



CHAPTER 15

The 1960s: The Counterculture Strikes Back

YOUTH AND CHALLENGE

During the 1960s, war was waged on several fronts. From 1964, when North Vietnamese torpedo boats reportedly attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, to 1975, when the United States evacuated its military forces from Saigon, the United States, together with its South Vietnamese allies, fought the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese in Southeast Asia. On the home front, one generation of Americans battled another. Youth (generally considered to be those under 30) found itself in an ideological battle with age. They differed over not only the war but also a host of other issues such as sexual mores, race relations, lifestyle, and just plain style. They belonged to two different cultures. The older members (the “establishment”) and the youth movement liked different kinds of music, dressed differently, and wore their hair at different lengths. Indeed, hair became a symbol of the 1960s counterculture and served as a point of departure for one of the decade’s most popular stage musicals, *Hair*, the tribal

rock opera that ran on Broadway from 1968 to 1972. Hair became a running gag in the Beatles' first film, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). And it was hair that triggered the redneck violence against the hippie heroes in *Easy Rider* (1969).

The younger, postwar generation, known as baby boomers, had been raised according to the new permissiveness advocated by Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose *Baby and Child Care* had originally been published in 1946. Indeed, Spock himself subsequently took responsibility for his "children" and became a spokesperson for the antiwar movement in the 1960s. According to Vice President Spiro Agnew, the "problem children" of the 1960s were the fault of Dr. Spock, whose book, according to Agnew, "threw discipline out the window." The products of this revolution in childrearing grew up to challenge the repressive codes established by their more conservative elders, who had been brought up in the hard times of the Great Depression. The children of parents who fought the good and just war against Hitler and fascism in the 1940s questioned the American ideology that had involved the nation on what was apparently the wrong side of a seemingly unjust war in Southeast Asia. And they looked with suspicion on the appeals to patriotism that were used to defend that war.

THE KENNEDY ERA

"The New Frontier"

The 1960s began not with violent confrontation but with the orderly transfer of power from one generation to another. In 1961, 43-year-old John F. Kennedy, a liberal Democrat from Massachusetts, was sworn in as president of the United States, replacing 70-year-old Republican Dwight David Eisenhower. As the youngest president in American history, Kennedy brought the energy and intensity of youth to his program for a New Frontier in American political life. In his inaugural address, Kennedy noted that "the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans" and called for a new activism, appealing to Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you" but "what you can do for your country."

With Kennedy, a new emphasis on sophistication, style, and wit entered national politics. Jack and his wife Jackie became the ideal couple, and Kennedy's admirers likened his administration to King Arthur's mythical court of Camelot, casting him as both Arthur and Lancelot and Jackie as Queen Guenevere. The White House became their castle, and Washington was transformed into a utopian kingdom full of dreams about the creation of an ideal once-and-future world. Just prior to Kennedy's inauguration, in December 1960, Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe's musical, *Camelot*, had opened on Broadway. And Kennedy's New Frontier naturally evoked Camelot, a world governed by acts of chivalry, trust, passionate idealism, and romance.

With Kennedy, the style of government changed. Kennedy invited noted artists such as cellist Pablo Casals to play in the East Room of the White House. New England poet Robert Frost, who was asked to read one of his poems at the inauguration, became Kennedy's poet laureate. The president's interest in literature ranged from Frost and Shakespeare to Ian Fleming. Fleming's slickly written spy novels about the exploits of Secret Agent 007, James Bond, doubled in popularity after JFK's fascination with them became public knowledge. At the same time, Kennedy cultivated the image of a movie star, bringing glamour to the White House. The president socialized with members of the movie colony—with his "Rat Pack" buddies, including brother-in-law Peter Lawford, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, and with Marilyn Monroe.

However, the novelty of the Kennedy style did not necessarily make him the spokesperson for 1960s youth, who questioned the substance of his political program. With the notable exception of his creation of the Peace Corps, Kennedy's foreign policy won him few supporters in the new left student movement. His attempted invasion of Fidel Castro's Cuba, in April 1961, at the Bay of Pigs resulted in severe criticism of his tactics by student activists and others. His handling of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 escalated Cold War tensions and the danger of nuclear war, infuriating antinuclear protestors at home. Under Kennedy's leadership, the presence of American military advisers in Vietnam dramatically increased, expanding an involvement of Americans in Southeast Asia that would ultimately result in the Vietnam War.

The Civil Rights Movement

Kennedy's domestic policy, which focused attention on civil rights, was readily embraced by liberal high school and college students across the nation. The civil rights movement became the cornerstone of 1960s activism, setting an agenda and establishing a strategy of nonviolent intervention that would inform subsequent student protests against the Vietnam War and other political and social problems. But the civil rights movement was well under way even before Kennedy took office. In 1960, four black students staged a peaceful sit-in at an all-white lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. By the end of the year, these nonviolent protests had successfully integrated lunch counters in over 126 southern cities. In 1962, James Meredith became the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi, though he needed the assistance of federal marshals to attend classes. In support of demands for civil rights set by black organizations such as SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), black and white students marched on Washington in 1962 and 1963. They registered black voters in the South during the summers of 1963 and 1964; the latter became known as "Freedom Summer." In 1964, three civil rights workers named Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Cheney were murdered in Mississippi—a crime that became the subject of investigation in Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (1988).

After a summer of civil rights work in the South, in 1964 Mario Savio returned to Berkeley, where he set up a table to recruit additional volunteers. When university officials banned him from organizing on campus and outlawed all other political activity as well, Savio and others protested, launching the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. When eight student leaders were summarily suspended by the university administration, students using sit-in tactics developed by the civil rights movement in the South passively protested the university's violation of their freedom of speech. Over the course of the strike, 814 Free Speech Movement supporters were jailed before Berkeley faculty finally voted to permit political activity on campus.

