

Camera Politica

Joe Kispal-Kovacs

John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*

Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film
by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 328 pp.

The publication of *Camera Politica* marks a welcome addition to the growing number of Marxist texts on film in particular and popular culture in general. Ambitious in scope, the book aims to highlight the "relationship between Hollywood film and American society from 1967 to the mid-eighties." In this it invites immediate comparison to Robin Wood's *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan* (1986). Both studies have as their starting point the recognition that there has been a significant shift from the Left to the Right in the social imaginary of American society and in its cultural representations.

This shift, according to the authors of both texts, has been marked by the increasing use of the Hollywood cinema as a tool for the dissemination of the agenda of the political Right — the restoration of the nuclear family, the rehabilitation of militaristic values and a Social Darwinist economic strategy. Other similarities include a radical political stance — one that incorporates Marxist economic and political analysis, radical psychoanalysis and socialist feminism — that is common to much contemporary film theory.

Robin Wood's analysis is largely informed by the work of Norman O. Brown (especially in the idea that the human race is at a crossroads — it must liberate itself or face extinction) and Varda Burstyn (the centrality of feminism to the socialist project). In the case of Ryan and Kellner it is the psychoanalytic theory of object relations (which "emphasizes the role of representation in determining the direction and development of psychological life") and the socialist feminism of people like Sheila Rowbotham that has influenced their work. Both *Camera Politica* and *Holly-*

wood: From Vietnam to Reagan also make the argument that the mainstream cinema should be the major site for the intervention of radical film theorists and not necessarily the work of the modernist avant-garde as had often been the case in the past. Ryan and Kellner claim that the avant-garde faces two dilemmas that undercut its possible influence. First, there is its structural exclusion from mass accessibility, and, secondly, there is the ability of the capitalist social system to gradually incorporate its aesthetic into the fold and to depoliticize those fragments that resist incorporation. In Wood's book this is not even an issue as he disregards it altogether. The final significant similarity between the two works is a recognition that while Hollywood provides an important institution for the production and reproduction of ideology — this process is by no means a monolithic and homogeneous one.

Hollywood films can and have, at various times, incorporated structural contradictions that highlight the artificiality and arbitrariness of the dominant ideology, and have even worked against it. Despite these apparent similarities, the strategies and content of these two works are quite different. Robin Wood's book makes no attempt to offer an exhaustive historical survey of the period. Instead, he offers some general comments on the change in political climate and focuses on a number of specific films and filmmakers that best typify the changes that took place over the past two decades. This work is largely a collection of essays tied together by a common theme — the crisis of representation in the mainstream cinema that accompanies the complex and uneven ideological counter-revolution in American society. The tone is largely pessimistic although Wood does find a number of instances, in specific films and artists, where the shift to the right has been resisted. Since this book has been reviewed elsewhere in this magazine (*Border/Lines* number 14), I will not dwell on it.

Camera Politica, in contrast, is more historical in orientation. Ryan and Kellner spend a fair amount of time elaborating the political and social context in which these changes in the Hollywood film took place. They begin by offering a periodization that incorporates some of the major developments that have taken place in American society over the past three decades:

1) the 1960s, when the growth of new social movements (feminism, the anti-Vietnam War movement, gay and lesbian liberation and the fight against racism) pressured the then liberal political administration to begin to make changes in society;

2) the crisis of legitimacy in American society in the 1970s that followed Watergate and the defeat of the imperialist adventure in Vietnam. This was accompanied by a great deal of liberal questioning about the priorities that had dominated American society for decades. However, the authors argue that while liberalism did offer a partial critique of the problems that faced society it was incapable of offering an alternative, redemptive vision of a society that could replace the one in crisis.

This "failure of liberalism" was partly responsible for

3) the conservative backlash that dominated the scene in the 1980s.

All of these developments were dealt with either directly or indirectly in the popular films of the period. However, Hollywood films did not magically reflect all of these issues in a straightforward or immediate way. Ryan and Kellner conceive "the relationship between film and social history as a process of discursive transcoding."

They argue that, "Films transcend the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves be-

come part of representation, of reality."

Following this logic, the production, the large body of work of this period, in various ways. Various of Hollywood's movements, the crisis of the and to the examine the political developments, some of the represented, and how they were them narrative s under the Ryan and K of some of this period. *Saturday Night of Endearment Deer Hunter* outlook bu

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come part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality."

Following a general theoretical introduction, the authors proceed to look at a large body of popular American films from this period. This is done in a number of ways. Various chapters include discussions of Hollywood's reactions to the social movements of the sixties and seventies, to the crisis of legitimacy mentioned earlier, and to the rise of the New Right. Others examine the specific effects that these political developments have had in changing some of the ways that popular cinema represented oppressed groups in society and how the conventions of the cinema were themselves partially transformed (in narrative structures, generic formulas, etc.) under the influence of external pressures. Ryan and Kellner also offer close readings of some of the more important films of this period. These films (*Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *The Godfather*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*) are largely conservative in outlook but for various reasons have captured the public's imagination. Much attention is devoted to the ways in which these films deconstruct themselves. It is interesting to note that, while Ryan and Kellner are fairly critical of Cimino's *Deer Hunter*, Wood and others have argued that despite its conservative veneer the film offers one of the more radical indictments of American society in this period. Other evaluations, however, coincide with Wood's. For example, the authors of both books agree that George Romero's *Dead* trilogy stands as one of the most radical indictments of American society ever committed to celluloid. Equally celebrated is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.

