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We Rob Banks: The Influence of 1960s Counterculture on New Hollywood Film

by Alissa Chater

After the Second World War, rising social tensions in the United States ushered in a new era which shook the film industry to its core (Schatz 8). This saw the American film industry undergo a shift in structure, personnel, output and overall practice which later became known as “New Hollywood” or “Hollywood Renaissance” (Neale 662). Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing into the 1960s, the rise of television’s popularity urged studios to create big-budget spectacle productions that would differentiate the two entertainment mediums (Schatz 12). However, with the rise of the art cinema movement, youth culture and changing views of censorship, major Hollywood studios produced a series of flops that were out of touch with the socio-cultural revolution (Schatz 14). Out of this, the monopoly system of the film industry was challenged and studios were forced to adapt the industry to suit their key constituencies: youth and “cine-literate” college students (Schatz 14). Three of the most influential films that arose from this new paradigm, Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974) and Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), reflected changing ideology by de-familiarizing conventional mise-en-scénes using cues from other genres. These films, triggered from the social anxieties of historical events, see characters who wish to purify their society through the use of vigilante justice, but not without the consideration of deep moral questioning. With the call for change at the heart of each of these film’s narratives, they best represent the climate in which New Hollywood emerges.

Stylistically, each film seeks to de-familiarizes a conventional setting: the small rural town during the Great Depression in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the urban metropolis in *The Conversation* and iconic New York City in *Taxi Driver*. The most prevalent example of a film borrowing cues from other genres is *Bonnie and Clyde*, which originally was to have been a French New Wave film directed by Francois Truffaut or Jean Luc Godard (Sterritt 67). A clever niche that acknowledges this is Bonnie’s French beret, which not only gives the film an underlying French theme, but also makes her appear as a modern woman isolated in the past. The most explicit use of the French New Wave style comes in the last sequence depicting Bonnie and Clyde’s violent shooting death. Several jump cuts rapidly present the characters’ fear and acknowledgment of death and allows them to share one last gaze into each other’s eyes. Like many French New Wave films, *Bonnie and Clyde* also idolizes classical narratives with the film ending in a grand, operatic manner, likening it to *Romeo and Juliet* or *Dido and Aeneas*. However, nothing is withheld in the ending of the film as the audience is left to see the wreckage of their demise. In its grandeur the film is unexpected, which is most accurately represented by its fast paced contrapuntal soundtrack in the style of the *Benny Hill* or *The Beverley Hillbillies* theme songs. In her review, Pauline Kael sums up the energy of the film by stating, “Maybe it’s because *Bonnie and Clyde*, by making us care about robber lovers, has put the sting back into death” (171).

As a transition from this film, both *The Conversation* and *Taxi Driver* use implicit violence and dark subject matter to provide the audience with a haunting vision of the world that surrounds them. In this, both films make reference to film-noir styles. In *The Conversation*, the main antagonist Harry Caul takes the likeness of a detective character, whereas Travis Bickle in *Taxi
Driver seems to find the role of executioner more fitting. In each, the mise-en-scene is meant to portray characters within a private and claustrophobic part of a larger society. In The Conversation this is seen by the lone Harry in his apartment, from which he has tried so diligently to keep the world away (he keeps his telephone in a drawer), whereas in Taxi Driver, Travis’ point of view is restricted to the view from his taxi’s windshield. In both films, the isolation of the main character is brought out with a lone saxophone musical accompaniment. Borrowing from the film-noir style, the true nature of each character is brought out in the night. Harry, like Travis, stays up during the night working with emotions that are, as Lawrence Schaffer refers to them, “in cold storage” (60). For Travis, the danger of his “heroic” act is made implicit in its use of a red-light night setting, whereas Harry’s failure to prevent the murder is shown at sundown, perhaps before guilt will haunt him for the rest of the night. In each, the persona of the main character is brought out most in costuming. In The Conversation, Harry is only seen wearing a suit, a symbol of the professionalism in his work, not unlike the detectives of the film-noir style. In contrast, Travis wears a beat-up army jacket in the final scene, as almost a haunting reminder of his past military involvement. In The Conversation and Taxi Driver’s use of lighting, costumes, sound diegesis and film noir style, they stylistically transition from Bonnie and Clyde to Taxi Driver to be a gritty portrayal of modern society.

