

1950s: Popular Cult Figures in Movie Entertainment

In 1950s America popular culture seems more visible and dominant than in most other decades. Most people were **optimistic**, at least on the surface. The country was still in its postwar **prosperity**, employment was generally high, and Americans were subject to materialistic **consumerism**, busy accumulating status-oriented objects such as homes, automobiles, and home appliances.



Fins and vivid colors: a 1958 Plymouth Hardtop

Television was the rage, and people stayed away from movies and subjected themselves to further consumerist temptation by watching television with its catchy advertising jingles at home. 50s taste was modernist and often questionable: home and furniture styles were clean and functional, but Americans drove ever **larger cars** that sprouted large fins on their rear fenders and were painted in outlandishly loud colors; 50s males seemed addicted to film **starlets** with blond hair and large breasts prominently displayed. The forces of **conformism** (perhaps satirized in ‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers’) seemed powerful, as

Americans sought to “outdo the Jones” in the size of their cars or the mechanization of their households (all those happy housewives beaming as they stood next to their new refrigerators. For all their surface optimism, Americans also seemed afraid – even **paranoid** – about the forces of change: the early Civil Rights movement threatened an important social transformation, and there was an underlying fear of nuclear war and the possibility of Communist subversion.

There was however a liberal, alternative culture present in the USA just under the conformist surface. The civil rights movements was set in motion by the Supreme Court Brown vs. the Board of Education decision (1954) that declared “separate but equal” facilities in schools, public facilities, etc. were unconstitutional. Rebellious writers such as the Beat poets and novelist Jack Kerouac (“On the Road”) challenged the orthodox assumptions of American culture. Even Hollywood began to present “liberal” movies such as Stanley Kramer’s ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ 1947 that criticized anti-Semitism, and ‘Inherit the Wind’ 1960 that challenged the Fundamentalist world view. Americans remained strongly inventive in literature and the arts and film, although it is possible to make the argument that the quality of film declined after the early 1950s.

The class gained further insight into 1950s popular culture by looking at excerpts from “Rebel Without a Cause” (1955 starring **James Dean**) and “The Seven Year Itch” (1955 starring **Marilyn Monroe**).

Marilyn Monroe was also an indispensable part of American popular culture in the 1950s. After playing small roles in the late 40s and early 50s, she suddenly shot to stardom with her film ‘Niagara’ in 1953. She made ‘The Seven-Year Itch’ with Billy Wilder in 1955.



The Famous Scene in ‘Itch’

The Seven Year Itch 1955 Billy Wilder 3.5 Marilyn Monroe, Tom Ewell. Quite entertaining adapted play about New York executive, who sends his wife and children to Maine, stays home by self and then endures an hour and a half temptation from MM; he smokes, drinks, twitches, and talks to

himself. (He is a little hard to take in some scenes.) Color. Marilyn is delicious, beautiful and sexy, and already her full-figured self compared to about 1951; plays herself (breathy, naïve, a bit ditzy, unconsciously seductive, and very good-hearted) and is quite convincing; has great screen presence; her breasts are very sharp, 50s style. Most famous scene is the one in the street where Marilyn, after emerging from a viewing of “The Creature from the Black Lagoon”, allows subway ventilation air to blow up her skirt and reveal her shapely legs.

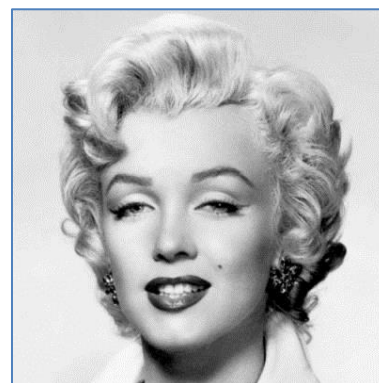


1950s Advertisement

Concerto), where TE for example is seducing Marilyn or imagining that his wife is having steamy sex with a guy on a hayride. High culture references abound -- Rachmaninov, Oscar Wilde's 'Picture of Dorian Gray,' John Dunne's 'No Man is an Island,' etc.

Quite a bit of satire about USA in 1950s – American advertising, ways of doing business, bullshit psychiatrists who charge you a lot, the fear of public opinion watching you and the prospect of being put to shame, Ewell hypocritically using psychoanalytic ideas to attempt to seduce Marilyn, Wilder’s sarcastic look at heavy Hollywood romance in the fantasy scenes. Also snide sex jokes, e.g., Ewell squirts seltzer water into glass just as he intimates sex with Marilyn. The seltzer water scene is particularly effective since Ewell and Marilyn are on entirely difference wavelengths despite the seduction attempt, and yet **they** end up at the same point through entirely different thought patterns. Almost all the movie takes place in TE's apartment -- very stage bound, but doesn't seem stogy since Wilder opens up with funny fantasies.

The phenomenon of **Marilyn Monroe** causes endless discussion. She has an upfront **sexualized image** with exposed legs, skirts blowing up, pouty lips, breathy speaking, breasts displayed, etc.; and she seems easily available to any **man** who would want her. But she also seems naïve, **childlike**, innocent, not entirely aware of her sexual manipulation, as if the two sides of her persona were coexisting unconsciously; she severely tempts Tom Ewell, but while he is preparing a drink and talking about sex, she is thinking only about keeping cool that night. So while she is sexually desirable, she also evokes in (some) men the desire to be her **protector**, to shield her from any harm that her sexuality exposes her to.



Men could fantasize about **possessing Marilyn Monroe without danger**: she would presumably remain faithful and not make undue demands on her man. If she were married, she would be the ideal “trophy wife”. Gloria Steinem describes her as “**the child-woman** who offered pleasure without adult challenge” and “a woman who is innocent and sensuously experienced at the same time.” She comes across as vulnerable, as if something bad might happen to her and we should **protect** her like a parent and **rescue** her; perhaps this instinct is dependent on hindsight – we know she was unhappy after the Wilder movie

and she eventually died of a drug overdose when she was only 42. She seemed to be yearning for something better. She was truly “loved by the camera” (she always looked good on camera).

Nicholas Ray’s **Rebel Without a Cause** (1955) features another **screen icon** of the 1950s, James Dean. The film is valuable for gaining an understanding of American popular culture in the 1950s. It was intended primarily for a **teen audience**.

The film stars James Dean in his iconic role of middle class teenage Angst, 16-year old Natalie Wood as his girlfriend, Sal Mineo as cute little kid seeking surrogate parents in Dean and Wood (actually he was homosexually attracted to Dean), Jim Backus as absurdly hen-pecked husband who wears an apron to underline the point, Corey Allen as gang leader and the guy that dies in the chicken run.

This is the film that made **James Dean** an eternal icon of middle class teenage Angst and rebellion (as opposed to the inner city kids of Glenn Ford’s ‘Blackboard Jungle’). Dean carries the movie as far as it goes – **sincere anxiety** and suffering, jeans and a red jacket (that he generously gives to Plato in final sequence), slouched over and head down as he speaks. It didn’t hurt that young women found him extremely good-looking and tempting in his bad boy image.