This historical survey of the contemporary Hollywood cinema is carried out through recourse to two tropes from literary criticism — metaphor and metonymy. These "master tropes" are used repeatedly as a yardstick to evaluate both the ideological character of a particular film and its emancipatory potential. A metaphoric, representational strategy is seen to be essentially conservative in nature, in that it seeks to replace an actual object with an ideal or higher meaning. In doing so it denies the materiality of that object. An example is provided by the authors to illustrate their point. The metaphor of the eagle representing "freedom" is doubly problematic: it denies the materiality of the eagle and its environment, and, secondly, it mystifies and idealizes a historically contingent concept like freedom. Metonymy, on the other hand, "is the trope of connection between objects which are in contiguous relation to each other or which relate by part to whole.

"Eagle is by metonymy not a sign for an ideal like 'freedom' but rather significant of, because literally connected to, some part of material reality like the threat hunters and land developers (whose material activities are sanctioned by an ideological ideal like freedom) pose to the wilderness and the environment."

Applied to films, these tropes demon-

strate the variety of narrative strategies possible within the mainstream. Conservative films like *Saturday Night Fever* are largely metaphoric in construction. In this film the dominant metaphor is the bridge that spans the divide between working class Brooklyn and affluent Manhattan: "Figuratively, it represents the transcendence of working class life, the act of crossing over to the world of upward mobility. The film wants the audience to think of the bridge in that sense exclusively." However, the metaphor is, at times, strained: "the bridge, in its literality... is a means of conducting working people to the drudgery of another day on the job. This literality must be sublimated, excluded and replaced by an idealized substitute." Hence the privileging of the metaphoric representation of the bridge as a means of escape from class oppression.

A consciously metonymic strategy can be found in a film like *Nashville* by Robert Altman: "The narrative of *Nashville* is discontinuous; the characters are multiple (24 in all), with no privileged hero or even privileged object of sympathetic identification.... No character is granted special metaphoric status as a hero who transcends social context. Altman's world is one without conservative monuments or ideological myths."

These are just some examples of the complex strands of argumentation woven together throughout the book. Still, the book is not without its flaws. Some of these arise from Ryan's peculiar appropriation of the philosophy of Deconstruction, an appropriation that is not entirely unproblematic, as anyone familiar with his *Marxism and Deconstruction* (1982) will find.

The difficulty with Ryan's earlier attempt to wed deconstruction to Marxism is that the end result is an unstable and contradictory philosophy. While it is true that Marxism has always had a "deconstructive component" and that deconstructive analyses of cultural texts are perfectly legitimate endeavours for Marxist theorists of culture, the attempt to transform an essentially diagnostic tool into a prognostic theory of political organisation belittles the tremendous task facing socialists who want to effect real social change.

Although Ryan does attempt to respond to charges that his proposed political practice will lead to "paralysis," these responses ring rather hollow. In order to discredit the older "humanist-essentialist" traditions within Marxism (Marcuse, Sartre, Lukács, for example), he has to caricature them.

In some ways his attempt to generate a new political practice is similar to Laclau and Mouffe's attempt (see *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1982) to wed an essentially Stalinist social critique (Althusser's anti-humanist structuralism) to a pluralist emancipatory project.

In the case of Laclau and Mouffe the result is a kind of liberalism with a socialist window-dressing. This problem is also evident in Ryan and Kellner's new book.

The authors are quite correct in arguing that the Left must abandon its traditional

disdain for popular culture (a tradition best exemplified in the work of the Frankfurt School) if it hopes to be successful in putting across socialist ideas to a large audience.

However, there is a big gap between calling for the Left to counter the dominant cultural representations in society with progressive ones and the need to address the problem of accessibility to the institutions of popular culture production.

By ignoring the latter part of this problem, the authors downplay the complexity of the issues involved. The book thus ends with a kind of "New True Socialist"* plea for the Left to bring the "object of desire" (socialism) to the screen as a blueprint for the masses.

Despite these criticisms the book is still well worth reading. As a sophisticated and at the same time clearly written diagnostic appraisal of this particular period in American cinematic history, *Camera Politica* has few precedents.

The historical component of the study also fills a gap in Robin Wood's otherwise impressive book on the same subject. *Camera Politica* would make an excellent addition to any undergraduate university course on the Hollywood cinema.

The only problem is, that at a \$66.50 retail cost, *Camera Politica* has priced itself out of the market at which it was aimed.

* Here I am referring to Ellen Wood's characterization in *The Retreat From Class* (1986) of the new political theories (Poulantzas, Laclau and Mouffe, etc.) that trace their genealogy back to Althusser.

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