make a case for legal sanity. The defence's psychiatrist is more confident but also more callous and immoral. He confronts his opposite number and persuades him to change his testimony to avoid being charged with malpractice, because his clinic had released Reece on an earlier occasion. To persuade his colleague, he cites the real-life recent case of John Hinckley, Reagan's failed assassin, where a psychiatrist was prosecuted 'for failing to predict future violence.'<sup>700</sup> When the first psychiatrist reneges on his original opinion, Fraser employs another practitioner who seems,

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<sup>698</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 401 (emphasis in original).

<sup>699</sup> Quoted in Clagett, p. 309.

<sup>700</sup> The Hinckley case is pertinent. A controversial verdict found him not guilty by reason of insanity and he was released in 2016 after 35 years. See Elizabeth Chuck, 'John Hinckley Freed From Mental Hospital 35 Years After Reagan Assassination Attempt', *NBC News*, 10/10/2016 ([www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/john-hinckley-freed-mental-hospital-35-years-after-reagan-assassination-n646076](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/john-hinckley-freed-mental-hospital-35-years-after-reagan-assassination-n646076)).

at first, to be plausible when presenting his evidence. He confirms the audience's inclination, having borne witness to the horrific crimes, to side entirely with the prosecution side but this is immediately undercut: when cross-examined, it is revealed that he has appeared on fifty occasions for the prosecution and supported their case in every instance, earning him the nickname of 'Doctor Death.' This seems to be an allusion to the real-life psychiatrist, James Grigson, also known as 'Doctor Death', who similarly testified in 'at least fifty' cases and always sided with the prosecution.<sup>701</sup> For all Friedkin's personal bias, these portrayals only reinforce what is written in the novel. Friedkin does not, though, confine his criticisms to psychiatrists and the legal system; in the opening scene, he starkly exposes the absurdity of identity checks and waiting periods that govern Californian gun purchases. When Reece tries to buy one, he is told there is a 15-day waiting period. He asks if he needs ID and the response is 'no, just a Californian driving licence.' Reece only has to answer 'a couple of questions' before the shopkeeper is satisfied, completing the transaction by telling Reece, 'I'll see you on December 21<sup>st</sup> and Merry Christmas.' Reece has to merely wait until that date to collect his Christmas present and begin his killing spree.

Once Reece is armed, the film moves swiftly to the first murder which is cross-cut with Fraser and his wife, Kate (Deborah van Valkenburgh) receiving communion. The couple have lost a child whose death is shown to haunt Fraser's thoughts (although Friedkin set aside from early drafts a sub-plot about their marital problems).<sup>702</sup> The action in the film is mostly observed from an objective distance in medium shots but in these early scenes that jump between protagonist and antagonist, the viewpoint is more subjective with Reece's second victim seen in close-up just before death, making apparent the true horror of Reece's murderous acts, before a rapid cut to a medium close-up of Reece bathed in blood, inside a cage with a tiger prowling behind him in the enclosed space. This brief foray into fantasy, into Reece's mind, that seems to imply his bloodlust is connected to a

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<sup>701</sup> Fred Barbash, 'Life or Death: It's in Your Mind – or His', *Washington Post*, 27/2/1981, p. A7.

<sup>702</sup> *Rampage*, undated 1<sup>st</sup> draft. WFP: f.525; Script, 8/8/1986. WFP: f.548.

compulsion to behave like a wild animal, is uncharacteristic in what is largely a sober film unadorned by ostentatious camerawork. While the crime is discovered and Fraser attends the scene, Reece moves rapidly onto his second murder. A family bury their dog which the father, Gene Tippetts (Royce D. Applegate), is convinced was carried out by their neighbour, Reece. When the father and older son go out, Reece enters their house and kills the mother and the younger son (whose body goes missing and turns up later, dumped by Reece in a nearby river). The horrific acts are not shown, only the aftermath when Reece is again shown bathed in blood. This is characteristic of the film's low-key approach where most of the violence takes place off-screen, which is in stark contrast with *To Live and Die's* excess of style and action. Reece is caught and much of the later part of the film is taken up with his trial. However, one hour into the film (which lasts 107 minutes), there is a sudden burst of action when Reece escapes while he is being transported in a police van from court. He manages, in the time before he is re-caught, to commit some unseen act of depravity that leaves him once again covered in blood. This interlude seems to have drifted in from another film; presumably its purpose was to add a dose of energy to a particularly downbeat film. Once Reece is re-caught, the trial proceeds and Reece is found guilty and likely to face the death penalty. Then, the defence demands further, more advanced brain scans which now identify Reece as insane and the jury reverses their verdict, sending him to a state hospital with a possibility of parole in the future. This conclusion was different from the 1987 version which ended after Reece is found guilty and, before the verdict, commits suicide in his cell. What would have been the final shot of Reece's body lying prone with a hint of dribble hanging from his mouth appears in the 1992 edit as part of a dream sequence in which Fraser imagines this fate for the murderer. This original ending conformed to both the novel and the real-life events on which it was based.<sup>703</sup>

