

Lecture 15 - Film in the 1970s

I. Transformations and subversion

- Directors
- Actors
- Style and endings
- Dissenting genres

II. Social history

- Vietnam war
- Assassinations
- JFK, LBJ, Nixon
- Watergate

III. Film and Television

- A new consensus medium
- Two versions of *MASH*

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

Film in the 1970s

- Remember: the history of film is not just the history of a single form – the medium migrated from one form to another depending on whether it was currently consensus narrative
- The late 1960s and early 1970s were one of the richest moments of American film, one of the richest moments of any national film history
 - French film might have had slightly richer eras
 - The movies of this era were very different from movies that had come before
 - They were self-conscious of this difference
 - Key figures of the 1970s:
 - Actors:
 - Warren Beatty
 - Jack Nicholson
 - Elliot Gould
 - Dustin Hofman
 - Robert DeNiro
 - Julie Christie
 - Jane Fonda
 - Faye Dunaway
 - Donald Southerland

- These actors and actresses weren't necessarily handsome/beautiful or heroic in the way that previous actors had been – they often played flawed characters
 - These actors don't project grandeur the way past actors had
 - They have a sort of subversive energy
- One of the transition actors might have been Humphrey Bogart
- Directors:
 - Robert Altman
 - Francis F. Coppola, *The Godfather* (72), *The Godfather II* (74)
 - Bob Fosse
 - Stanley Kubrick, *Clockwork Orange* (71)
 - Alan J. Pakula, *Klute* (71), *The Parallax View* (74)
 - Sam Peckinpah, *The Wild Bunch* (69), *Straw Dogs* (71)
 - Roman Polansky, *Chinatown* (73)
 - Martin Scorsese, *Mean Streets* (73), *Taxi Driver* (76)
- These directors took control of their films, and their vision of the world permeates their movies in a way that hadn't been present in previous films
- By this era, the studios were no longer the enormous, extensive film factories that they had been before
- The visual style of these films was different, with elements like quick clips, discontinuous editing, shots from strange angles, etc.
- The traditional Hollywood film generally ended in a comforting way, or if the ending was subversive, it was subtly so
 - The endings of films from the 1970s were often much more disturbing, discontinuous, and morally uncertain
- Dissenting genres
- Pakula's *Klute*
 - The female lead is a prostitute
 - The subject matter is often morally disgusting
 - The comically innocent eyes of Donald Sutherland's character are dramatically opened to the dark realities of the world
- Pakula's *The Parallax View*
 - Alcoholic former newspaper reporter who can never hold a job anymore because he's always drunk
 - The landscape is eerie and science fiction-like – as though Pakula is taking us into a modern world that is unfamiliar, hostile to human beings
 - The alcoholic reporter who is now working for some lousy local paper gets on the trail of the assassination of the president
 - In a way, the plot resembles Hitchcock's films, with a lone hero working against the world, or James Bond films, with a lone hero saving the world against all odds
 - This main character discovers a vast conspiracy of corporate leaders who are trying to control national politics

- Just as he's about to discover the evil absolutely, he is suddenly killed
 - In the last scene, we see a judicial scene meant to echo the inquiry in to the assassination of JFK, where the respectable judges decide that the assassination was the work of one lone gunman
 - The implication is that you live in a world where political and moral conspiracies are everywhere, and they cannot be exposed because they are too extensive
 - Altman's *The Lone Goodbye*
 - The title of a famous novel, made into movies many times previously
 - The film's in conversation with detective stories generally, as well as in conversation with the many films of the same story that had been made previously
 - Elliot Gould, the star, detective
 - He finally discovers that the killer is a friend of his, who he had previously defended
 - Clip: the protagonist suddenly kills the murderer, upon discovering him
 - This ending is an absolute shock
 - The Gould character is somehow unheroic and selfish
 - This is not how the novel or any of the previous films by the same title ended
- The films of this period have to do with the turbulent politics of the era
 - The catastrophe of the Vietnam War
 - The Civil Rights Movement
 - Brown v. Board of Education
 - Martin Luther King
 - These two movements became increasingly connected
 - Some of these movements, unlike Martin Luther King, were violent in nature
 - The double assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy
 - Nixon's election
 - Elected on the platform of ending the war, but he ended up expanding it into Cambodia before eventually leaving
 - The Watergate scandal
 - All the structures of order and the basic institutions of the society were in question
 - All of this has to do with the great disorder, controversy, and subversion of the movies of this era
- But remember, at this point the movies are no longer a consensus medium in the United States, because television had replaced them
 - Television in this era is much more aware of politics in the outer world

- But it's still a television in which the center holds – it's not as subversive as films of the era
- Example: *All in the Family*
 - The contrast between conservative and liberal, old and young, a father-in-law and his son-in-law
 - Even though they argue and scream at each other, in the end they stay in the family
 - The idea broadcast is that the country's still a family – we can get through our difficulties
- Television is still maintaining its consensus function
- *M.A.S.H*
 - The difference between the movie and television versions are deeply revealing of the consensus narrative function of television
 - The difference can't be explained by date – they're nearly simultaneous, rather, it is a function of the place that society gives each form and medium
- A great irony and paradox: just as film finally articulates the problems of society, it is no longer watched as much
 - Just as film finally fully realizes itself, it surrenders its great popular function

- Robert Altman (1925 -)
 - In the early 70s, he was seen as such an outlaw that he often had great trouble financing his movies
 - He was very prolific, with lots and lots of magnificent films – he's still making movies today
 - He loves improvisation, and encouraged his actors to do it while they were being filmed
 - He likes to play with sound
 - It's sometimes hard to distinguish what the characters are saying in the foreground from the background noise
 - He's hostile to plot, like he's more interested in juxtaposing characters with each other than in following a linear story
 - In *Nashville*, you spend a long time following several different characters without any understanding of how they connect to each other
 - He's announcing his distinction from traditional Hollywood film, where you could only keep characters interested by having something going on and happening for every second.
 - In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, you can see this emphasis on characters at work by the fact that even though the movie is about the growth of the town in many ways, you never notice it until the end because the movie is so grounded in the characters
 - This trend is not new to narrative – we see it in great novels all the time – but it was new to film

- Bob Fosse (1927-87)
 - He worked in theater before he moved to film
 - Many people expected him to replicate his Broadway work on film, but in fact he developed a deeply cinematic style, with effects that never could have been achieved on stage
 - “Life is a Cabaret” – but you know by the desperation with which the character delivers those lines, that life is *not* a cabaret.
 - His dance sequences introduced a kind of carnality and realism into film dance that had never been there before
 - His dances don’t necessarily project beauty, but they do project dances and power
 - He made dances about subjects that earlier musical directors would never have addressed
 - He made only one movie without a musical dimension: It was called *Lenny*, about Lenny Bruce
 - Dustin Hofman plays Lenny Bruce
 - In 1972, he became the only director to win an Emmy, an Oscar, and a Tony all in one year

- Both Altman and Fosse can stand for the greatly revolutionary creators of film in this era of the 1970s