Civil rights marches by Martin Luther King and others led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of color, race, religion, or national origin in public places, at the polls, and in housing. Non-violence, however, soon gave way to violence. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963. Blacks rioted in Harlem in the summer of 1964. Malcolm X was killed in February 1965. Blacks rioted in Watts in August 1965, and in Newark and Detroit in 1967. In 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panthers, a black militant organization that advocated violence as a means to secure black liberation and favored separatist objectives instead of integration. Martin Luther King was gunned down in April 1968, and Robert Kennedy was slain in June 1968.

Against the War

In the mid-1960s, as students shifted attention from purely domestic to foreign issues, they adopted the techniques of symbolic protest that had proven effective in the civil rights movement. In 1965, they organized a March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam, which drew national attention to the antiwar movement. By 1968, the escalation of the Vietnam War, the complicity of Columbia and various other universities with war research, and continuing racial injustice at home prompted students at Columbia University to escalate the sit-in into the strike. Students occupied administration buildings and other university property in an attempt to focus attention on the war and racism. When the administration had the students forcibly and violently removed by police, a strike ensued in which students protested the administration's action by shutting down the university. A number of other university campuses followed suit in 1968 and 1969, and in May of 1970, after President Nixon announced a further escalation of the war—an incursion of U.S. forces into Cambodia—there was a nationwide strike on over two hundred college campuses. At Kent State University, Ohio National Guardsmen fired into a crowd of student protestors, killing four of them and wounding nine others. Meanwhile, during the summer of 1968, antiwar protestors at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago were savagely beaten by police while network news cameras looked on. Live broadcast of the spectacle in the streets shocked home viewers, who were



Courtesy of M.G.M

Campus unrest and the student strike at Columbia University served as the basis for *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), which portrays police response to the student occupation of university buildings.

outraged at the excessive violence employed by the Chicago police in arresting the demonstrators. These events subsequently served as the background for Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969), which followed the movements of a fictional television news cameraman who was caught up in the police riots.

Liberation: The Women's Movement

Conflict resulting from generational and racial differences provided a broad background against which traditional relationships between the sexes underwent a reevaluation. In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she examined the ways women had been disempowered and repressed. Women in the new left soon found that the student movement was as sexist and patriarchal (that is, male-dominated) as the larger society and began to set up their own activist organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), which was formed in 1966 with Friedan as its president.

For feminists, the traditional oppression of women was seen as rooted in the institution of marriage, which confined them to the home, and in the dominance of certain cultural assumptions about women, which excluded middle-class women from the workplace and restricted working-class women to a narrow range of permissible jobs. Certain sectors of this institutional oppression relaxed somewhat in the 1960s. The availability of the first reliable oral contraceptive for women (introduced with the marketing of Enovid in

1960) gave women more control over their bodies than they had ever known before, enabling them to choose whether or not to have children and when to have them. Political activism during the 1960s resulted in the overthrow of anti-abortion laws in a number of states, with New York at the forefront in 1969.

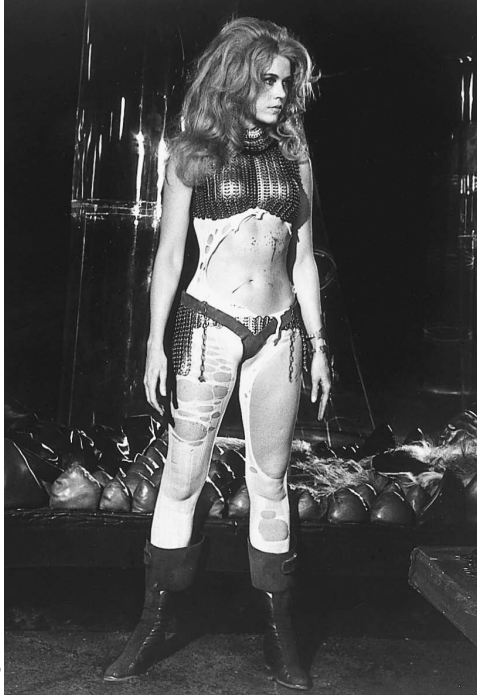
At the same time, more and more women enrolled in and graduated from college; their numbers increased by 47 percent in the 1950s and 168 percent in the 1960s. As college graduates, women entered the workforce qualified for white-collar jobs traditionally held by men. Working women had been a factor in the American economy throughout the twentieth century, but middle-class women had never entered the workforce in great numbers prior to the 1960s. The women's movement served as an advocate for equality in the workplace, demanding equal pay for equal work, and campaigned to make women economically self-sufficient.

Yet women's liberation entailed new forms of subjugation. Radical feminists complained that the sexual revolution proved more of a benefit for men, who had a field day, than it did for women, who became victims of sexual exploitation. The Pill may have liberated women, but it also changed the attitudes of men toward women, who were now expected to be more accessible than they had been in the past. In other words, it became harder for a woman to say no to a man. Nor was the trade-in of unpaid domestic drudgery as a homemaker for a 40-hour workweek necessarily liberating, especially when men began to expect women to be breadwinners and lovers as well as homemakers.

The 1960s saw some success for the civil rights movement, which put an end to (overt) segregation in schools, public places, and housing, and for the antiwar movement, which helped to force American troops out of Vietnam in the 1970s. The limited success of the women's movement, however, was undercut by women's larger disempowerment within patriarchy. The women's movement's chief political victory proved to be the legalization of abortion, which came in the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision. Its chief political failure was its inability to secure the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have guaranteed women the same rights enjoyed by men under the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

PROJECTIONS: WOMEN ON THE SCREEN

As far as the films of the 1960s were concerned, the women's movement became the sexual revolution; that is, its political agenda was translated into a series of superficial changes in sexual mores. Women were depicted as sexually liberated or aggressive. But Hollywood's women were modeled less after the revolutionary women who fought for equal rights in NOW than after the centerfolds found in the misogynistic pages of *Playboy*. *Lolita* (1962) and *Cleopatra* and *Irma la Douce* (both 1963) celebrate the sexual power of the new woman, as



Rutgers Cinema Studies

Sexual politics were translated onto the screen in terms of sexual display: for example, Jane Fonda as the title character in *Barbarella* (1968).

does *Barbarella* (1968), the futuristic film in which Jane Fonda revolutionizes life in the forty-first century by making love “the old-fashioned way.” James Bond films introduced a host of sexually available women, including Pussy Galore (Honor Blackman) in *Goldfinger* (1964). The sexual revolution culminated (for men, at least) in the wife-swapping craze celebrated in *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969).