Wood's book was based on the case of Richard Chase who committed a series of horrific murders and mutilations in late 1977 and early 1978 before committing suicide in prison after his conviction

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<sup>703</sup> As far as I can tell, the original version has never surfaced after its very limited initial release.

in May 1979.<sup>704</sup> Friedkin, as he had done with *Cruising* and, to a lesser extent on *To Live and Die*, used the source novel as a jumping off point for extensive research into the subject matter which he amalgamated with the original book. It was this mining for the small details that led Friedkin, once again, towards controversy, albeit on a much smaller scale than his difficulties with *Cruising*. On this occasion, it seems Friedkin was not at fault. In a story in the January 1986 edition of *NewsRounds*, the monthly newspaper of the Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke's Medical Center in Chicago, it was reported that Friedkin visited Dr Jim Kavanaugh at the facility as research for a film that would 'show the world through the eyes of a killer who is also schizophrenic.'<sup>705</sup> The consequence of this small report in a publication with an extremely limited readership was a deluge of letters of complaint sent to Friedkin. In terms of an early intervention, the protests even outdid *Cruising*, occurring before a screenplay had even be written. Most of these letters, written between February and May 1986, said much the same thing: schizophrenics are no more or less likely to be killers than anyone else and the making of a film where a schizophrenic is a murderer will stigmatize them. The writers were a combination of health professionals and members of the public, particularly parents of schizophrenic children. The majority cited the *NewsRounds* article and these included those who were part of a concerted campaign by the Alliance for the Mentally Ill (with a membership of thirty thousand).<sup>706</sup> Friedkin was sufficiently concerned to feel the need to respond in the June/July edition of *NewsRounds* in which he stated:

In no way is it my intention to equate murder with mental illness...the film deals with the death penalty in California and the arguments for and against it. My purpose...is to *accurately* portray the role of forensic psychiatry in a murder case.<sup>707</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Letter from John Daugherty (Office of the District Attorney, Sacramento) to Kathy Lambert (Rampage Productions), 4/2/1986, accompanying materials about 'People vs. Richard Trenton Chase'. WFP: f.653.

<sup>705</sup> *NewsRounds*, January 1986, p. 16. WFP: f. 623.

<sup>706</sup> Letters in 'Hate Mail 1986' files. WFP: f.612 and f.613. Example from Helen Smith, 14/5/1986: 'Surely you can make money some way without hurting so many people.'

<sup>707</sup> Friedkin, 'A Statement from William Friedkin', *NewsRounds*, June/July 1986, p. 5.

There is a certain irony that it was the writer-director's determination to provide an accurate representation by making the visit to specialists in the field that should have caused the protest. Objections focused on a single quotation from which it was assumed that Friedkin would sensationalise the issues and it is possible that the *Cruising* farrago may have prompted the complainants to fear the worst.

What was not said amidst all this pre-production uproar is that in the real-life case, upon which Wood and Friedkin based their narratives, Richard Chase *was* diagnosed as schizophrenic (although this does not necessarily undermine the complaints).<sup>708</sup> The extreme reactions certainly indicate Friedkin's uncanny ability to attract controversy. These visits to Kavanaugh's institution eventually fed into the final film in a specific way that allowed Friedkin to use more recent medical advances than in the novel. Advances in PET scan technology, that pinpointed evidence of schizophrenia in the brain, become a crucial plot point in the film's revised 1992 ending. After being found guilty, further tests show the use of technology from which the doctors conclude, 'abnormal patterns without a doubt...consistent with schizophrenia, What it shows is a picture of madness.' Whereas the original version concludes with the suicide of Reece, the 1992 version finishes with a shot of him staring into the camera, clutching the prison bars, followed by a stark caption that informs us that 'Reece has served four years already and has already had one parole hearing. The next one is due in six months.' In the original version, the question of insanity as a reason to keep a murderer alive is not answered: Reece's premature death leaves open what his fate would have been. The new ending, on the other hand, adds a frightening coda that makes clear Friedkin's views. He said that it put the film 'firmly on the side of the death penalty. This version is more ironic and unsettling.'<sup>709</sup>

Friedkin's research extended beyond the visits to psychiatric clinics. He read up on Chase extensively and in December 1985, received advice from a public defender in Sacramento about the

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<sup>708</sup> Iris Yang, *The Sacramento Bee*, 7/2/1979. WFP: f.653.