Sal Mineo and James Dean

The film hammers relentlessly on the plight of teenagers who are abandoned by their parents – they are absent (Plato’s parents are divorced, send him a check for support and he is raised by a Black woman, who truly loves him), the father rejects the affection of his daughter (Wood’s father slaps her hard when she tries to kiss him on the cheek!), the mother is a stupid ninny and the **father is hen-pecked** and weak and unable to speak straight to his son and give him advice. Says Dean, “He always wants to be my pal... If he had the guts to knock Mom cold once, then maybe she’d be happy... I never want to be like him.” The effect is often ridiculous, partly because the director wants to spotlight the plight of abandoned teenagers, partly because of censorship, which refuses to allow the film to discuss some real problems (Wood could be out on the street hooking, Dean could already be an active member of the gang). Script would have benefited from a little balance and more openness about the viciousness and irresponsibility of some of the kids.



The film is famous for the **chicken run** sequence on the cliffs resulting in the death of Corey Allen – spectator cars in double line, Natalie Wood in white dress raising her arms for the car lights to go on, and then lowering them suddenly to start the race, Allen catching his sleeve on the door handle and thus being unable to jump at the last minute and plunging to his death. The three kids escape to the abandoned house and start to form their own **substitute family**, cavorting in the same swimming pool where William Holden drowned in ‘Sunset Boulevard’ (1951).

Sal Mineo acts very strange (perhaps because he is jealous of Dean’s and Wood’s developing romantic relationship), and he goes out of control at the end, dying from a police bullet (but film is very careful to cast the police in a

Natalie Wood in the 1950s good light – they warn him repeatedly about his possession of a gun). House sequence is sort of dreamworld idyll where the three characters all play like children seeking the childhood none of them ever had because of their ineffective parents. **Hollywood censorship** of course rejects any sexual connection between the two principals.

The ending suggests **reconciliation** – there is an implication that Dean has purged his hostility, he introduces Wood to his parents as “my friend,” and his parents seem wiser and semi-reconciled (mother starts to make negative remark about the girlfriend, Backus shuts her up, and she takes it and smiles at him). Reminiscent of other 50s hard-hitting dramas, where much of the drama is gutted by rampant censorship (how about Paul Newman’s and Elizabeth Taylor’s version of ‘Cat on a Hot Tin Roof?’).

‘Rebel Without a Cause’ reminds us that the 1950s were not all sexual titillation and escapism. Hollywood took into account the rising irritation and alienation of the generation born during or after World War II and the widespread public perception that families were coming apart (cf. ‘Imitation of Life’ 1959) and that **fathers were weak** and emasculated and needed to overthrow the tyranny of their wives. The film helped to launch the phenomenon of **youth rebellion** that carried over into Civil Rights and anti-war political activity in the Sixties. Although perhaps not a great actor, Dean still has an enormous reputation in American popular culture. He is still the icon of youth discontent and rebellion – the scruffy, handsome **cool** guy, sensitive and not really violent, standing up for the discontent and anxieties of **misunderstood youth**.

Notes on the Image of Women in American Film

The cult of Marilyn says a lot about **U.S. popular culture** in the 1950s. American audiences were increasingly obsessed with blonds and large breasts (Marilyn’s weren’t that big compared to Mamie Van Doren and Jayne Mansfield). The ideal woman star of the 50s was sexually attractive, available, and safe. She would be devoted to the pleasure of her husband and to tending the home and children without holding down a job. Men (and some women) in later decades may have looked back on the 50s as an uncomplicated and reassuring time when gender roles were clearly delineated and women “knew their place”.



The **image of the woman** that Marilyn presents is quite different from previous iconic images from **American movies**. In the **1920s** movie women were generally not seen as threatening: hence Clara Bow was hip, cute and flirty, and in the end of ‘It’ she found her true love and presumably settled down with him. **Greta Garbo**, devoted entirely to love and passion, might cause her man some harm, but never on purpose. In the **1930s** **Mae West** was aggressive and sought a sort of equality with men, but probably because she expressed a need for men in her life, most men found her amusing and perhaps titillating, not menacing. **Jean Arthur**, who was popular in the late 30s and early 40s, often started her films as an independent working girl, but she was always ready to give up the marketplace to settle down with a good man; her shining, doe-like eyes when she was looking at her man reassured us that she was loyal and safe. **Katherine Hepburn** was a strong woman with certain masculine characteristics who knew what she wanted; in different parts of her films she balanced her professional achievements with her desire to settle down with a husband.

Perhaps as a result of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, there was little reassuring about **Barbara Stanwyck** and the other *femmes fatales* of **1940s** film noir, who were no good, manipulative, and destructive of their men; Stanwyck and Ann Savage were a man’s worst nightmare. With the return to postwar “normalcy” in the **1950s**, Hollywood fashioned many of its female stars in the image of Marilyn Monroe (think of Jane Russell, Mamie Van Doren, and Jayne Mansfield): highly sexualized with large breasts and pouty lips, attractive to men but not threatening since one imagines them willing to settle into the accepted domestic roles of ‘Kinder, Kirche, Kuchen’ (children, church and kitchen). Many female movie stars have become **objectified**, i.e., their appeal is based on their (sexual) physical attributes and they are now primarily objects of male sexual desire.

In the 1950s Hollywood finances were in trouble, and executives sought to stimulate new audiences to increase attendance, including the **pushing of the limits of the Motion Picture Code**. After years of onscreen repression of sexual subjects and the opening of the door to more explicit treatment brought by foreign films, America was “horny,” ready for sexual stimulation. The sexual content of “Seven Year Itch” was much more explicit than in most previous periods of Hollywood – Marilyn was dressed very seductively and her whole character was intended to be a sexual tease (we are however a long way from the nudity and onscreen sex that insinuates itself into American movies in the 1970s). And in the end “reason” prevails: Tom Ewell triumphs over his lower self and the blandishments of Rachmaninoff, and he remains faithful to his wife. As always, audiences enjoyed experiencing temptation, but could leave the theaters safely knowing that virtue had been preserved.



50s Starlet Jayne Mansfield Hit Hollywood romantic comedies later in the 1950s show some of the developing cracks in the Hays Code. The popular singer and actress, **Doris Day**, ever defending her virginity but yearning for romance and marriage, is a case in point.

