

50 years since the socially critical films of 1974: an introduction

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This is the introduction to series of articles on the socially critical films of 1974. Part 1 was posted May 6, Part 2 May 8, Part 3 May 10, Part 4 May 13 and Part 5 May 16.

Starting today, the WSWs is posting a series of articles marking 50 years since the release of numerous socially critical and realistic films in 1974. The films that emerged in the early- to mid-1970s represented the highest point reached by American filmmaking since the anti-communist witch-hunts of the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, the rightward political and cultural shift that set in from the late 1970s onward and which continued for decades meant that those works continue to stand out.

We are posting the articles in the hope they will shed light on the social and cultural situation a half-century ago and that by examining these works, their strengths and weaknesses, we can assist Marxists today in assessing how our current challenges and difficulties may be met and overcome in a new period of even greater political and social convulsion.

Cinema, particularly carried out on a large scale, which involves setting significant resources into motion and the collective activity of great numbers of people, reacts more slowly to events than more “portable” and flexible artistic forms. The radicalism and upheaval of the post-1968 era did not find sharp expression in American movies in particular until that process had nearly exhausted itself.

While filmmaking may respond tardily, it is especially sensitive to the ebb and flow of social movements. A mass art form, dependent on a global audience, cinema is susceptible to the trajectories of great numbers of people. It seems to be most “in its element” at moments of great social drama and popular activity and mobility.

The *Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* (United States) explains that the period

between 1968 and 1975 witnessed an immense upsurge of the working class. Left-wing and socialist movements grew significantly throughout the world. In the midst of a powerful strike movement of British workers in the summer of 1972, the *Daily Telegraph* published an editorial headlined, “Who Shall Rule?,” raising openly the specter of a revolutionary overturn of the capitalist state by the working class.

The unprecedented global upheavals of 1973–74 certainly formed a fitting background for the generally anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment films that were released that year: the crumbling of the Nixon administration in the Watergate affair, the fall of the Conservative government in Britain, the Arab-Israeli War, the quadrupling of oil prices, the fall of the fascist regime in Portugal and the breakdown of the military junta in Greece.

While the number of US workers on strike in 1974, 2.8 million, was not as great as the figure for either 1970 or 1971 (approximately 3.3 million workers each of those years), that total has not been surpassed in the intervening 50 years.

The relationship between social life and art is complex, but the starting point for grasping it must be the acknowledgment that social being determines social consciousness, that the development of the world determines the development of art.

The turmoil of the first half of the 1970s provided the general conditions in which numerous filmmakers produced their most enduring work in the US. It is only necessary to mention the names of Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Hal Ashby, Roman Polanski, Mel Brooks, Alan Pakula, Martin Scorsese, Arthur Penn and John Cassavetes, among others. This general process holds true for prominent screenwriters, such as Robert Towne, and actors, like Jack Nicholson, as well.

A period of widespread radicalization draws the film artist closer to the mass of the population in movement and away from the steel embrace of studios and corporations, according to what Leon Trotsky described as the “law of social attraction ... which, in the last analysis, determines the creative work of the intelligentsia.” Not only is there more directly and critical political and social commentary at such moments, but, in general work of a more non-conformist and “free-thinking” character. Long-held shibboleths, conventional wisdom, official “public opinion” are called into question.

1974 in particular saw the release of Ashby’s *The Last Detail* (played briefly in December 1973, but released to the general public in February 1974), Coppola’s *The Godfather, Part II* and *The Conversation*, Polanski’s *Chinatown*, Brooks’ *Young Frankenstein*, Pakula’s *The Parallax View*, Altman’s *Thieves Like Us* and *California Split* and Cassavetes’ *A Woman Under the Influence*. In numerous cases, the film or films in question comprise the director’s finest effort.