Hollywood tended to ignore the women’s movement. Parts for women remained stereotypical: actresses played either madonnas or whores. The only working women were motherly governesses or prostitutes. Julie Andrews enjoyed a spectacular career as the former, playing nannies in both *Mary Poppins* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). Jane Fonda excelled as the latter, playing an unfaithful wife in *The Chase* (1966) and prostitutes in *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962) and *Klute* (1971). As one of the few white-collar women workers, Doris Day successfully straddled the fence in *Lover Come Back* (1961), in which she played an account executive for an advertising firm. But she also paid the price, winning the screen persona of a sexual tease (that is, a madonna-whore).

It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that white- and blue-collar working women made it back to the screen. Films such as *Network* (1976), in

which Faye Dunaway played a ruthless television executive; *The China Syndrome* (1979), in which Jane Fonda played a television reporter; and *Norma Rae* (1979), in which Sally Field was a textile worker, reflected the real-life achievements of professional working women. They led the way for the new image of the independent woman that dominated the 1980s in films starring actresses such as Sigourney Weaver, Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Kathleen Turner, Whoopi Goldberg, Debra Winger, Cher, Sissy Spacek, Diane Keaton, Bette Midler, Shelley Long, and Melanie Griffith. Yet the late-1970s and 1980s also witnessed a dramatic backlash against women's liberation as seen in films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), in which a woman who abandons her husband and child in an attempt to find herself is unsympathetically portrayed as selfish, and *Baby Boom* (1987), in which a female business executive can find true happiness only after she gives up her job to devote herself exclusively to taking care of her adopted child.

YOUTH FILMS: ACTIVISM AS LIFESTYLE

Women's liberation was not the only movement to fare poorly in its representation on the movie screen. With one or two exceptions—that is, in certain noncommercial works produced by the alternative media—the student movement tended to find itself reduced to confused college kids whose ideas were halfbaked and who were drawn to political activism and protests in search of sex and cheap thrills. Documentary and student filmmakers brought some seriousness to the underlying issues, covering peace marches, protests, and student strikes, while radical filmmaking groups such as New York Newsreel and San Francisco Newsreel attempted to represent the perspectives of minority groups and student radicals in films such as *Black Panther* (1968) and *Columbia Revolt* (1968). *Medium Cool* (1969), which was made independently but distributed by Paramount, straddled the fence between documentary honesty and Hollywood glitz, combining the raw fervor of the new left with the stylish trappings of old-fashioned narrative cinema. It deals with the adventures of a television news cameraman whose encounters with black militants, affair with a woman whose husband was killed in Vietnam, and experiences during the police riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention radicalize him.

At the very end of the decade, the student protest movement gave rise to a number of fairly conventional Hollywood features designed to exploit the new youth market. In 1970, after the astounding commercial success of youth-cult movies such as *The Graduate* (1967), which looks at postgraduation career angst, and *Easy Rider* (1969), which glamorizes counterculture lifestyles, the major studios released a series of films concerned with student protest, including *Zabriskie Point*, *Getting Straight*, and *The Strawberry Statement*, as well as *The Magic Garden of Stanley Sweetheart*, *The Revolutionary*, and *R. P. M.* (all 1970).



Courtesy of M.G.M

Student radicals in jail: Mark Frechette (*left*) embodies the hipness of alienated youth in *Zabriskie Point* (1970).

Pursuit of Happiness (1971) rounded out this unusual, short-lived subgenre dealing with the equally short-lived student movement. In *The Strawberry Statement*, which was based on the Columbia protests, a student becomes involved in campus demonstrations because he is interested in a girl who belongs to the movement. The hero in *Getting Straight*, a former civil rights worker and Vietnam veteran, returns to school, discovers that demonstrations are sexy, and becomes a committed radical only when victimized by the bureaucracy of the academic establishment and unprovoked police brutality.

Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* similarly obscured the underlying political issues that prompted student unrest. The film reduced student radicalism into an extremely generalized and universal male anxiety, suggesting that the age-old identity crisis is what was at the bottom of student unrest in 1960s America. Its hero, an innocent suspect in a cop killing, sets off on a cross-country flight in a stolen airplane. Distracted from his goal by a girl driving on the highway below, he lands and joins her on her trip to Zabriskie Point in Death Valley. At the end of this absurdist reworking of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), he returns to California to surrender to the police but is killed before he can give himself up. The circular story pattern demonstrates the futility of student activism, and its politically incorrect conclusion suggests that the pleasures of mental revolt can be more satisfying than material action in the real world. The film ends with the girl's fantasmatic, imaginary destruction of the symbols of American materialism: as she looks at the house of her bourgeois boss, it explodes, and close-up slow-motion shots of commercial products fill the screen. In other words, the heroine's psychic act of rebellion proves to be as powerful as—even more powerful than—the hero's physical acts of rebellion.

"SOLVING" THE RACE PROBLEM

Neither the women's movement nor the student movement found adequate representation in mainstream American cinema. The controversial political issues they both raised were transformed into the melodramatic stuff of conventional film narratives. Equal rights for women became sexual liberation, and war resistance became existential adolescent angst. Race relations tended to be dealt with a bit more directly, but even well-meaning liberal films such as Stanley Kramer's Academy Award-winning *The Defiant Ones* (1958) "solved" racial problems without uncovering their root causes in the fundamental political and economic inequality between blacks and whites. In the Kramer film, two convicts—one a white bigot (Tony Curtis) and the other a bitter black (Sidney Poitier)—flee the police while handcuffed together, learning that the survival of each depends upon the assistance and cooperation of the other.