Pillow Talk 1959 Michael Gordon 3.0 Doris Day with a minimum of singing as virginal 35-year-old, who has “bedroom problems”, i.e., needs a man in her life; Rock Hudson, womanizer on a party line with her (party lines in cool apartments in 1959 New York?), who is obviously that guy; Tony Randall amusing and clever as Hudson’s sexless friend, who is in love with Day but gets little romantic attention from her; Thelma Ritter in truly objectionable role as Day’s boozy (ha-ha-ha) housekeeper, arriving every day so hung over that she can’t look out the window without wincing, at one time proudly drinking Rock Hudson under the table. Embarrassing, sexist, although well-made and often amusing romantic sex comedy that starts the collaboration between Hudson and Day. Film begins with celebrated party line tension between Hudson and Day that is presented in split screen (the device enables the two to lounge in their bath tubs “together” and even play footsie without running afoul of the Hayes Code censors). Despite initial hostility, Hudson decides to court her with a faked Texas identity, almost nauseating in its artificiality. Despite her virginal objections, Day allows herself to be drawn to Hudson’s Connecticut country retreat (a nod to screwball comedy!), where by recognizing one of his songs she finally discovers that he is the same person as her detested party line partner. Day decides to get even with him by decorating his apartment in the most atrocious taste (mostly Middle Eastern and Indian), but Hudson realizes she is more willing than she wants to admit; he charges to her apartment, kidnaps her in her pajamas, carries her through the street and back to his apartment (why?), and then of course the Hollywood Kiss and the promise of happily ever after: a man has to take charge of his woman and force himself on her to make sure *she* gets what she wants. The film has a lot of non-nudity sexual content: Hudson as womanizer with a remote control system in his apartment that locks the door, rolls out the bed, and starts the seduction music on his record player; several smutty references to the word “bedroom”; on the way to the Connecticut cabin, Day sings a romantic song “Possess Me”—the viewer always gets the message that despite her apparent resistance, Day wants to be possessed sexually by the right man. If she could find him, she would melt in his arms and do his every wish; one character says that the only thing worse than a woman living alone is a woman doing that and liking it. The film is entertaining – Randall’s role, passing sight gags, the sexy use of the split screen, Day’s song “Pillow Talk” that she sings during the beginning and ending credits; amusing McGuffins such as the song melody that gives Hudson away in the cottage



Popular actress and singer, Doris Day

scene, the remote control seduction setup in Hudson's apartment. It is a compendium of female sexual behaviors that would be out of fashion in about five years. (2016)

Sex before marriage is not yet okay, but Day gets awfully close.

Revival of Hollywood in the late 1960s; the Seventies Films

As indicated in the Sklar chapter 'The Decline of Hollywood', the American film industry was at a low ebb in the late 1960s: **profits continued to fall** and most critics detected a marked **decline in the quality** of American movies.



1967 seems to mark a **first turnaround** in the industry. American movies in the late 1960s were influenced by European films, particularly the **French "New Wave,"** which introduced new (some thought experimental) techniques that departed from the classical model of filmmaking: examples are jump cuts (non-standard editing when the relationship between two juxtaposed shots ends not being clear), franker treatment of sexuality and character psychology, etc. And as seen, already in 1967 American filmmakers had more freedom to deal with sex and violence, since the Hayes Code had been

François Truffaut, influential New Wave filmmaker abolished in the previous year and replaced with the Rating System (both films below received an 'R' rating).

The social and political background of the 1960s was also important. The Civil Rights Movement occupied most of the 1960s, and the movement against the War in Vietnam was already in full swing by 1967. The radicalized youth movement opened up a **generation gap** between young and old, a resentment among college students and others against the 'Establishment' that had created racism and aimless materialism and allowed the prosecution of the Vietnam War.

In his *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America*, Jonathan Kirshner attempts to categorize innovative films of the late 1960s and early 1970s as "**Seventies Films**".

Kirshner portrays an America wracked by protest, war, urban decay, and pervasive injustice, among other things; particularly in the Watergate Affair (1972-74) authority and institutions are seen as imperfect and worthy of our suspicion. The makers of the 70s films were reacting to these novel conditions, aspiring to create films that were works of art rather than mere popular entertainment.

The 70s films are more critical and analytical vis-à-vis US politics, culture and society than traditional Hollywood fare. They no longer steer away from controversial subjects and stick to "harmless" comedy, romance, adventure, patriotism, etc. These films might critique violence in US culture ('Bonnie and Clyde'), the superficial materialism of middle class society ('The Graduate'), hopelessness of the down-and-out in urban society ('Midnight Cowboy'), the secret power of the corporations ('The Parallax View'), betrayal and mendaciousness in the CIA ('Three Days of the Condor'), Nixon ('Shampoo'), ruthlessness and impunity of the capitalist elite ('Chinatown'), moral decay in New York ('Taxi Driver'), the illusion of trust ('The Friends of Eddie Coyle'), or the power of network television ('Network').



Robert Redford in 'Three Days Of the Condor'

In contrast to the strictures of the Hays Code that sought to banish moral ambiguity from the movies, there is no clear right and wrong in the moral world of the 70s film; the movies are character- rather than plot-driven, there is no path toward redemption, and “open” endings replace the traditional closure of Hollywood happy endings. The films of this style are more “realistic” and more pessimistic than the traditional Hollywood offerings. Influenced by the French “New Wave”, their film style is “often shaky, darker, filtered, or grainy” and sometimes with editing that breaks the rule of the classical Hollywood style, e.g., jump cuts inspired by the French film ‘Breathless’.

These politically and socially engaged films were largely pushed aside by the rise of the pop culture blockbuster (e.g., ‘Jaws’ 1975 and ‘Star Wars’ 1977).

‘**Bonnie and Clyde**’ (1967), directed by Arthur Penn and based in part on the old (excellent) film noir ‘B’ movie ‘Gun Crazy,’ received bad reviews when first released (Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* called it “a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick” and *Newsweek* called it “a squalid shoot-‘em-up”), but it went on to be a big critical and box office success. The director hired several theater actors – Faye Dunaway, Gene Hackman, Michael J. Pollard – who made their mark in this film and who went on to have successful careers in Hollywood.



The **final scene** in the movie is very famous. Expertly constructed, it generates a lot of suspense and excitement. The actual shooting of the two protagonists is done in a rapidly edited sequence that mixes startled facial expressions, one character diving under the car, a quick look at the bushes where the lawmen are hiding, birds flying away, and finally a lengthy burst of automatic weapons fire and the riddling of the car and the bodies of Bonnie and Clyde with bullets (apparent debts to Alfred Hitchcock and **Sergei Eisenstein**, including the close-up of Beatty’s face with the broken glasses). Remarkable elements in the scene are the dragging out of the killing sequence in **slow motion**, making the act of mortal violence a kind of cinematic subject in itself, and the way in which the bodies are not just killed, but torn to pieces and pulverized by the machine gun fire; such is what you would expect from a **corrupt, violent Establishment**. The movie has us identify with a lawless couple that lives a life of adventure (in the process killing several innocent people and lawmen), where robbery is fun and anyhow excusable because of oppression of the people by banks and the police; they learn to love one another in the course of the movie, and they are brought down in an excessive broadside of bullets.



The film rather made its own genre, mixing explicitly gory violence, incongruous bursts of humor, and a touching and tragic love story – all commented on by ironic bluegrass music.

‘**The Graduate**’ (1967), starring Dustin Hoffman and Ann Bancroft, was also aimed at the youth market, but in a different way. Hoffmann (Ben) is a recent college graduate, who doesn’t know what he wants to do with his life but who just knows that he does not want to be like his parents. In the first, very humorous part of the movie he is shown divided from his parents’ generation, and not able to communicate with them. The classic **pool scene** includes callow materialistic upper middle class adults applauding Ben’s progress toward a conformist life style; the image of Ben diving into the parents’ swimming pool with a point of view shot through his diving mask demonstrates his isolation from his environment. One

of his parents' pompous friends makes the classic statement that "**plastics**" is the product of the future (playing on the other meaning of the word as 'artificial').