The interior meaning in all three films reflects fears of society brought on by historical events. The only film which directly deals with the historical event it recalls is 1967’s Bonnie and Clyde, a film about two Depression-era lovers that, as they quite simply state, “rob banks.” Through the film’s interpretation of Bonnie Parker, it goes further to reflect anxieties of second wave feminism, among other movements. In the south, women who were not highly educated took refuge in small community churches that addressed the movement as an effort to create “the oneness of humanity” (Gitlin 3565). The film brings forth this idea of male and female equality in Clyde Barrow, who recognizes Bonnie’s desolate position as well as her lack of respect for herself and calls on her to join him. Most importantly, when Clyde shows Bonnie how to handle a gun, he helps her gain phallic power. By using the idea of Depression-era politics, the film is able to parallel ideas of 1960s culture, which makes it, as legendary film reviewer Pauline Kael states, an “excitingly American American movie” (146). In Bonnie’s poem, “The Story of Bonnie and Clyde,” featured near the end of the film, its main theme is brought out: Bonnie and Clyde do not rob banks not for sadistic, immoral reasons, but do it as it is called for in the economically depressed era in which they live. In their restricted view, which the audience shares, they are seen as “honest and upright and clean.” Most importantly, it is the Texas sheriff, who spits in the face of Bonnie and Clyde, who is seen to be rude and unappreciative. It is noted that his spitting is a shock to the audience as they anticipate what Clyde’s reaction to him will be. The good nature of Bonnie and Clyde is secured in that scene as they do not immediately kill the sheriff in revenge. To introduce the theme of confused morality, the film shows Bonnie, Clyde and their companion, C.W Morris, sitting in a movie theatre as the song “We’re in the Money” is heard as Clyde deals with the guilt of killing a defenceless man. Most interestingly, Bonnie seems unfazed by the killing. In contrast, she eagerly watches the film of upmost importance, which gives her the likeness of a femme fatale, as a lead up to the final scene which ensures the film’s ideologies do not advocate their lifestyle.
Almost a decade later, 1976’s *Taxi Driver* makes historical reference to the Vietnam War as the lead character of Travis Bickle is introduced as a veteran. However, contrary to *Bonnie and Clyde*, the way in which the war has shaped Travis’s dark manifesto is left ambiguous. As 1960s counterculture in the United States grew, public reaction to the Vietnam War was polarized between those who were fiercely patriotic in their belief of a full American victory and those who saw the war as immoral and sought peaceful resolution (Boyer 683). The war was made infamous by the fact that many of its soldiers returned with mental illnesses and a broken sense of patriotism at the hands of the military’s failure (Boyer 673). As the war is subtly mentioned in the beginning of *Taxi Driver*, it is understood that Travis is to be a mentally unstable character that may be against government institution. From the idea of counter-patriotic acts, the film is also a perverse reimagining of the story of Lynette “Squeaky” Frome, who was made infamous after her attempted assassination of President Ford (Fuchs 697). *Taxi Driver*’s use of historical events in relation to Travis’ mental stability allows the audience to view him as more than a patient with mental illness, but as a man who wishes to purify the society that warped him. In the film, confused morality is introduced not as a struggle by the lead protagonist, but as a judgement by the audience as to whether Travis’ actions were appropriate. As critic Andrew Sarris put it, “There is much to like in *Taxi Driver* if one doesn’t mind the disorder in the narrative” (Fuchs 697).

In contrast to these two films, 1974’s *The Conversation* does not directly mention any relation to a historical event, but rather uses major themes of the Watergate scandal to drive its interior meaning. This anxiety originates from the early 1950s when the threat of nuclear war from Eastern Europe changed domestic American life to foster the belief that even the friendliest of neighbours could be seen to carry a hidden agenda (Gitlin 113). During the presidency of Richard Nixon in 1972, provisions were taken to regain a government stronghold in a wayward society of radicals and protesters by any means necessary (Steigerwald 293). Nixon recruited covert government operations, as well as ex-CIA agents, to use wiretaps, burglaries and other extreme measures to stop these groups (Steigerwald 293). Once the operation was unravelled, America was no longer left with an institution to trust. With this idea of anti-trust and the consequences that coincide with spy operations, *The Conversation* is able to apply the climate of historical events to make a unique crime-drama narrative. The lead character of Harry Caul presents a challenge to the protagonist/antagonist model of film as he is the manifestation of voyeuristic post-Watergate anxieties, but at the same time, a sad portrayal of a lonely man. This is best represented in the scene of the party at his office. In the scene, Harry is shown to be in complete control of the complicated technologies he shows, but is completely lost when his control is tested in a sexual context. In his moral struggle, Harry is able to identify with the audience as a man of the working class, versus a powerful spy.

In the stylistic, cultural and historical context of Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* and Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, each film is able to portray the anxieties of iconic historical events brought on by the socio-cultural revolution of the late 1950s and 1960s. As the preceding discussion has shown, *Bonnie and Clyde*, through innovative use of mise-en-scene and its borrowed use of French New Wave styles was able to de-familiarize its conventional setting to emphasize characters isolated in their society. Through the use of vigilante justice, with the consideration of moral issues, it was able to set the climate for *The
Conversation and Taxi Driver. These films use the film-noir style to take these ideologies further until the audience is left with a gritty, self-reflexive look into the issues of underground society. Through the restricted view of Bonnie Parker, Clyde Barrow, Harry Caul and Travis Bickle, the audience is left with a changed vision of the hand that feeds them.
Works Cited


Films Cited

