

Peter Lev, *American Films of the 1970s: Conflicting Visions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), ISBN: 0-292-76582-7, paper £13.50, xxii +238 pages, bibliography, index, 30 black and white plates.

The 1970s have often gotten a bad press, or, more nearly, no press. While the 1960s continue to arouse passionate responses from the Left and the Right, the 1970s are often characterized as a decade when nothing seemed to happen.<sup>2</sup> At the time, many commentators described the

2. Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1982).

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period as one during which the social movements of the 1960s were exchanged for the egotistical human potential movements. Tom Wolfe famously characterized the decade as one for the 'Me Generation,' one in which the hedonism of *est* and the decadence of disco served as the dominant symbols of a culture adrift. Americans had supposedly sought refuge in their psyches because the world outside had turned sour. Oil crises, stagflation, high unemployment and interest rates, political scandals, and a defeat in war had all combined to lead Americans to look within themselves. However, the 'I'm O.K., you're O.K.' indifference concealed a crisis of confidence in the American Dream of a more perfect union.<sup>3</sup>

In his introduction to *American Films of the 70s*, Peter Lev makes clear that he wants to avoid reductionist readings of either the period or the films. Lev grounds his understanding of the cultural and political complexity of the United States during the decade in the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin, which provides him with a framework that allows for both various interpretations of single films and of the multifarious cultural and political currents running through the period. He stales out an admirable effort at balancing categorization – necessary for analysis – and the aesthetic and historical complexity of the films and their socio-historical context. Thus, he reminds readers that the release of 'New Hollywood' films such as *The Last Picture Show* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971) had to compete with *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971). Lev finds this Hollywood dichotomy an element of a larger division within American society and culture between younger and older generations, those who opposed the war in Vietnam and those who did not, between progressive and reactionary groups within the United States at the time. While Lev at times come close to adhering to the simplified version of 1970s American life I sketched above, he consistently reminds his readers that things were never quite simple and that competing visions of what American life was like at the time and of what it should become were manifold. A survey of the popular films of the time reveals how these visions – insofar as they could be found in popular films – at times coexisted in various releases, such as the example of *The Last Picture Show* and *Dirty Harry* suggest, or they coexisted in the same film simultaneously, as Lev's reading of *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) shows. These competing visions were cultural and political.

The pattern of embedding individual films in their industry context is followed consistently, as Lev points out to readers that a film such as *Easy Rider* (1969) differed significantly in content and form from other mainstream Hollywood releases during the summer of 1969. (That list also suggests that *Easy Rider*, its box-office success notwithstanding, was a popular culture anomaly.) He carefully places *Easy Rider* within the B-film/exploitation genre of the early to mid-1960s, when American International was originally scheduled to produce the film. Lev also addresses a number of theoretical issues, such as the distinction between fiction and non-fiction in the war film genre (*Patton* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1970) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979)). Lev provides an excellent account of the manner in which the screenwriters and filmmakers blended historical events with fictional worlds of their own creation. The representation of the war in Vietnam would become, of course, a central topic in sociocultural-oriented film studies in the following decade.

3. Thomas Harris, *I'm OK, You're OK: A Practical Guide to Transactional Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

Moving between various genres, Lev explains why mainstream film production had become less recognizable, less standardized than during the studio era, given the large variety of producers, directors, and actors and the absence of the homogenizing effects of the Production Code. On the other hand, as he indicates, various market demands on production, distribution, and exhibition ensured mainstream films remained firmly within the socio-cultural mainstream. Thus, the New Hollywood did not feature only experimentation. Indeed, greater emphasis was placed on producing family-oriented blockbusters, targeting a younger-than-ever youth market, and developing a distribution system characterized by multiplex theaters in malls and cable technology. Universal produced *Jaws* (1975) while Columbia produced *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), both directed by Steven Spielberg. Twentieth Century-Fox produced George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). Under the conglomerate structure of ownership, films became entrenched in a broader concept of entertainment. Thus, they were produced to have their theatrical runs, their cable release, and to be broadcast on network or syndicated television. There was also an influx of management from television, and these people brought talent from TV with them: made-for-TV movies directors such as John Badham and actors such as John Travolta[JP1], the two of whom combined talents in the immensely successful *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) (but which only receives passing mention in *American Films of the 70s*).

Lev's book provides a number of interesting readings of a wide variety of films from the period. He successfully combines an approach based on genres (counterculture films, cop films, teen films, disaster films, women's films, and so on) with one based on sociocultural themes – the counterculture, the shift to the political right, the aftermath of the civil rights movement, and feminism. The readings offered of films ranging from *American Graffiti* (1973) to *Patton* (1970), *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) to *Shaft* (1971), and *Jaws* (1975) to *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) are informative and suggest nicely their positioning on the sociocultural landscape. If the book has a fault, it would be that it – as is generally the rule in film studies – only superficially treats that landscape even as it avoids oversimplifying it. The book's greatest strength – and perhaps its most positive asset as an introductory survey – is its instance of avoiding reducing the manifold problems and successes that emerge from the diversity of American society and culture to either-or questions or answers. Although an occasional film goes missing – such as Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979) or Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) – Lev concedes the inability to cover completely this peculiarly rich and torpid period. Lev deserves credit for daring to omit such 1970s stalwarts as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) and *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and including films such as *Hester Street* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1975) and *Girlfriends* (Claudia Weill, 1978). (Interestingly, the absence of Scorsese and Coppola's films does not so much distract from the book's claim to be representative as call into question the validity of identifying a decade with certain films.) He calls his survey an 'interpretive work' and the label is fitting. While few of the interpretations of the films or the historical period go to any great depths (there are exceptions, such as the account give for the sources for the narrative of *Apocalypse Now*), they are nicely balanced and serve as a fine introduction to this largely neglected, if much maligned, period in American social and cultural history.