In another funny, although rather pitiful, scene, **Mrs. Robinson**, one of his parents' friends, seduces him after she hitches a ride with him back to her house; he yields reluctantly but with second thoughts and guilt. While he yearns to be united romantically with her daughter, Elaine, he has sex with her mother in a hotel: a rather unusual incest-like situation. The **adult generation** is depicted as conformist, shallow, artificial, mindless, dull, self-indulgent, silly, sybaritic, and corrupt. The movie pits the spiritual sincerity and purity of youth against the corruption of their parents, who have sold out to the "System" and who are trying to trap their children into the same thing.

Toward the end, the movie turns into a more typical **romantic comedy** (it seems to owe a debt to Frank Capra's 1934 classic 'It Happened One Night'), as Ben decides he wants to marry Elaine. He leaves the corrupt Southland and journeys to Berkeley (perhaps more virtuous, but in any event cooler) to save his beloved from marriage to a vapid college frat guy (the attentive viewer will notice that he drives the wrong way across the Bay Bridge). His journeys in his sports car occasion playing the sound track of **Simon and Garfunkel** that gives much of the youth flavor to the movie and that seems to have been largely responsible for the film's popularity: their renditions of "The Sounds of Silence", "Mrs. Robinson", and "Scarborough Fair" are unforgettable for viewers who saw the movie in the 60s.



Simon and Garfunkel

Ben arrives at the church just in time to save Elaine from the mistaken marriage. When he cries her name and splays himself against the church window in a **crucified** stance, she runs out of the church to join him. The adults are depicted as screaming madmen and madwomen. Ben uses a cross from the back of the church to fight off the fury of the adults and then to bar the door. He and Elaine jump on a city bus (public transportation for the children of millionaires!), and to the bemusement of the bus patrons, they ride off into the future to the accompaniment of strains of "The Sounds of Silence."

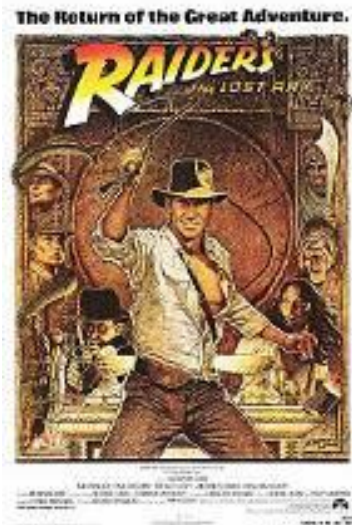
There is perhaps something a contradictory about **salvation** from one's parents' generation by marrying someone your own age, your own romantic choice, with whom you will live (somehow) happily ever after. It is unclear at the end of the film whether Ben and Elaine will start a new life that is "different", or whether they will end up with essentially the same choices and lifestyles of their parents.

These two films represent a **major break** in Hollywood movies in the late 1960s. They were **superior** in quality to almost any American movie made in the 1960s. They manifested a spirit of imagination, innovation, and a willingness to treat new subjects like politics and society that had been absent for some time. They also reflected the **disenchantment of many young people** in the USA in this period with the established structures of American politics and society. With hits such as 'Easy Rider' (1969) and 'Midnight Cowboy' (1969) and 'The Conversation' (1973) American movies maintained this critical, offbeat quality through the middle and late 1970s; this approach was a part of the Hollywood Renaissance that marks this period.

Main trends in American Movies in the 1970s, 1980s and Beyond:

* Some see the 1970s as perhaps a "golden age" of American movie-making, perhaps a second one after the studio era (1920-1955). Profits return, and an astounding variety of first-rate American movies, including movies by the "**Film School Generation**," (Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg, Lucas, etc.); all the latter manage to make commercially successful films through the mainstream system and yet appeal to critics and gain the status of "**auteurs**" (film "authors" akin to literature).

Movies of the early 1970s ('The Godfather', 'The Conversation,' etc.) continue the searching, satirical, sometimes offbeat, experimental and critical attitude of late 60s movies toward American society. The 'Godfather' series (1972, 1974) raises questions about the nature of American business and the American family; 'Apocalypse Now' (1979) explores the socio-psychological roots of the Vietnam War; Warren Beatty's 'The Parallax View' (1974) is a paranoid thriller where big business interests crush the little guy, and Martin Scorsese's 'Taxi Driver' (1976) vividly portrays the seamy side of life in the American city and raises questions about urban loneliness and alienation.



* Beginning in the 1950s in France and the 1960s in the USA, movies become an object of serious, academic study. The 60s and 70s see the beginnings of **film studies programs** at places like UCLA, the University of Southern California, and New York University, and the popularity of publications on film history and criticism. Sacramento State started a Film Studies Program in Fall 2008.

* **Technological changes** abound after about 1980 – VCRs, cable delivery of movie products, CD-ROM, DVD technology, etc. Films reach consumers in many ways aside from theater presentations. Many more people view films through rentals than in initial theater

presentations. Studio profits on individual releases depend less on domestic receipts in the USA, and more on foreign receipts (blockbusters and action movies are very popular abroad), on rentals for home viewing, and on income spinoff merchandise like lunch boxes, action figures, clothing, books, etc.

* The **blockbuster** strategy (make expensive movies with top stars, special effects, etc. with the expectation that they will take in a lot at the box office and make the studio a lot of money). Aside from 'The Sound of Music,' which was a huge success, it had not worked so well in the 1960s, but it comes back with a vengeance in the 70s. George Lucas and Steven Spielberg are the directors/entrepreneurs most closely associated with the blockbuster. The good business health of the industry has depended a lot on the blockbuster until the present. Marketing strategies include **extensive marketing** of the movies before release, significant **receipts from abroad** (especially Europe and the Far East), marketing of **spin-off merchandise** (clothing and 'Star Wars' action figures), a financially conservative reliance upon **sequels** and prequels (how many 'Star Wars', 'Rocky', 'Rambo', 'Spiderman', etc.?), and of course beginning about 1980 release to VHS and DVD for home viewing. Generally accepted thresholds for a movie qualifying as a blockbuster were \$100,000,000 in ticket sales in the 1970s and perhaps \$200,000,000 in the 21st century. Receipts in the theater releases are often less than the money earned by other means.

* After the middle 1970s, blockbusters tend to stress science fiction ('Star Wars'), fantasy ('E.T.') and military heroism (the Rambo series) in the "Reagan Era" of the 1980s. Many big American movies such as the 'Star Wars' series, 'Superman', 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' reference American popular culture of the early 20th century, usually focusing on action heroes with much nostalgia and affection. **Special effects** become very important for American movies, especially after the beginning of the 'Star Wars' series. Movies of the late 1970s and 1980s tend to be **more conservative** and nostalgic than the previous era, stressing the family, **traditional American values**, patriotism when confronted with outside threats, etc. When compared with the work of the 1970s, 'E.T. the



Independent filmmaker Neil La Bute

Extraterrestrial' (1983) oozes with affection for the American family and nostalgia for a happier past. Sylvester Stallone's 'Rambo' series plays on American military patriotism. 'Red Dawn' (1984) has America invaded by Soviet and Cuban forces that confiscate guns, defile popular American institutions like McDonald's, and set up concentration camps; patriotic Americans then bravely organize guerilla resistance to the Communist invaders.