<sup>709</sup> *Friedkin Connection*, p. 401.

veracity of the source novel.<sup>710</sup> In January 1986, he was sent copies of defence arguments against the death penalty by another lawyer, Colleen Grace.<sup>711</sup> All this research fed into the film, adding layers of verisimilitude which can be seen most obviously in the details of Reece's horrible activities, and in Fraser's closing arguments. However, it is not just the extent of the research or the determination to be accurate that recalls Friedkin's beginnings in documentary filmmaking, but also the film's unvarnished imagery. However, Friedkin's observation that he 'tried to make the film without style...no discernible visual style' does not seem entirely accurate.<sup>712</sup> The film's visual palette is understated - and to a considerable extent - but Friedkin's decisions do denote a specific style, even if it is one determined not to draw attention to itself. In the exterior scenes, when Reece stalks his neighbourhood, or in the scenes that depict the domestic life of Fraser and his wife, everything appears drained of both colour and light. There is a restraint in the film's lighting schemes that makes Stockton's suburbs seem to be engulfed in a permanent haze. There is very little self-consciousness or overt flair in Friedkin's direction, but there *are* exceptions. When the police and Fraser search Reece's cellar, this is both the film's most horrific and most cinematic scene. A swinging light illuminates the space fleetingly, as the music becomes steadily more ominous, revealing in glimpses, Nazi regalia, mice and rats scurrying, brains and dead animals in jars. Another example is when Reece makes his escape from custody and, here, Friedkin plays on Reece's blood-sucking pathology. He escapes from a church, in which he was hiding, in one dramatic leap straight through the ornate stained-glass window, like a vampire with supernatural powers.<sup>713</sup> These infrequent flourishes aside, the subdued tone of the film is underpinned by restrained presentational decisions, by the sheer ordinariness of a typical American suburb, and by Morricone's subtly evocative music.

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<sup>710</sup> Letter from Office of the D.A. Sacramento, John Daugherty to Kathy Lambert, 4/2/86 plus file marked 'Research (Richard Chase) 1978-1986' including newspaper articles, books. All WFP: f.653.

<sup>711</sup> Letter from Colleen Grace to Friedkin, 15/1/1986. WFP: f.656.

<sup>712</sup> Clagett, p. 310.

<sup>713</sup> The real-life model, Chase, was dubbed the 'Dracula Killer' in the press (Clagett, p. 318).

Friedkin was much more faithful to the source novel than in his previous 1980s work, with script drafts and revisions also less extensive. However, Friedkin still made last-minute changes on-set that resulted in some interesting ideas, on paper at least, being discarded. He initially had plans to visualise Reece's thought processes. The first draft states, 'Reece separates from himself, and in a state of depersonalization is literally out of his body watching himself through the following action...[He] hovers above the scene like a Chagall figure.' There is also a hand-written note that states: 'Throughout the film, Reece's P.O.V. is transferred to video-tape, color-altered and re-transferred to film.'<sup>714</sup> Friedkin chose not to use these subjective visual effects because he reasoned that it would have encouraged the audience to feel some unearned sympathy for Reece.<sup>715</sup> By the time of the re-release by Miramax, Friedkin's later changes are documented in a revised continuity script dated 11 July 1991. One addition extends an olive branch of hope amidst the despair (perhaps as a correlative to the depressive new ending). In the penultimate scene, the only wholly sympathetic characters in the film, Gene and Andy Tippetts (the father and son of the family in the second murder) enjoy a visit to the fairground and Gene tells a rapt Andy a story while he carries him aloft.<sup>716</sup> This singular hopeful and redemptive scene is as positive as this 'too serious' film ever gets.

*Rampage* seems an outlier in Friedkin's career, even though he has often dabbled in a range of different genres and styles. While touching on topics that appear in serial killer thrillers and courtroom dramas, it hardly ever refers to familiar generic tropes. It does examine contemporary issues that conceivably might have resonated with a 1980s or 1990s domestic audience; however, its mode of execution, and its troubled and deferred release, did not lend itself to attracting a wide audience. The film moved Friedkin further away from the Hollywood industrial power complex as he, like a number of his peers, sought finance and distribution from the independent sector. This did allow him a high degree of creative freedom but ended badly when DEG, like so many small

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<sup>714</sup> Undated 1<sup>st</sup> draft, p. 5. WFP: f.525.

<sup>715</sup> Segaloff, p. 265.

<sup>716</sup> Revised Continuity Script, 11/7/1991. WFP: f.557.



independents in the 1980s, was unable to fulfil its commitments. Although it is as obscure a film as any in Friedkin's career and was patently out of step with the marketplace at the time of its release, it still asks provocative questions about American society that seem just as relevant today because, some thirty years later, gun control and the death penalty in the United States continue to generate controversially strident and diverse opinions.