Hollywood films of the 1960s exposed bigotry and racism but did so without exposing their sources. The major studios ignored the *politics* of racism. Their films contained no sit-ins, no marches on Washington, no campaigns to register black voters, no attempts to integrate schools and colleges, and no exposés of racial discrimination in housing. There was one notable exception in this silence. *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), an adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry's play, treated the attempts of a black family to move into a white neighborhood in Chicago.

Hollywood concerned itself with racism but did so on its own terms. For Hollywood, racism was not an economic or political but rather a human problem. As such, it could be solved through dramatic means. It was isolated, identified, recognized, and rejected; an Aristotelean catharsis then followed, during which a tenuous accord was reestablished between the races, suggesting that all would be well in the future. Mere acknowledgment of the problem meant that the problem was somehow solved. Sidney Poitier emerged as a perfect problem solver. His skin color provoked racism, but his class status solved whatever problems whites had with his blackness. Playing middle- and upper-middle-class professionals such as a journalist (*The Bedford Incident*, 1965), a doctor (*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, 1967), an engineer-schoolteacher (*To Sir, With Love*, 1967), and a homicide detective (*In the Heat of the Night*, 1967), Poitier is equal, if not superior, to any of his white antagonists, who are forced to recognize his abilities and to purge themselves of their own racism.

In other instances, the cure for racism proves to be white paternalism. The liberal lawyer (Gregory Peck) in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) intervenes to save an innocent black man (Brock Peters) from a white lynch mob, as does a young white priest in *The Cardinal* (1963). Toward the end of the decade, blacks and whites were seen onscreen working together against a common enemy, as was the case in *Hurry Sundown* (1967), in which two young southern farmers—one

white and one black—join forces to defeat a white bigot who wants their land. And in *Change of Habit* (1969), black and white nuns work together at a free clinic in the slums to help disadvantaged blacks and Hispanics. These latter two films dramatized the cooperation that takes place between blacks and whites working in the civil rights movement but removed this spirit to a different time (*Sundown* is set in the post-World War II South) and place (*Habit* is set in a northern city). In this way, the films were made more marketable to a contemporary southern (white) audience not quite ready for films dealing with events from the recent past or with ongoing civil rights issues.

ON THE OFFENSIVE: MONEY, FILMS, AND CHANGING MORALITY

Controversy and Conservatism

The political conservatism of Hollywood in the 1960s was, in large part, driven by economics. The industry was still making films for a general audience, in spite of a growing awareness that the traditional moviegoing audiences of the past had begun to disappear in the 1950s, replaced by a younger, better-educated, and more diverse audience. The economics of the general audience explained Hollywood's reluctance to tackle subject matter that was politically controversial. It might have offended some sector of the viewing public—such as the South. The big money-making films of the 1960s reflected this conservative taste.

In the previous decade, the restriction on controversial social subjects such as sex and drugs had been relaxed. But the films that spearheaded this challenge to the Production Code—*The Moon Is Blue* (1953), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), and *Baby Doll* (1956)—did not rank among the top 10 box-office attractions of their respective years. Sex continued to sell in the 1960s with the release of films such as *Lolita* (1962), *Cleopatra* and *Irma La Douce* (1963), and James Bond films, especially *Goldfinger* (1964), *Thunderball* (1965), and *You Only Live Twice* (1967). But other forms of social controversy, such as violence, drug use, and the open rebellion of contemporary youth against the conformity of the older generation, remained relegated to the marginal status of cheaply made exploitation films. As such, they rarely appeared on the big screens of major theaters and, thus, rarely made enormous sums of money. But all of this began to change in the late 1960s, when a viable market opened up for exploitation films—that is, for films containing sex, violence, drugs, and willfully disobedient youth (of the sort found in low-budget teen pics of the 1950s and 1960s made for drive-ins by Roger Corman and American International Pictures). The change was gradual.

A New Vocabulary

In 1966, Warner Bros. tested the waters, as it were, with its film adaptation of noted playwright Edward Albee's prestigious play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Directed by Broadway director Mike Nichols, it features language that violated even the tolerant Production Code of the mid-1950s. Its stars, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, traded expletives that had never been heard on the screens of first-run theaters before. There are eleven "goddamns," five "sons of bitches," and seven "bastards" as well as "screw you," "hump the hostess," and "up yours." Rated R (restricted to those over the age of 18), the film grossed over \$14.5 million and was nominated for thirteen Academy Awards, winning five. But Albee was hardly exploitation material.

The next year, Avco/Embassy earned more than \$44 million with another Mike Nichols picture, *The Graduate* (1967). Though its hero, played by Dustin Hoffman, engages in an adulterous relationship with the sex-starved wife of his father's business partner, the film violates few taboos. Yet, it foregrounds the situation of disaffected youth in ways that appealed to the under-30 market. None of the adults in the film understand Hoffman's alienation; all of them—including his parents and the infamous Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) who seduces him—try to manipulate him or shape his future. But he simply refuses and, finally, rebels against them.

Live Fast, Die Young: *Bonnie and Clyde*

That same year, Warner Bros. released *Bonnie and Clyde*, an outlaw-couple film that earned almost \$30 million. Combining large doses of sex (or, more accurately, sexual frustration) and violence, the film appealed to an emerging audience that was both young and antiestablishment. Posters and other publicity material for the film proclaimed that its central characters were

Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) poses for a photograph in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).



Courtesy of Warner Bros.

“young,” “in love,” and “kill[ed] people.” Depression-era folk heroes cast in the mold of figures from populist mythology such as Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde robbed the banks that foreclosed on rural farmers. At the same time, in living out their lives moment by moment, they looked back to the more recent, existentialist antiheroes of the films of the French New Wave, such as the Jean-Paul Belmondo character in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1959), who was also an outlaw on the run.

Bonnie and Clyde’s cross-country spree captured the spirit and energy of the youth movement and epitomized the revolt against institutional authority that found support among young moviegoers of the mid-1960s. The stars of the film, Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, even made the cover of *Time* magazine. The characters they played were immediately appropriated as cult figures by the new generation of college-age audiences, who were fascinated by their style—by the way they dressed, by the way they talked, by the way they defied custom and convention, and by the way they died. Young men and women began wearing fashions from the 1930s, and the “Bonnie Parker look”—which consisted of a V-neck sweater, miniskirt, shoulder-length hair, and beret—became the rage in women’s fashion magazines.