* Beginning about 1990, **Independent Film Productions ("Indies")** provide an alternative outlet for creative people, who won't or can't work through the mainstream Hollywood system (Spike Lee, Woody Allen, Quentin Tarantino, John Dahl, Todd Solondz, Neil LaBute are examples of filmmakers who sometimes don't work with the studios). The introduction of digital filming techniques about this time greatly lowers costs thus encouraging movie production independent of the studios.



Al Pacino as Michael

Two Financially and Critically Successful Blockbusters in the 1970s and 1980s.

The following two films show the high quality, blockbuster entertainments put out by the **Film Brats** (members of the Film School Generation) and they provide interesting commentaries on the evolution of American culture and society from the 1970s to the 1980s – two very different decades in the evolution of American culture from the experimental and critical 1970s to the conservatism and nostalgia of the Reagan-inspired 1980s.

1) 'The Godfather' (1972) by **Francis Ford Coppola** was the first big hit of the film school generation in the 1970s. Coppola, who got his film degree at UCLA, did not have many successes before this film (he did receive an Academy Award for the screenplay for 'Patton' (1970), but he went on to have a successful career after this first smash hit. He was one of the "film brats," "the film school generation" that helped revive Hollywood after the doldrums of the 1960s. His films in this period employ traditional Hollywood visual style but, they share the socially analytical themes typical of the Vietnam years (1965-75).

The film is currently listed second on the American Film Institute's list of the greatest films in American cinematic history. *Entertainment Weekly* recently voted it the greatest film of all time. Vito Corleone's line "I am going to make him an offer he can't refuse" is one of the most remembered quotes in film history; only slightly less notorious is the widely used "It's not personal. It's strictly business". The score of Italian composer **Nino Rota** is famous and adds a romantic operatic quality to the film. The film was a smash box office hit, grossing \$81,500,000 in its initial run – 14 times its initial budget and marketing campaign. At the time it was the highest grossing film ever produced.

The excerpt viewed in class stretched from the family's meetings about what to do after the attempt on Don Corleone's life to Michael's murder of the "Turk" (Sollozzo) and his client, Captain McCluskey (Sterling Hayden) in an intimate New York restaurant.

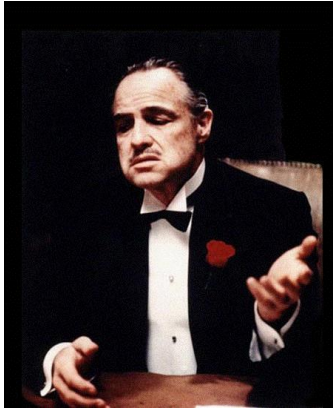
Sonny (James Caan), the hot-headed oldest brother, argues with Tom (Robert Duvall), the temporizer. In a series of dramatic scenes, **Michael, the younger brother, is transformed** from a callow war hero and college guy in a button-down collar to "maturity" and willingness to kill his family's enemies in the



Michael takes target practice in 'The Godfather'

interest of “business”; Coppola’s camera tracks in to his face at the moment he announces his change of heart.

He performs the murders in a bravura scene in **Louis’ restaurant**, where, after retrieving a handgun from the men’s restroom, he cold-bloodedly shoots both of his enemies twice in the head at close range.



Marlon Brando makes an offer we can’t refuse

The **baptism scene** later in the movie, where the author **crosscuts** aggressively between family scenes in church and the ruthless murders of members of opposing families, continues to juxtapose ironically Michael’s affectionate Catholic family life and his promise to “renounce the works of Satan” and the brutal violence of his mafia “business”.

The two scenes at the end of the film complete the portrayal of Michael’s transformation. After telling his brother-in-law that he is not going to kill him despite his betrayal to rival gangs, he has him strangled in the car taking him to the airport. In the last scene, his sister, Talia Shire, who is the sister of the murdered man, protests hysterically against Michael’s heartlessness and cruelty. When Kay (Diane Keaton), Michael’s wife, asks him whether he did it – did he kill Carlo – , Michael lies to her face, saying

‘No’. Michael still cares deeply about Kay and his family, but things have gone so far that he has to lie to her to reconcile the two contradictory parts of his life.

Coppola shows himself as a master of characterization (the four brothers are all different). He makes Michael into a sort of **tragic hero**, a nice fellow who would like to have been normal, but who is drawn by circumstances into the underworld at the head of the family. This theme is continued in ‘Godfather, Part II’ (1974), where Michael, despite his love for his family, decides to kill his brother Fredo, and in ‘Godfather, Part III’ (1990), where despite further attempts to extricate his family from the crime business, he has to witness the murder of his daughter. He dies in the last scene of the film, falling to the ground much as his father did in the first movie.

Coppola is also a **master storyteller**, who by a good script and appropriate direction keeps the viewer on the edge of his seat until the shots ring out. He plays constantly on the film’s main theme: although the Corleone brothers are affectionate family men (note how they eat take-out food together and hug each other goodbye when Michael leaves for the killing), they do not hesitate to kill in cold blood; family togetherness (eating, long wedding ceremonies) and Catholic religious practice coexist uncomfortably (for us) in this film with illegal activity and extreme violence. The film is implicitly critical of American culture, often drawing an implicit comparison between normal **American families** and businesses and the mafia families and their business.

2) The immortal **E.T., the Extraterrestrial** (1983) typifies the blockbuster approach of **Steven Spielberg**, who studied film at CSU Long Beach. In this film he creates a children’s fantasy that refers the viewer to the American suburbs and evokes a **warm nostalgic world** in which children and adults can feel safe. In films of the **Reagan Era** there is little left of the experimentation, upheaval and divisions typified in American movies such as ‘The Godfather’ ten years before.



The film was shot on a budget of \$10.5 million. When released, it was the biggest box office hit of all time, grossing \$352 million (!) by the end of its first theatrical run, with another \$1 billion in revenue from merchandising. Spielberg made an enormous amount of money from the film, pocketing as much as \$500,000 a day in the first weeks of release. It was received favorably by most American critics – Roger Ebert said “This is not simply a good movie. It is one of those movies that brush away our cautions and win our heart.” *Variety* called it “the best Disney movie that Walt Disney never made.” It was nominated for nine Academy Awards for 1983, winning four of them. The success of the film touched off a pop culture frenzy, leading to a 65% increase in the sale of **Reese’s Pieces** (Mars, the maker of M&Ms, had turned down Spielberg’s original offer) and every child in America saying “E.T. phone home.”