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Like so many Renaissance auteurs, William Friedkin's career in the 1980s was neither profitable nor prolific. He had never been as productive as some others such as Altman, but none of the four films he directed for the cinema made worthwhile money. Both *Rampage* and *Deal of the Century* are largely forgotten today, and both received only cursory theatrical releases in their time, with neither ever exhibited in the United Kingdom. *Cruising* and *To Live and Die*, although initially somewhat unsuccessful, have both, gradually, enjoyed a higher profile and enhanced critical reputation. What this examination of Friedkin's decade has revealed is how he shared with both Altman and Coppola a desire to carry on making the type of cinema that was now less welcome in the blockbuster-dominated Hollywood marketplace. In the 1990s and 2000s, Friedkin continued to make films at a similar rate but was no longer writing his own screenplays or generating his own projects. When he directed *Jade* in 1995, it was Joe Eszterhas, the in-demand writer of 1992's *Basic Instinct*, whose authorial signature seemed pre-dominant. Studio fare like *Blue Chips* (1994), *Rules of Engagement* and *The Hunted* were films with generic plots and big stars, while *The Guardian* and *Bug* (2006) took him back into horror territory. Nevertheless, in many of these post-1980s films, he still retained his penchant for morally ambiguous protagonists. Friedkin's work in the eighties, with the benefit of hindsight, now looks like a concerted attempt to make a last stand for his particular brand of filmmaking in an environment that now favoured more manageable subject matter.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that, while the reasons for any supposed decline for the Renaissance auteurs were much the same, their responses to the consequent challenges to their ability to work as they wished were diverse and nuanced. Although it is true that times were certainly challenging for these directors, sweeping generalisations about their fortunes provide an incomplete picture when the focus of study is shifted away from box-office performance or right-leaning ideology, and towards the fortunes and films of those auteurs whose names still tend to dominate discussions of the previous decade. The extent that directors' career paths were not uniform is amply illustrated by how differently the three case-study filmmakers approached the difficulties of finding ways to express themselves satisfactorily. Each example has revealed contrasting aspects of 1980s filmmaking, their experiences and films allowing a variety of perspectives on the history of the period. It is true, however, that the story of the Renaissance auteur in the 1980s does still re-enforce, by dint of their poor box-office performance, some of the commonly held perceptions about the decade. It was always a challenge, even for those who achieved some measure of success, to consistently register any impact at the box-office at all.

Coppola's experiences were unique, and his freewheeling decade featured both extravagance and foolhardiness, but also surprising instances of discipline and restraint. He inscribed, particularly on the projects he originated, a visual style that reflected the thematic concerns of individual films and it is notable the extent that he was able to engage in innovative modes of filmmaking even when he was working for others. He pioneered new video-assisted methods that allowed for the sort of pre-visualisation and editing practices that would become common practice from subsequent advances in digital technology. On the more personal projects, as we have seen in *One from the Heart*, *The Outsiders* and *Tucker*, Coppola quotes from his influences but in a way that is distinctive rather than imitative. My examination of the films' aesthetics, and of Coppola's authorship, has revealed a gap

because of the way that his 1980s films have tended to be used as part of the wider saga of Coppola's financial demise and indefatigable hubris.

Coppola still managed to achieve more commercial success than either Altman or Friedkin and the latter's attempts to maintain a career in Hollywood were ostensibly more conventional: Friedkin operated in familiar genres and dealt with more contemporary subject matter. What is interesting, which suggests a problematic approach by him to the challenges he faced in keeping in work at this time, is how Friedkin seemed unable to resist undermining his own chances of success by demonstrating a perverse determination to register his individuality. He undermined the potential conventionality and commerciality of the work through his refusal to offer easily digestible narratives that conformed to viewers' expectations.<sup>717</sup> The ambiguity and occasional incoherence, in *Cruising* and *To Lie and Die* particularly, made the films difficult to understand and goes some way to explain Friedkin's problems at the box-office. Perhaps even more than Coppola, some of Friedkin's 1980s films can be thought of as among his most personal work, and my focus on the screenwriting, in his case, reflects the degree of creative control he was able to exert. In Hollywood, a director's authorial control has always been challenged by producers and production companies' reluctance (in both studio and independent sectors) to allow them creative freedom. Friedkin suffered in this respect on *Deal of the Century*; on the other three films he directed in the decade, because he fulfilled the dual role of writer-director, this meant that he was able to exert a high degree of authorial agency.