And audiences were profoundly moved by the romantic way in which Bonnie and Clyde died. Caught in a police ambush in a hail of bullets, they first look at one another and then rush for one final embrace. Filmed in slow motion, they jerk spasmodically as the bullets tear into them. It is as if they are in the throes of some great passion or of some ultimate sexual experience. Overnight, they became the counterculture’s Romeo and Juliet—star-crossed lovers who lived fast, died young, and left good-looking (but bullet-ridden) corpses.

The increasing violence of mainstream Hollywood films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* tested the limits of what had traditionally been permissible on the American screen. The *New York Times* critic, Bosley Crowther, condemned the film’s violence and apparent glorification of criminals—two aspects of the film that clearly violated the old Production Code. But the cultural context in which the film had been made differed dramatically from that in which the original Production Code was written (ca. 1930). John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963, and his spasms as the bullets entered his body had been recorded on film and seen by millions of Americans who also saw Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald in front of television cameras. By the mid-1960s, the Vietnam War had begun to escalate, along with its nightly coverage on the network news. Finally, in the spring of 1968, a few months after the film’s release, Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated; RFK’s shooting was also captured, in part, by television cameras and replayed for shocked audiences.

Sex, Violence, and Ratings

The sexual explicitness of both foreign and domestic films, such as *La Dolce Vita* (Italy, 1960), *Two Women* (Italy, 1961), *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964), and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, increased, responding, in part, to changes in the popular

perception of acceptable sexual behavior. However, what was acceptable in one culture or community was not necessarily acceptable in another. In April 1968, the Supreme Court delivered two decisions that proved crucial to ongoing debates over the definition of obscenity, permitting local communities to establish their own censorship guidelines. These changes immediately prompted the MPPA (the Motion Picture Producers Association) to transform its timeworn Production Code review process (which was preliminary to the granting or withholding of its seal of approval) into a ratings system.

By clearly distinguishing films from one another in terms of the potentially objectionable nature of their content, the film industry hoped to head off any attempts on the part of local governments to establish their own forms of censorship. At the same time, the new ratings system provided categories for films that would never have received seals of approval in the past. By acknowledging the existence of such films, the MPPA officially admitted them into the marketplace, paving the way for more American films dealing with mature subject matter.

Under the ratings system, which took effect on November 1, 1968, a “G” means that a film is suitable for general audiences; all ages are admitted. An “M” (which was subsequently changed to “PG”) designates the film as suitable for mature audiences; that is, for adults and, subject to the guidance of their parents or to “parental guidance” (PG), for children. An “R” means that a film is restricted to adults; children under age 16 (an age that was later changed to 17) are admitted only if accompanied by an adult. In the case of an “X” rating, no one under 16 (later 17) is admitted. The PG rating was subsequently modified, broken down into PG and PG-13, after the release of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), which contained graphic violence that was subsequently deemed unsuitable for children under age 13.

In 1969, sex and violence hit unprecedented heights on the screen. *Sexual Freedom in Denmark*, a foreign import, became the first pornographic film to play in a commercial theater in New York; previously, porno films had been shown only in theaters reserved exclusively for hard-core films. Another import, *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, pulled in \$6.5 million in rentals that year at the box office, becoming the first porno film to rank among the top 12 grossing attractions of the year. Hollywood also tested the waters. *Midnight Cowboy*, a prestige production directed by John Schlesinger and released by United Artists, contained an explicit sex act, which automatically earned it an X, making it one of the first big-budget Hollywood films to receive that rating. In spite of the X, which not only limited admission to it but also restricted advertising for it (many papers, including the *New York Times*, refused to accept advertising for X-rated films), *Midnight Cowboy* earned over \$20 million and won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. That same year saw the release of Sam Peckinpah’s apocalyptic Western, *The Wild Bunch*, which was rated R because of the violence of its opening and closing gun battles and bloodbaths. Here, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, slow motion aestheticized the violence, making it both more graphic and more balletic.



Courtesy of Columbia

Dennis Hopper (left), Peter Fonda, and Jack Nicholson go looking for America in *Easy Rider* (1969).

The Great Teen Pic: *Easy Rider*

Drugs, sex, and violence provided much of the spectacle that turned actor-director Dennis Hopper's low-budget (\$555,000) R-rated motorcycle picture, *Easy Rider* (1969), into a big hit that grossed over \$60 million worldwide. Although distributed by Columbia, the film is essentially an exploitation teen pic, modeled on AIP (American International Pictures) biker movies such as *The Wild Angels* (1966). Yet, at the same time, the film's intentions went beyond those of the conventional B picture. It looks like an underground film, employing stylistic practices found in the nonnarrative, experimental cinema of Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, and Kenneth Anger. Hopper used flash frames and cuts that flash forward from one sequence to the next; shots filmed with a hand-held camera; squeezed, anamorphic images; and a hallucinatory, psychedelic dream sequence. Advertisements for the film, which described its theme, give some sense of its artistic ambitions: "A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere." The film's soundtrack, punctuated with music from Steppenwolf, the Byrds, the Band, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, and other major rock bands, guaranteed its credentials as a counterculture teen pic and established a model for the use of rock-and-roll songs as nondiegetic underscoring in films as diverse as *Zabriskie Point* and *Mean Streets* (1973).

This rambling motorcycle film serves as a picaresque portrait of 1960s America, ranging from utopian hippie communes to bigoted small-town communities in the South. The film's young heroes become countercultural knights in search of a contemporary Holy Grail, journeying from drug deals

in the modern wasteland of Los Angeles to a spaced-out Mardi Gras in the Old World city of New Orleans, where, under the influence of LSD, the film's heroes wander through a graveyard. The characters' idealistic search for the American dream proves to be a failure—or, as Wyatt (Peter Fonda) confesses to Billy (Dennis Hopper) near the end of their trip, "We blew it." They search, but they find nothing.