The film stars Henry Thomas, Dee Wallace, Peter Coyote, Drew Barrymore, who became an instant celebrity for her role as Elliot’s little sister. Superior children’s fantasy movie about encountering a visitor from another world, and deciding not to destroy, dissect, study, etc., but to love and support it, and help it return to its own parents. Very endearing and heart-warming throughout; **sentimental**, but saved from excess by Spielberg’s genuineness and good taste. Much **glowing supernatural mystery** with the hazy atmosphere and crane shots of the city’s street, the bluish night sky with the new moon (appearing emblematically in first part of movie) and the sparkling stars suggesting the intriguing mysteries of other worlds. The film includes a lot of mythic elements to be found in other film sources – discovery, rescue, and escape (‘Peter Pan’); death and resurrection (E.T.’s apparent death in the research facility parallels Jesus’ mission in the Bible); the trope of the missing father (Spielberg’s own experience \as a child); three creatures assist a stranger to find his way home (‘The Wizard of Oz’).



E.T. as the adorable child in Elliot’s closet

The film is set firmly in **American suburbia** in Southern California (it was filmed in Tujunga, a Los Angeles suburb); the family lives in a typical tract home, the kids swarm into the streets like locusts on Halloween; the final exciting extended chase takes place through graded lots and houses under construction. The **family is ‘typical,’** always tugging on the heartstrings; the mother, Mary, is pretty, competent and divorced and is teary eyed when she thinks of her husband off with another woman in Mexico; the kids bicker, but hang in there together when the going gets tough; they care about their mother’s feelings; Gertie (Drew Barrymore) misses her dad and generally is cute and adorable throughout. Elliot is a typical sweet kid, who is a little lonely; E.T. seems to be a projection of the imaginary companion that many lonely children invent. Spielberg said that the family situation in the film is derived from his own **childhood experience**, where he experienced the divorce of his parents and the absence of his father, and where he created an imaginary childhood friend to escape his sadness and loneliness.

Movie is definitely **kid’s eye** with few adult characters, aside from the mother, who finds out about E.T. pretty early on. Much of the film is shot deliberately from a low camera angle to simulate the experience of children. Kids hope and believe and are not “realistic”; they have the privilege of living in a world of make-believe, where they are not suspicious and accept creatures different from themselves. E.T., despite his bizarre appearance, is pretty much like any other kid: same desires, he misses his parents, he



learns by imitation, he can learn a foreign language quickly, etc. There is an extra-sensory parallel of powers between E.T. and Elliott, whereby E.T. heals Elliot's finger, and then Elliott raises E.T. from the dead.

The federal agents (**adults**) are faceless and threatening in the beginning; then they metamorphosed into rather sterile medical personnel as they perform endless tests on E.T. and pursue the kids when they try to bicycle the extraterrestrial back to the clearing to meet his parents. There is one good guy, Peter Coyote, who understands what childhood wonder and faith are like; and of course the Mom is loyal and helpful once she finds out what is going on.

Great **emblematic moments**: E.T. undiscovered by Mary because he looks like a stuffed animal in the closet; E.T. leaving the Reese's Pieces on Elliott's blanket; the kids on their bicycles levitating and pedaling in front of the oversized full moon; the sensitive close-ups of E.T.'s face; E.T., dressed up in clothes put on him by Gertie, with his bony finger points out the window up into the sky saying "E.T. Phone home". All performances are good, particularly Thomas, who shows real emotion.

The film's values are the ultimate in **family values**: tolerance and understanding across all frontiers, the sacredness of life, the healing power of love; the value of a close family; always stay loyal to your friends. Since the feelings are genuinely sweet, the film never seems saccharine.

The class viewed a **sequence toward the beginning of the film** stretching from our first contact with Elliot's family to the moment in which E.T. is safely hidden in the family home. The point of view is strictly children's eye; the mom is the only sympathetic adult, while faceless federal agents comb the city in search of the invader. The **mise-en-scène** is warm and mysterious – moist, misty nights with the new moon and electric lights shining through the misty penumbra. The extraterrestrial has landed plumb in the middle of **suburbia** on the outskirts of Los Angeles.



There are many observations about **American culture** – the family broken by the departure of the dad (and mom's loneliness), but they hang together; the kids play dungeons and dragons; they have a dog; they love pizza, they bicker among themselves and razz their mother. The developing connection between Elliot and E.T. is essentially **two children** of perhaps a different nationality getting to know one another; it happens slowly and tentatively, but unlike adults, who are more suspicious and isolated by experience, they are open to new experiences, no matter how fantastic (aside from the mother, the

only adults we have seen so far have no faces). The film celebrates the warmth and togetherness of **American family life**; we may not live in small-town America (think of 'Mr. Deeds Goes to Town'), but it is important to remain in touch with traditional family values.

Many **endearing and sentimental touches**; the new moon in the misty sky space between Elliot's house and the tool shed; Elliot and E.T. meeting amid the cornstalks and both squawking in terror (E.T.'s quieter voice is more like a cross between a cat purring and a pigeon cooing); E.T. approaching Elliot's chaise longue rather threateningly, but then simply dropping a bunch of Reese's Pieces on the blanket with his ugly hand; E.T. learning from Elliot how to speak and act.

After the widespread cynicism in movies in the 1970s, Americans were delighted to see a film that made them feel good about themselves. As a result of the artistic and financial (!) success of the film, the blockbuster strategy was more tempting than ever.

**Spielberg filming
'Raiders of the Lost Ark'**

Some Independent Movies Around 1990

An **independent film** (“**Indie**”) is a film made outside of the normal Hollywood studio system of production, often in a small independent studio. Independent studios of course date back to the days of the fight against the Motion Pictures Patent Company and the attempt by Mary Pickford and others to



The Sundance Film Festival

market their films outside the major studios through United Artists, but independently produced films declined greatly in importance during the heyday of the major studios from 1920 until the 1980s; the cost of producing a movie on film (film stock, film crew, post-production facilities, etc.) made it difficult for smaller production companies to compete. Examples of independently produced films before the 1990s include King Vidor’s ‘Our Daily Bread’ (1934), The ‘Race Films’ produced for Black audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, youth-oriented sexploitation films of Roger Corman in the 1960s, Blaxploitation films of the 1970s, and of course hardcore pornographic films in the 1970s. There were also many independently produced avant-garde films in the decades following World War II.

Most of the films in the **1970s and 1980s** that seemed independent – ‘Midnight Cowboy’, Peter Bogdanovich’s ‘The Last Picture Show’, Francis Ford Coppola “Godfather” series, Woody Allen’s annual films, – were largely studio projects. While these films were usually conceived and produced outside the studios, the studios provided much of the financing and distribution services.

The arrival in the early 1990s of **high resolution digital video** and non-linear editing performed on home computers made it again possible to produce films outside of the reach of the major studios. The production and distribution arrangements are often confusing. Some of the independent film producers are small studios not controlled by the majors, while others, like Sony Picture Classics and Fox Searchlight, are subsidiaries of the major studios. Many of the independently produced films have been produced with distribution arrangements with the major studios, and thus may not have been as autonomous as others – such films as ‘Pulp Fiction’ (1994) are sometimes called “Semi-Indies”. About two-thirds of the independent films are produced in Los Angeles, the rest in **New York**. They are often featured and marketed through independent film festivals such as Robert Redford’s **Sundance Film Festival** and the Cannes Film Festival in France. Independent films comprise something around 15% of box office revenue in the USA.