The situation worldwide is too complex to summarize here, but it is certainly worth noting that the New German Cinema was at its

height in 1974 (R.W. Fassbinder made *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *Martha* and *Effi Briest*, Wim Wenders directed *Alice in the Cities* and Werner Herzog *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*). French and Italian filmmaking were already in the process of entering a steep decline, after the convulsions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but Bertrand Tavernier's *The Clockmaker*, Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* and Luchino Visconti's *Conversation Piece* are important. The Australian New Wave, which first came to prominence in the early 1970s through films like *Walkabout* and *Wake in Fright* (both 1971), was also about to make a major mark.

American society has undergone an immense and dramatic deterioration in the last half-century, which makes it all the more striking that the most insightful films of 1974 *already* directed the public's attention to the criminality, corruption and conspiracy that pervaded the ruling elite.

The films appeared in the midst of the Watergate scandal, but they also inevitably bore the influence, directly or indirectly, of a decade of political murders, the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark of the Black Panthers, George Jackson and more, not to mention the mass shootings at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970. The filmmakers came to maturity during the violent era of the neocolonial, imperialist Vietnam War, with its millions of casualties, and the mass anti-war movement that emerged in response.

It is no accident that sinister, even murderous plots by powerful elements dominate *Chinatown*, *The Parallax View*, *The Godfather, Part II* and *The Conversation*. A number of the films culminate in ferocious acts of police or other kinds of official violence (*Thieves Like Us*, *The Parallax View*, *Chinatown*, Steven Spielberg's *The Sugarland Express* and, less fatally, *The Last Detail*.) The film that is generally considered as having initiated "New Hollywood," *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), notoriously, if somewhat glamorously, concluded in a hail of official gunfire.

While recognizing the positive attributes of the 1974 films, there is no need to gloss over their limitations or even failings.

As we noted in the introduction to *The Sky Between the Leaves*, the "New Hollywood"

produced some fresh and innovative work, which at times took a searching look at official American institutions and mythologies. However, even the most non-conformist films suffered from a diluted interest in the concrete conditions and life of the working class, as well as a profound lack of awareness about the events that had shaped the previous half-century and therefore their own times.

These weaknesses were essential ingredients, more generally, of the middle class protest politics of the day. As we have noted a number of times, the "New Left" rejected a socialist orientation to the working class and avoided a historical reckoning—above all—with the Russian Revolution and the nature of Stalinism, either because the issues were too complex or because they hit a little too close to home.

In this regard, we include a comment on Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, both because of the anarchistic writer-director's more pronounced anti-capitalist views and because of the sway that the German student left politics of the time, with their component of Frankfurt School influence, held over him and his work.

As is well-known, perhaps a little too symmetrically, the appearance one year later, in 1975, of Spielberg's *Jaws*, in combination with the efforts of George Lucas (*American Graffiti*, *Star Wars*), ushered in a new era of massively promoted, expensively produced blockbusters. American filmmaking in the 1980s would enter its weakest decades in history.

No doubt, financial and technological changes played their role in this process, but the decisive factor was the social one, the political and ideological shift that occurred from the mid-1970s onward, especially in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the ending of conscription.

The working class had demonstrated its willingness to defend its interest everywhere in the years 1968–1975, but the absence of revolutionary leadership remained the critical question.

As the SEP *Historical and International Foundations* explains:

The old Stalinist and Social-Democratic labor and trade union bureaucracies utilized their positions of influence, with the critical assistance of the Pabloite tendencies, to divert, disorient and suppress mass struggles that threatened bourgeois rule. Situations with immense revolutionary potential were misdirected, defused, betrayed and led to defeat. ...

The inability of the working class to break through the log-jam created by its own organizations provided the bourgeoisie with the time it needed to stabilize and reorganize the fragile world order. ...

By late 1975 the international bourgeoisie was able to begin exploiting the social frustrations produced by the inability of the working class to implement a revolutionary socialist solution to the crisis.

Overwhelmed and confused by the reactionary turn of events, culminating in the coming to power of figures like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the film writers and directors, and leading performers, became demoralized or cynical in many cases, grew silent, made their peace with the status quo or disappeared into various forms of dissipation.

This does not detract from the contributions they made, which we begin to discuss today.



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