Altman undertook an entirely different route to keeping in meaningful employment and his sheer productivity is indicative of the fresh opportunities available in both cable television and low-cost filmmaking, if directors were willing to lower their expectations about budget, fees and audience reach. By taking himself away from Hollywood, he found novel solutions to the problem of maintaining his customary level of control over authorial creativity. Operating with small budgets

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<sup>717</sup> Wyatt, *High Concept*, p. 191.

that bore no comparison even with Coppola's or Friedkin's reduced funding, Altman still managed to be innovative in expressing himself cinematically and I have shown that his authorship can be identified in the staging and filming of ostensibly faithful adaptations of theatrical properties (although my analysis has also shown that the level of fidelity was not quite as high as the writing credits suggest). The low-key and low-cost nature of Altman's 1980s films has led to a perception that what followed in the 1990s represented a comeback, aptly illustrating the way that the diversity in auteurist filmmaking in the 1980s has been undervalued.

This project was conceived from the outset as a challenge to the homogeneity that routinely characterises the story of the Hollywood Renaissance auteur in the 1980s. It is unsurprising, therefore, that conclusions that can be drawn are not particularly simple or easily explained. In fact, the fortunes (or lack of them) for this diverse group, and the films they directed, have required ways to explain them that reflect the wide range of circumstances that make up their individual narratives. Industrial developments, changes in audience tastes, the difficulties of obtaining finance and distribution, as well as personal behavioural issues, were interconnected factors, which for each director impacted on their careers in varying degrees and produced a range of different outcomes.

At the outset, I noted that many of this study's aims aligned with the practice of 'New Film History'. In this regard, by offering a more nuanced perspective on a particular decade, I have been able to enrich aspects of film history obscured by the conventional historiography that has codified the nature of the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s. The project has revealed gaps, as well as generalised and occasionally problematic accounts, in the study of this period (amply illustrated by the earlier review of existing literature) and thereby offers a fresh perspective on what is conventionally considered to be a 'standard' period in Hollywood history.

Writing at the mid-point of the decade, Stephen Farber profiled five 'maverick' directors' gravitation towards the independent sector which he identified as being caused by the lack of opportunities now available from within the studio system. In doing so, he made an important point

about the divergent nature of Renaissance auteurs' situations in the 1980s, observing that 'track records are neither guarantee nor curse, and having a bad one does not mean that a director, producer, can't continue making pictures for years.'<sup>718</sup> As Farber implied, for all the changes in the industry and the lack of support for maverick directors, it was not necessarily success in the immediate past that determined the amount, or type, of work they were offered and the reasons that directors were hired were often due to other project-specific factors. The reality in the 1980s for directors who wanted to carry on working at the sort of scale to which they were accustomed, was that maintaining high production values or attracting stars could usually only be achieved with studio backing. Justin Wyatt's argument about how adhering to the precepts of high-concept filmmaking was the route to attracting a substantial viewership seems particularly relevant here: Scorsese's *The Color of Money* is a particularly apposite example in this respect, where the director achieved his biggest hit to that point by moving into more conventional territory and harnessing some of the high-concept markers that Wyatt identifies (the Newman-Cruise star package and a pre-sold property that was a sequel to the book and film of *The Hustler*).

It was the progressively increasing reluctance from the majors to venture much beyond the blockbuster model in the 1980s that led the Renaissance auteur towards independent finance but even then, a film was still reliant on the Hollywood studios for distribution if it stood any chance of becoming a hit. Even though a film might be independently funded, the freedom to make a film according to the director's wishes without outside interference was still dependent on a production company being willing to allow them such latitude: there were no guarantees that an independent would be less controlling than a major studio. At the same time, in an independent production that was only made for a modest sum, the scope of a director's creativity was often challenged by a lack of available funds.

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<sup>718</sup> Farber, 'Five Horsemen After the Apocalypse', p. 32. The five are Altman, Bogdanovich, Scorsese, John Sayles and Alan Rudolph.

Such difficulties were not, of course, confined to the Renaissance auteurs. This study, if my concern had been about the viability of authorial creativity in 1980s Hollywood as a whole, might easily have focused on a younger cadre of filmmakers who were in the vanguard of the growth in independent cinema in the post-Renaissance period (such as Sayles, Jarmusch or Lee). By concentrating instead on those particularly associated with the previous period in American cinema, and who were no longer considered to be bankable at the box-office, I have shown how the conventionally stated division between two eras can be perceived more fluidly than usual, at least in terms of authorial creativity. Yet in the 1980s, it is also clear that these directors, the Renaissance auteurs that I have identified, were all still subject to the same pressures and problems that derived from new industrial and societal determinants, as well as the technological developments that fuelled ancillary markets. These factors functioned to both underpin and accelerate the changes in audience tastes that led to a greater concentration on more populist filmmaking.