TRANSFORMATION: THE COUNTERCULTURE GOES MAINSTREAM

The financial success of *Easy Rider* established the existence of a specialized youth market. By the mid-1960s, the traditional movie audience had changed from a middle-aged, high-school-educated, middle- to lower-class viewing group to a younger, college-educated, more affluent, middle-class audience. By the mid-1970s, 76 percent of all moviegoers were under the age of 30; the majority of these—64 percent—came from affluent families and had gone to college. *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* had suggested that a younger audience with a taste for more adult themes could dramatically increase the box-office revenues for a major studio production. But *Easy Rider* proved that even a cheaply made exploitation film that was pitched solely to the college-age crowd could make a great deal of money.

Easy Rider led to a series of youth cult films, including a number of films from those who had been involved in its production. Producer Bert Schneider parlayed the success of *Easy Rider* into a production company (BBS Productions), a distribution deal with Columbia, and a string of films, including *Five Easy Pieces* (1970); *The Last Picture Show* (1971); *A Safe Place* (1971); *Drive, He Said* (1971); *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972); and finally, the antiwar Academy Award-winning documentary about Vietnam, *Hearts and Minds* (1974).

Director Dennis Hopper was given a blank check to make his next film, *The Last Movie* (1971), a self-reflexive, antiestablishment Western about the exploitation of third world cultures that was filmed and set in a remote Indian village in Peru. Jack Nicholson, who played a cameo role in *Easy Rider* that brought him instant stardom, was cast as a hippie in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970) and played a series of offbeat types in *Five Easy Pieces*; *Carnal Knowledge* (1971); *A Safe Place*; *Drive, He Said*; and *The King of Marvin Gardens* before landing his starring, Academy Award-winning role as the nonconformist mental patient, Randle P. McMurphy, in the film adaptation of the ultimate 1960s antiauthoritarian novel, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975).

In the case of Hopper, Nicholson, and Schneider, the counterculture moved into the mainstream of Hollywood production, though only Nicholson remained there for any length of time. A handful of directors, such as Michelangelo Antonioni (*Blow-Up*, 1966; *Zabriskie Point*) and Arthur Penn (*Bonnie and Clyde*,

1967; *Alice's Restaurant*, 1969; *Little Big Man*, 1970), gave dramatic form to the lifestyles and beliefs of the dissident generation that fought war abroad and racism at home, but the majority of films that tried to deal with the 1960s youth culture, the civil rights movement, the student protest movement, or the women's movement depoliticized their agendas or disguised them in such a way that they no longer possessed any confrontational power.

As the films became more and more expensive and less and less exploitative, they lost their dissident status as attacks on the mainstream from the fringe and became mainstream themselves. Even *Easy Rider* softened the politics of the antiestablishment left and focused on the style rather than the content of the revolt of youth in the 1960s. Westerns such as *Little Big Man*, *Soldier Blue* (1970), and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) implicitly criticized American involvement in Vietnam by suggesting that the genocidal warfare by whites against Native Americans in the old West was comparable to that of whites against Asians in Southeast Asia. But their antiwar stance remained hidden beneath the surface of seemingly conventional genre pictures. In other words, in spite of the production of films specifically targeted for younger audiences, it was through the disguised medium of genre pictures that the counterculture got its message into the mainstream of Hollywood production.

BLAXPLOITATION AND BEYOND

An Emerging Black Audience

One or two of the most radical films of this era came disguised as genre vehicles. In fact, it was again in the area of exploitation films that the counterculture found the least compromised and most powerful presentations of its political concerns. The most compelling instance of this was found in the short-lived cycle of black action pictures made between 1970 and 1973, which were referred to as blaxploitation films by contemporary trade magazines such as *Variety*. The phenomenal success of three Sidney Poitier films made in 1967—*In the Heat of the Night*; *To Sir, With Love*; and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*—indicated to Hollywood that black was not only beautiful but box office as well. Polls indicated that one-quarter of all regular moviegoers in the late 1960s and early 1970s were black. This statistic was reinforced by the box-office figures for Poitier's films, but it was confirmed by the amazing success of a number of routine, cheaply made genre pictures starring relatively unknown black actors—pictures that made money in the wake of Poitier's success.

Between 1970 and 1972, over fifty feature films were made specifically for a black audience. In 1970, United Artists began to cultivate this emerging black audience with its release of Ossie Davis's adaptation of a Chester Himes detective novel, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*—starring Godfrey Cambridge,

Raymond St. Jacques, and Calvin Lockhart—which earned a hefty \$15.4 million, largely in urban markets where there were large numbers of black viewers. In 1971, Melvin Van Peebles’s independently made, outlaw-on-the-run, sexually explicit, X-rated picture *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, which cost only \$500,000 to make, earned over \$10 million. Also in 1971, *Shaft*, a private eye picture directed by Gordon Parks and released by M-G-M, grossed over \$7 million.

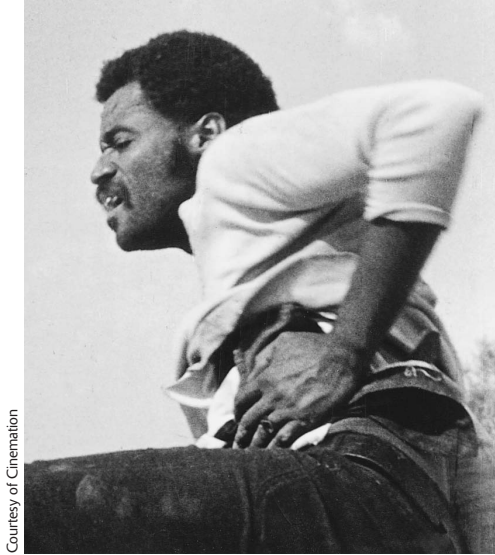
Poitier’s big-budget A pictures were targeted at a general audience comprised of both blacks and whites who shared the more or less middle-class values embodied in Poitier’s screen persona. This was the same audience that came to see Diana Ross play Billie Holiday in Paramount’s lavish production of *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) and to see Cicely Tyson as a southern sharecropper in *Sounder* (1972). Both *Lady* and *Sounder* were directed by whites and earned over \$9 million each in rentals. The boom in big-budget black films went bust in 1978 with the disappointing returns from the filmed adaptation of the Broadway Musical, *The Wiz*, starring Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Nipsey Russell, and others. The film, which cost Universal more than \$24 million to produce, returned only \$13.6 million in domestic rentals, emerging as one of the biggest flops of the late 1970s.