Indie Director John Dahl: “Red Rock West 1992, ‘The Last Seduction 1994

The new independent structures have enabled the rise of filmmakers, who probably would never have seen the light of day in the era of studio domination. The independent filmmaker, who is often an independent, “artistic” personality, does not usually have to answer to studio bosses, and thus has a lot of **artistic autonomy**; the budget is smaller, and often the actors are not stars. The result is that independent films are able to “segment”, i.e., appeal to (often more adult) tastes outside the normal “High Concept” Hollywood fare, and thus to be more experimental and to **try new ideas**, new directors, and new actors. Independent films are often more personal, philosophical, more challenging and edgy, etc. They are a godsend for filmgoers disillusioned with the blandness, sameness and often immaturity of the mainstream Hollywood product.

A look at films of Woody Allen, Spike Lee, and Quentin Tarantino may help to understand the variety brought to American movies since the 1980s by the Independents (and semi-Independents). **These three films** are extremely different, but each provides aspects of film experience that one does not often find in mainstream films – crude language (Lee and Tarantino), non-linear narratives (Tarantino), existentialist philosophical issues (Allen), realistic look at racism (Lee); each deals with a different social group – Allen with middle-class Jewish intellectuals, Lee with working class ethnic minorities in tense neighborhoods, Tarantino with gangsters and their associates.



1) Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Pulp Fiction’ (1994) is profane, violent, technically brilliant, and less thematically oriented than Lee’s and Allen’s films.

Pulp Fiction features John Travolta, Samuel L. Jackson, Uma Thurman, Bruce Willis, Harvey Keitel, Maria de Madeiros, Christopher Walken.

The film is a crazy ride through characters associated with a crime boss, Marcellus (Vic Rhames). Everything in the film is unpredictable: characters are always in difficult situations, and then escape ... into stickier ones (Willis escaping

Travolta, into the hands of Rhames, and then into the leather shop, where he falls into the hands of biker S&M gay rapists). The first time through you are completely surprised time after time (reminds one of the big jolt in ‘Psycho’); the second time you are looking for meaning, but you end up thinking there really isn’t any – e.g., what in the world is the meaning of the McGuffin-like glowing briefcase, except perhaps a reference to ‘Kiss Me Deadly’ and ‘Repo Man?’ The movie doesn’t seem to be about life, but is an extremely formalist excursion through the imagination of Tarantino, which in turn is based on the pulp level of American popular fiction, and perhaps of American movies (private eye flicks?).

Movie has extreme energy and **momentum** – the viewer is never bored for a minute, always the unexpected laugh or shock that keeps you involved. Tarantino loves to mix incongruous elements.

Dialogue is often very entertaining and “**off the wall**”, having little relation to the plot line. A good example is the first scene when Travolta and Jackson, on the way to a “hit” for Marcellus after a failed drug deal, talk about McDonald’s in France (Travolta tells us that the Quarter Pounder is known as the “Royal” in France because they measure weight on the metric system); then they **debate** in a almost

formal fashion – with one gangster taking the “pro” side and the other the “con” – whether a foot massage is a sexual act and whether the poor guy who gave a foot massage to Marcellus’ wife deserved to be thrown out of a window. When they finish and prepare to enter the apartment, Jules says “Let’s get into character.”



Jules and Vincent take aim in ‘Pulp Fiction’ 1994

After the two hit men enter the apartment, they terrorize the “yuppie” drug dealers in steadily escalating innuendoes and threats, and then execute them with multiple gunshots to the accompaniment of a **biblical verse** (Ezekiel 25:17 – “I will execute on them sore retribution by acts of furious chastisement, and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I carry out My punishment upon them.”).

Characters are extremely off-beat. **Travolta is rather taciturn and marginally competent** (Thurman overdoses on his date; he kills an assistant by mistake because Jackson hit a bump in the car; he gets himself killed because he didn't take sufficient precautions when he was going to the bathroom), but he is willing to debate heatedly with Jackson. Jackson is a charismatic leader, rather intellectual, and very precise in his expression reminding one of a good professor or a good debater (did Tarantino go to college?). Madeiros is very cute and naïve, and yet attached to burly boxer Willis, who in turn adores her and calls her "lemon pie." Thurman is young, cute, elusive, likes to have fun, seems to be flirting heavily with Travolta, but then overdoses silently and privately until the crisis. Keitel is very businesslike, the expert who knows his job (cleaning up the car messed up by Travolta's accident!) and just gets the job done. Rhames is bulldog-like, demands respect, and is horrified that he has been raped by the S&M guys in the shop basement. Walken is hilarious delivering the history of the gold (?) watch to child Willis in deadpan fashion, and then handing it to him after describing how many "asses" it has been hidden in (the child innocently takes it).

Film has convoluted time line: after first two stories, it focuses on Willis story, and then flashes back to follow Travolta, "after" he has already been killed by Willis. The main plot development is that Jackson decides to quit the business and to wander the earth like a samurai warrior (Travolta counters that we call that living like a bum), whereas Travolta decides to stay, and he is killed by Willis in the latter's apartment. Movie wild roller-coaster ride; terrifically entertaining movie experience.

2) **Spike Lee** is perhaps the most gifted of the African-American filmmakers that began to make feature films in the 1980s. Despite controversial subject matter such as race and ethnic tensions, he has managed to make a lot of his movies more or less in the studio system. Most critics think the quality of his films has declined over the years. 'Do the Right Thing' was released by Universal Studios.



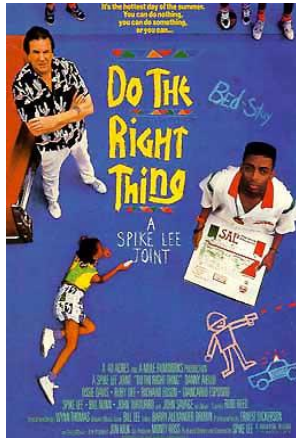
Do the Right Thing (1989) features Spike Lee, **Danny Aiello, John Turturro**, Richard Edson, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Bill Nunn (**Radio Rahim**), Giancarlo Esposito as the angry Buggin' Out, and Samuel J. Jackson, the disc jockey who presides over the day's events from his local radio station.

Spike Lee

'Do the Right Thing' (1989) is a very '**obnoxious**' movie about racial tensions in **Bedford-Stuyvesant** section of Brooklyn. It takes place on a very hot day, and racial tensions escalate resulting in the burning of Sal's pizzeria. There is much **hostility and tension among all racial groups** – focus on Blacks, but also Koreans, who have opened a grocery store across the street from Sal's, Puerto Ricans, who object only to Rahim's very loud '**Public Enemy**' music, the white cops, who can't stand the 'useless' minorities, and of course **Italians**, who as usual are the bad guys in Lee's movies (John Turturro is the most racist), who seem even to hate one another but hang together in a kind of clan belonging. Nothing poetic or quiet; everybody **loud**, in your face, loud music, a lot of shouting, and extremely **profane**.