The characterisation of the eighties as a 'lost decade' is persuasive as a means to describe the hiatus in innovative, unconventional and personal filmmaking in Hollywood, between the acclaimed films of the Renaissance and the successes in Indiewood cinema in the 1990s, and such a designation stands as a marker for a lack of both public and academic attention. The division between eras is also appropriate because the fate of the Hollywood Renaissance auteur has shown the extent that opportunities were diminished in the 1980s, not just for them but for those others who faced similar challenges. Not only that, but it should also be acknowledged that these filmmakers were no longer in the first flower of youth. While they had dazzlingly reflected the *zeitgeist* when they burst into public consciousness in the late 1960s, they no longer seemed to be culturally relevant to a populace in thrall to a Reaganite optimism.

The research into the three case-study directors then has revealed many differences in their filmmaking experiences in the 1980s but it also has suggested similarities that are indicative of the state of the American film industry at the time. The vaunted reputations of these three filmmakers,

much like most of their peers as well, had already become more of a hindrance than a benefit. After *Heaven's Gate*, but particularly in their cases after *Apocalypse Now*, *Sorcerer* and *Popeye*, all three were no longer as attractive to the major studios in terms of their allure as 'auteur-stars'. The conglomerated entities were less inclined to use a critically acclaimed auteur to burnish their reputation but there still exceptions under certain circumstances. The change of attitude was caused by the changing nature of the marketplace, but also by directors' individual behaviours. As we have seen, almost all of the Renaissance auteurs enjoyed the sort of relationships with Hollywood studio executives that could problematise their ability to get projects green-lit. Even when they did find work that involved the participation of the majors, they all struggled (frequently in vain) to retain a degree of authorial agency. Studios were less forgiving and less indulgent than in the earlier decade because they considered, paraphrasing Biskind, that there was now less chance of these filmmakers' laying golden eggs.<sup>719</sup>

What has also become apparent during the course of this study is how Hollywood's conglomerated environment of diminished opportunities led film directors towards other areas in which they could practice their craft. Today, forty years on, filmmakers considered to be auteurs are happily gravitating towards the opportunities and budgets offered in television by the new media behemoths of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Netflix and Amazon (as well as others scrambling to get a slice of the new 'pie'). In the 1980s, however, it was still considered a step down in class to move from big screen to small. It was only because of the vastly reduced options available to them in cinema that directors like Altman, Friedkin and Coppola made forays into television. Altman, in particular, was prescient in identifying the opportunities that television might be able to offer enterprising filmmakers. The smaller budgets required to make a television film in the 1980s, even at feature length, meant far less risk for those providing the finance, but more significant was that new avenues

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<sup>719</sup> Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 16.

were opening up due to the growth of cable and satellite channels in the States and the need for product to fill up the schedules.

Elsewhere, the arrival of MTV at the beginning of the decade was a boon for the production of extravagant and prestigious music videos designed to stand out on the nascent channel. Major pop stars, including Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen, sought the prestige of a director's authorial star image (and presumably also their skill-set) with six of the Renaissance auteurs featured in this study (Ashby, Coppola, De Palma, Friedkin, Rafelson and Scorsese) hired to direct mini-features, expensive in terms of their per-minute cost but which still palled compared with the cost of making even the cheapest feature film.<sup>720</sup> Such work has rarely been noted in the scramble to characterise these directors' careers as in terminal decline but these opportunities, on television and in music videos, were one way to keep in employment. They certainly avoided the associated risks to auteur-directors when they were foolish enough to provide their own funds to get projects off the ground, as Bogdanovich and Coppola found to their cost.

Even if the relative neglect shown to the films made by the Renaissance auteur in the 1980s might be justified because they were mostly box-office failures, these directors still managed to offer up a range of cinema that ought to be taken into account when their legacy, both individually and collectively, is considered. They made a range of films that are particularly interesting as examples of the different ways that directors' authorship is inscribed in their work. This study has suggested that many of the films featured might be overdue for some critical re-evaluation (and I trust that this project has offered plenty of reasons for others to do so) but they are also valuable because, collectively, they form a pattern of creativity that puts into question existing accounts that characterise the decade as being 'lost' for auteurist filmmaking, and that deny the Hollywood Renaissance auteur any role in the history of 1980s American filmmaking. The circumstances of the

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<sup>720</sup> For full details of these music videos, see Filmography, pp. 239-243.



marketplace at the time when examined through the prism of the selected directors has provided a new position from which to appreciate individual films, American film history, and the viability of sustained authorial creativity within post-studio era Hollywood. That the 1980s produced films that are as diverse, artistically ambitious, and formally and stylistically rich as *Fool for Love*, *One from the Heart* or *To Live and Die in L.A.* illustrates why the 1980s output of the Hollywood Renaissance auteur should not be so readily consigned to a dusty corner of film history.