Blaxploitation films, on the other hand, were inexpensively made exploitation films pitched primarily to middle- and lower-class urban blacks. White audiences raised on a steady diet of the sex and violence found in gangster films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), war films such as *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), and Westerns such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) were drawn in considerable numbers to black crime pictures, which featured similarly strong doses of sex, violence, and gritty realism. Though blaxploitation films were often merely the reworking and recasting of traditionally white stories, plot situations, and character types for black audiences with black actors, many of them nonetheless addressed the concerns of the black community in ways that were unprecedented on the American screen.

A Revolutionary Film: *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*

Sweet Sweetback (1971)—which was produced, written, edited, scored, and directed by its star, Melvin Van Peebles—emerged as one of the most revolutionary films of this era. The film’s hero evolves from a cynical, self-absorbed, morally corrupt superstud into an angry black militant. Sweetback becomes a political outlaw when he intervenes on behalf of a black radical who is being beaten by the police. He fights back and seriously wounds two cops by hitting them on the head with his handcuffs. The radicalized figure of Sweetback emerges as a cult hero for the Black Power movement. Black Panther chief, Huey Newton, proclaimed the film “the first truly revolutionary Black film made.”

Like the hero of Godard’s *Breathless*, Sweetback is an outlaw on the run. But his rebelliousness is more political than existential—he resists white authority on behalf of the larger, oppressed black community whom he realizes he now represents. Presenting Sweetback’s flight from the law in the form of a



Courtesy of Cinematation

Pursued by the Los Angeles police, Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles) becomes a black folk hero in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971).

contemporary runaway slave narrative, Van Peebles devotes considerable footage to scenes of his hero running across various landscapes, and signals Sweetback's escape to freedom with shots of the dead police bloodhounds he killed. By the end of the film, Sweetback has crossed the border into Mexico, where (the film suggests) he will recover from his wounds and continue his struggle against the white establishment. The film ends with a title that promises things to come: "A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES."

Radical hostility underscores many blaxploitation films in which whites tend to be cast as bigots and villains. Even in Poitier's first film as a director, *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), black homesteaders are tracked down and ruthlessly slaughtered by white bounty hunters. Their sole allies prove to be another oppressed group, Indians, who ride to their rescue at the last minute, playing the part usually performed by the U.S. Cavalry, who rescue settlers from attacking Indians in countless white Westerns. White police officers, like Mattelli (Anthony Quinn) in *Across 110th Street* (1972) and McKinney in *Black Caesar* (1973), tend to be corrupt and brutally racist cops who take bribes from black gangsters and who abuse their authority as police officers to beat up defenseless blacks.

Outlaws or Role Models?

Black Caesar, directed by the white Larry Cohen, serves as an allegory for racial conflict. Its hero, Tommy Gibbs (Fred Williamson), rises from shoeshine boy to small-time hood to hitman for the Mafia. His rise to power is symbolized by his overthrow of the white lawyer for whom his mother worked as a maid. Gibbs

takes the lawyer's place, buying him out of his apartment and even buying the clothes off his back; then he "frees" his own mother from servitude. Gibbs's quest for power leads him to take on the Mafia itself. He and his henchmen wipe out the Mafia family for whom he works and take their place.

Near the end of the film, in a showdown with McKinney, the white cop picks up a handy shoeshine box—the film's first symbol of black oppression by whites—and begins to beat Gibbs with it. Though the hero ultimately defeats the representatives of white power and racism—the Mafia and McKinney—he nonetheless falls from power himself in traditional gangster fashion. Abandoned by friends and family and wounded in a series of gun battles with the Mafia who have wiped out his gang, Gibbs (suddenly vulnerable for the first time in his life) is knifed to death in the rubble of a slum tenement by a gang of black teenagers.

Critics in the black community, including representatives from the NAACP, complained that the heroes of blaxploitation films did not represent the black community in a positive manner. These heroes tended to be violent criminals (*Black Caesar*), superstars and pimps (*Sweet Sweetback*), or drug dealers (*Superfly*, 1972). The title characters in *Shaft* (1971) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) proved to be more traditional heroes, working as a private detective and a government agent, respectively. In fact, *Cleopatra Jones* provided an image of black womanhood that was considerably more liberated than that found in other blaxploitation films. And the black policeman in *Across 110th Street*, Pope (Yaphet Kotto), is steadfastly incorruptible. But the criminality of most black heroes made them unacceptable to middle-class black audiences.

However, blaxploitation heroes epitomized the outlaw status that the more aggressive and revolutionary members of the Black Power movement enjoyed in the eyes of both the black and white middle class. In other words, it was perversely appropriate for the black counterculture to find itself identifying with, and identified as, outlaws. Thus, while the white counterculture identified with Bonnie and Clyde or with the drug-dealing antiheroes of *Easy Rider*, black (and white) revolutionaries made folk heroes out of black outlaws who overthrow white authority. Though the majority of Hollywood productions garbled the message of the counterculture, it found a voice—albeit marginal—in a handful of exploitation films that permitted it to strike back against the more conservative mainstream.

SPLIT SCREEN: THE TWO 1960S

In *Field of Dreams* (1989), the heroine (Amy Madigan) lashes out during a PTA meeting at a conservative neighbor who wants to ban the books of a (fictional) radical black writer, Terence Mann (James Earl Jones), who was an inspiration to the youth movement in the 1960s. She accuses the would-be book burner of

never having experienced the 60s, insisting that, instead, she had had two 50s and then had gone right on to the 70s. The 1960s has come to mean the civil rights, student protest, antiwar, and women's liberation movements. It has also become the stuff of nostalgia for television sitcoms such as *The Wonder Years*, which presented the 1960s as an age of innocence and idealism.