## Appendix 1

### Directors and their 1980s Feature Films: Production and Distribution by Industry Sector

<u>Director</u>	<u>80s films</u>	<u>Production</u>			<u>Distribution</u>		
		Major studios*	Mini-majors*	Indie	Major studios	Mini-majors	Indie
Robert Altman	8	3	1	4	4	1	3
Hal Ashby	4	0	0	4	3	1	0
Peter Bogdanovich	3	1	0	2	2	0	1
Francis Coppola	7	0	2	5	4	3	0
William Friedkin	4	1	0	3	3	0	1
Dennis Hopper	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
John Milius	3	2**	0	2**	2	1	0
Brian de Palma	7	5	2	0	5	2	0
Arthur Penn	4	1	1	2	3	1	0
Bob Rafelson	2	2**	0	1**	2	0	0
Martin Scorsese	5	3**	0	3**	5	0	0
<b><u>Totals</u></b>	<b><u>49</u></b>	<b><u>17</u></b>	<b><u>7</u></b>	<b><u>27</u></b>	<b><u>33</u></b>	<b><u>10</u></b>	<b><u>6</u></b>

\* Majors: Paramount, Fox, Warners, Universal, Disney, Columbia, MGM/UA

Mini-majors : Cannon, Filmways, Orion, Tri-Star

\*\* Includes 1 studio/independent co-production.

Source: *IMDb* (www.imdb.com)

## Appendix 2

### Top Grossing 1980s Films Directed by Hollywood Renaissance Auteurs

Film	Director	Production	Distribution	US Returns (\$ million)
<i>The Untouchables</i> (1987)	Brian De Palma	Paramount	Paramount	76
<i>The Color of Money</i> (1986)	Martin Scorsese	Disney	Disney	52
<i>Popeye</i> (1980)	Robert Altman	P'mount/Disney	Paramount	49
<i>Mask</i> (1985)	Peter Bogdanovich	Universal	Universal	48
<i>Colors</i> (1988)	Dennis Hopper	Orion	Orion	46
<i>Scarface</i> (1983)	Brian De Palma	Universal	Universal	45
<i>Peggy Sue Got Married</i> (1986)	Francis Coppola	Tri-Star	Tri-Star	41
<i>Conan the Barbarian</i> (1982)	John Milius	Universal/DEG	Universal	39
<i>Red Dawn</i> (1984)	John Milius	United Artists	MGM	38
<i>Dressed to Kill</i> (1980)	Brian De Palma	Filmways	Filmways	31
<i>The Outsiders</i> (1983)	Francis Coppola	Zoetrope	Warners	25
<i>The Cotton Club</i> (1984)	Francis Coppola	Orion	Orion	25
<i>Black Widow</i> (1987)	Bob Rafelson	Fox	Fox	25

Source: *Box Office Mojo* ([www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com))

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## Filmography

*The following are complete filmographies for work directed by the 11 Renaissance auteurs from 1980-1989.*

*All feature films made for theatrical release unless otherwise stated. Also included are television films (tv), television episodes (tve), television series (tvs), music videos (v) and documentaries (d).*

### Robert Altman

*Health* (sc. Frank Barhydt, Robert Altman and Paul Dooley, 1980)

*Popeye* (sc. Jules Feiffer, 1980)

*Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (sc. Ed Graczyk, 1982)

*Rattlesnake in a Cooler* (sc. Frank South, 1982) - tv (*Two by South*)

*Precious Blood* (sc. Frank South, 1982) – tv (*Two by South*)

*Streamers* (sc. David Rabe, 1983)

*Secret Honor* (sc. Donald Freed and Arnold Stone, 1984)

*The Laundromat* (sc. Marsha Norman, 1985) - tv

*Fool for Love* (sc. Sam Shepard, 1985)

*O.C. and Stiggs* (sc. Ted Mann and Donald Cantrell, 1987)

*Beyond Therapy* (sc. Christopher Durang and Robert Altman, 1987)

*The Room* (sc. Harold Pinter, 1987) - tv

*The Dumb Waiter* (sc. Harold Pinter, 1987) - tv

'Les Boréades' (sc. Robert Altman, 1987) - segment in *Aria*

*The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* (sc. Herman Wouk, 1988) - tv

*Tanner '88* (sc. Gary Trudeau, 1988) - tvs

### Hal Ashby

*Second-Hand Hearts* (sc. Charles Eastman, 1981)

*Lookin' to Get Out* (sc. Al Schwartz and Jon Voight, 1982)

*Let's Spend the Night Together* (1982) - The Rolling Stones (d)

'Going to A Go-Go' - live version (1982) - The Rolling Stones (v)

'Solo Trans' (1984) – Neil Young (v)

*The Slugger's Wife* (sc. Neil Simon, 1985)