But the 1960s cannot be so easily labeled. For moviegoers, there were at least two 1960s. There was a 1960s for the conservative, middle-aged, middle-class mainstream who went to big-budget historical spectacles, lavish musicals, Doris Day and Rock Hudson sex comedies, Disney family pictures, and cartoonlike, gadget-filled James Bond spy thrillers. This 1960s was essentially the second of the two 1950s referred to by Amy Madigan in *Field of Dreams*. But there was also a different 1960s for a younger, more liberal, middle- and lower-class audience—the audience that was moved by the books of writers like the fictional Terence Mann. These viewers were gradually drawn away from their parents' movies to films such as *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Easy Rider* that attempted to address an under-30 age group. For them, the 1960s began sometime after JFK's assassination—after the nostalgic days of Buddy Holly and before the fanatic hysteria that greeted the arrival of the Beatles in the United States. In other words, the 1960s began, for them, when the happy days depicted in George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973) came to a close—at the end of the summer of 1962. For this generation of moviegoers, the 1960s stretched beyond the end of the decade into the early 1970s and lasted until the end of the Vietnam War. But their movies did not catch up with them until the late 1960s. Even when they did, few films—with the possible exception of the animated Beatles' film *Yellow Submarine* (1968)—conveyed the spaced-out, utopian pacifism of the hippies or flower children who followed Timothy Leary's advice, took LSD, and “tuned in, turned on, and dropped out.” Nor did many major Hollywood productions capture the anger or intensity of the new left, the antiwar movement, or black militants.

By the mid-1970s, the cynicism of Dr. Spock's baby boomers had won the day. A number of their parents' movies—all of them musicals—began to flop one after the other at the box office, beginning with *Dr. Dolittle* (1967), which cost \$20 million and earned \$6 million; then *Star!* (1968), which cost \$15 million and earned \$4 million; *Hello, Dolly!* (1969), which cost \$24 million and earned \$15 million; and *Darling Lili* (1970), which cost \$22 million and earned only \$3 million. Meanwhile, films for the college-age crowd became more and more popular, with *The Graduate* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and *Easy Rider* (1969) returning huge profits to their producers. Bitter social satires and genre send-ups—such as Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971); Mike Nichols' adaptation of Joseph Heller's comic novel about military bureaucracy, *Catch-22* (1970); Arthur Penn's anti-Western, *Little Big Man* (1970); and Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess's study of amorality, violence, and repression, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)—found a ready audience among disenchanted, increasingly skeptical youth who had been raised on the black humor of nightclub comedian Lenny

Bruce, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, and novelists Terry Southern, Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

REJUVENATION

Hollywood filmmaking slowly adjusted to its new audience in the 1960s, but, for many, the system moved too slowly. The majority of those who produced, wrote, and directed motion pictures in the 1960s were themselves products of much earlier eras. As Richard Corliss noted, “For most of the Sixties, movies were a business for middle-aged (or old) men: from 1957 to 1966, the Best Film Oscar went to movies directed by men whose average age was 52.” Within ten years, that statistic had changed, and the average age of Oscar-winning (still male) directors had fallen to 38. During the early 1970s, a new generation of filmmakers appeared—filmmakers who had gone to film school in the 1960s and who therefore belonged to that generation of filmgoers: Francis Ford Coppola (UCLA, 1958–1968); George Lucas (USC, ca. 1967); Brian De Palma (Columbia, 1962; Sarah Lawrence, 1964); Steven Spielberg (California State, ca. 1968); and Martin Scorsese (NYU, 1964, 1966).

Although products of the 1960s, these filmmakers came from varied backgrounds and represented a broad political spectrum. De Palma had roots in the 1960s counterculture that cropped up in both *Greetings* (1968), which deals with the draft and the antiwar movement, and its sequel, *Hi, Mom!* (1970), which contains a powerful sequence dealing with race relations. Coppola, on the other hand, eludes easy categorization. His script for *Patton* (1970) combined idolatry for the World War II military hero with a sympathetic critique of the general’s authoritarian behavior. Coppola described the Mafia in *The Godfather* (1972) as “a metaphor for America” and suggested that his film was an exposé of the greed and violence that underlie the capitalist system. But, in exposing the criminal underworld’s corruption and abuse of power, Coppola also celebrated the family values, loyalty, and sense of justice that lay at the heart of the charisma that made the Corleones attractive to audiences.

Although Hollywood’s filmmakers had become younger, the audiences for Hollywood films had grown even younger still. By the mid-1970s, almost half of the moviegoing public was between the ages of 12 and 20. In other words, the college-age spectators of the 1960s had given way to a high school-age audience in the 1970s. By the end of the 1970s, the five top-grossing films of all time—*Star Wars*, *Jaws*, *The Godfather*, *Grease*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—had all been directed by men under the age of 35. But the combination of young directors and even younger audiences had resulted in a cinema that was stylistically youthful and inventive but politically conservative. Exploitation-type genre films continued to dominate the marketplace, but in the 1970s they cost much more to make, and much more was at risk if they failed. As a

result, their potential for subversive statements had been severely restricted. If, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the counterculture had struck back, then by the mid-1970s it found itself seriously compromised by changes in the marketplace, which heralded yet another turn in the revolutionary progress of the cinema.

SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

<i>Lolita</i> (1962)	<i>Medium Cool</i> (1969)
<i>Cleopatra</i> (1963)	<i>The Strawberry Statement</i> (1970)
<i>Goldfinger</i> (1964)	<i>Zabriskie Point</i> (1970)
<i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> (1966)	<i>Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song</i> (1971)
<i>Bonnie and Clyde</i> (1967)	<i>Black Caesar</i> (1973)
<i>The Graduate</i> (1967)	<i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i> (1975)
<i>Midnight Cowboy</i> (1969)	
<i>Easy Rider</i> (1969)	