*8 Million Ways to Die* (sc. Oliver Stone and R. Lance Hill, 1986)

'Pilot' (sc. David Milch and Jeffrey Lewis, 1987) - *Beverley Hills Buntz* (tve)

*Jake's Journey* (sc. Graham Chapman, Andy Schatzberg and David Sherlock, 1988) - tv

### **Peter Bogdanovich**

*They All Laughed* (sc. Peter Bogdanovich and Blaine Novak, 1981)

*Mask* (sc. Ann Hamilton Phelan, 1985)

*Illegally Yours* (sc. M.A. Stewart and Max Dickens, 1988)

### **Francis Coppola**

*One From the Heart* (sc. Armyan Bernstein and Francis Coppola, 1981)

*The Outsiders* (sc. Kathleen Rowell, 1983)

*Rumble Fish* (sc. S.E. Hinton and Francis Coppola, 1983)

*The Cotton Club* (sc. William Kennedy and Francis Coppola, 1984)

*Captain EO* (sc. George Lucas, Rusty Lemorande and Francis Coppola, 1986) - short (Disneyland)

*Peggy Sue Got Married* (sc. Jerry Scheitling and Arlene Sarner, 1986)

'Rip Van Winkle' (sc. Mark Curtiss and Rod Ash, 1987) – *Faerie Tale Theater* (tve)

*Gardens of Stone* (sc. Ronald Bass, 1987)

*Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (sc. Arnold Schulman and David Seidler, 1988)

'Life Without Zoe' (sc. Francis and Sofia Coppola, 1988) - segment in *New York Stories*

### **Brian De Palma**

*Dressed to Kill* (sc. Brian De Palma, 1980)

*Blow Out* (sc. Brian De Palma, 1981)

*Scarface* (sc. Oliver Stone, 1983)

*Body Double* (sc. Robert J. Avrech and Brian De Palma, 1984)

'Dancing in the Dark' (1984) – Bruce Springsteen (v)

'Relax' version 3 (1984) – Frankie Goes to Hollywood (v)



*Wise Guys* (sc. George Gallo, 1986)

*The Untouchables* (sc. David Mamet, 1987)

*Casualties of War* (sc. David Rabe, 1989)

### **William Friedkin**

*Cruising* (sc. William Friedkin, 1980)

*Deal of the Century* (sc. Paul Brickman, 1983)

'Self Control' (1984) – Laura Brannigan (v)

'To Live and Die in LA' (1985) – Wang Chung (v)

'Nightcrawlers' (sc. Philip DeGuere, 1985) - *The Twilight Zone* (tve)

*To Live and Die in L.A.* (sc. William Friedkin and Gerald Petievich, 1985)

'Putting It Together: The Making of the *Broadway Album*' (1986) - Barbra Streisand (v)

*C.A.T. Squad* (sc. Gerald Petievich, 1986) - tv

*Rampage* (sc. William Friedkin, 1987)

*C.A.T. Squad: Python Wolf* (sc. Robert Ward, 1988) - tv

### **Dennis Hopper**

*Out of the Blue* (sc. Leonard Yakir and Brenda Nielson, 1980)

*Colors* (sc. Michael Schiffer, 1988)

### **John Milius**

*Conan the Barbarian* (sc. John Milius and Oliver Stone, 1982)

*Red Dawn* (sc. John Milius and Kevin Reynolds, 1984)

'Opening Day' (sc. John Milius, 1985) – *The Twilight Zone* (tve)

*Farewell to the King* (sc. John Milius, 1989)

### **Arthur Penn**

*Four Friends* (sc. Steve Tesich 1981)

*Target* (sc. Howard Berk and Don Peterson, 1985)

*Dead of Winter* (sc. Mark Schmuger and Mark Malone, 1987)

*Penn and Teller Get Killed* (sc. Penn Jillette and Teller, 1989)

### **Bob Rafelson**

*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (sc. David Mamet, 1981)

*Modesty* (sc. Bob Rafelson, 1981) - short

'All Night Long' (1983) – Lionel Ritchie (v)

*Black Widow* (sc. Ronald Bass, 1987)

### **Martin Scorsese**

*Raging Bull* (sc. Mardik Martin and Paul Schrader, 1980)

*The King of Comedy* (sc. Paul D. Zimmerman, 1982)

*After Hours* (sc. Joseph Minion, 1985)

'Mirror, Mirror' (sc. Joseph Minion, 1986) - *Amazing Stories* (tve)

*The Color of Money* (sc. Richard Price, 1986)

'Bad' (sc. Richard Price, 1987) – Michael Jackson (v)

*The Last Temptation of Christ* (sc. Paul Schrader, 1988)

'Life Lessons' (sc. Richard Price, 1989) - segment in *New York Stories*

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