Mookie (Spike Lee) is the narrative focus; a skeptical, moderate guy, who works for Sal and who tries to stay friends with both Blacks and Italians, and toward the end to keep the peace; but for some reason that is not clear in the movie, he is the one who, after Rahim is killed by the police, **starts the riot** by throwing a garbage can through Sal's window.

Radicals are Esposito and Rahim; moderates are the old folks, the Mayor and Mother/Sister. Lee is affectionate but impatient with three older black guys who sit on the corner (including “Sweet Dick” Willie) and express their opinions about everything, but who never act; they complain about the Koreans taking their jobs and money, but then Sweet Dick Willie, who is annoyed with one of his buddies when the latter complains about racism, crosses the street to buy another beer from the Korean store owners.

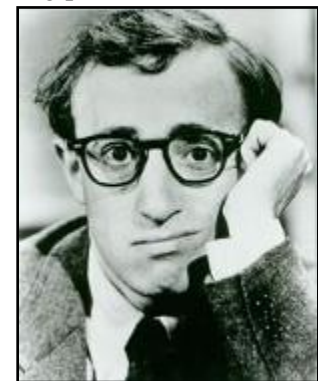


Lee’s camera is quite subjective, moving from face to face, on one occasion with individuals from all racial groups shouting racial epithets at the camera in **an insult montage**, and ending with the radio station announcer (Samuel L. Jackson) telling everyone to **cool it**. The color palette of the film is bright and garish.

The film **ends in violence** beginning with the confrontation between Sal and Rahim (and Buggin’ Out) in the pizzeria over putting some pictures of Blacks on the walls of the restaurant (all the pictures are of Italian Americans), then the death of Rahim at the hands of the police. By throwing a trash can through the window of the pizzeria, Mookie kicks off the looting and burning down of Sal’s. But the mood in the street the next morning is subdued and in the case of Mookie remorseful. Lee ends movie with two printed quotations, one from MLK denouncing violence as no solution under any circumstances, and the other from Malcolm X seemingly justifying violence under certain conditions, i.e., in “self-defense;” – quite an ambiguous ending, some think irresponsibly so.

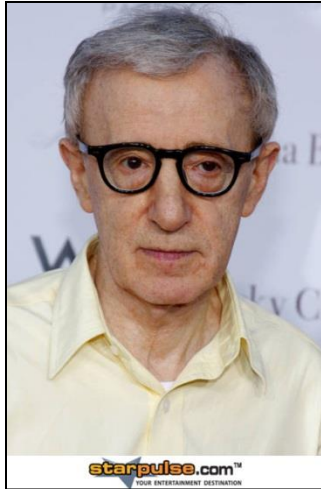
A lot of imagination went into this film, and Lee has to get credit for making a movie about **racism and violence**, and inventing a style to express it. Through the character of Mookie, he seems to lean in the direction of non-violence. In style and theme ‘Do the Right Thing’ could hardly be more different from ‘Crimes and Misdemeanors’.

1) Woody Allen’s movies have always been deeply **personal and philosophical**: most of them take place in his beloved **New York**, which is always presented as a lovely, artistically striking place featured on a lovely, sunny fall day; his characters, including the eternally neurotic Allen, are **educated**, cultivated middle class people obsessed – or at least worried – about love, sex, death, God, and the search for the meaning of life. Allen’s characters often talk like they just got out of **philosophy** class at Columbia University; his film idol was the gloomy Swedish film director Ingmar **Bergman**, who popularized existentialist philosophy (there is no God and your life is what you make of it) among American art house habitués. His films are filled with affection for old Hollywood movies (lots of *homages*) and the great popular music of classic musicals and the Big Band era. His filmmaking style is mostly talky classical Hollywood.



‘**Crimes and Misdemeanors**’ (Woody Allen, 1989) is a morality tale (mixed with hilarious comedy) by Woody Allen and in the instructor’s view **A Young Woody Allen** one of his best movies. Roger Ebert calls it “a thriller about the dark night of the soul”. Allen takes the risk of constructing **two separate stories** through most of the movie, and then joining them only in the last scene. One story is about **Judah** (Martin Landau), a fabulously successful and wealthy eye doctor, who has his brother (Jerry Orbach) murder his overanxious mistress (Anjelica Huston), and who after a time of guilt and near confession, “gets over it” and goes on with his glamorous life, as if nothing had happened. The other is about **Cliff** (Woody Allen), a moderately gifted filmmaker, who suffers in comparing his own life with that of his brother-in-law, Lester (Alan Alda), an enormously successful, albeit obnoxious producer of sitcoms. Cliff has fallen in love with Halley (Mia Farrow) but is making

little headway with her. The overall question is whether there is justice in this world and **whether God watches over us** to ensure the good are rewarded and the evil punished. There doesn't seem to be much of it; Cliff is fired and loses his girlfriend Mia Farrow to the insufferable Lester. Not only is Judah not punished for his crime, but he positively prospers as a wealthy ophthalmologist lionized by the community; his wife (Claire Bloom) is beautiful, stylish, and supportive.



A much older Allen

The class viewed several scenes. In one a guilt-ridden Judah returns in his imagination to a **Seder table** held by his father in his childhood; the scene has a spirited debate between the traditional God-fearing Jews, who think that God presides over a moral universe where He rewards virtue and punishes evil, and the free-thinkers who think that God is absent, and that the virtuous have no help from God but they will be happy if they watch out for themselves and are lucky. The idea – a visitor from the future walking through his past without essentially being noticed by the characters who are there – was imitated from one of Allen's film heroes, **Ingmar Bergman**. The same theodicy issue (does a just God exist?) is treated in Allen's 2005 film 'Match Point', where his answer to the question depends, so to speak, on the bounce of a tennis ball; after some suspense, he comes to the same conclusion in the latter film – we are on our own and bad guys can get away with murder.

Another scene viewed was a rough cut of the **documentary** that Cliff had been commissioned to make about the creative abilities of Lester. The finished film is hilariously negative, showing Lester having a tantrum and abusing his employees for not coming up with funnier lines and trying to seduce one of his assistants in the corner of a conference room; the film compares Lester to **Mussolini** (Fascist dictator of Italy) and Francis the Talking Mule. Needless to say, Cliff is fired; he just doesn't understand why (he still believes in immanent justice).

The **long concluding scene** takes place at a wedding party; everyone seems happy and celebrating; the children are sneaking icing off the wedding cake, the adults are chatting about love and family, the father (Ben Waterston who has gone blind) is dancing with his daughter. Woody Allen delivers some good one-liners ("The last time I was inside a woman was when I visited the Statue of Liberty."). He also learns, to his shock, that **Halley has become engaged to Lester**. Cliff cannot understand how she could fall for such a pompous ass; he is devastated.

The movie concludes in a private conversation between the **two protagonists, Judah and Cliff**, thus joining the two narratives of the film for the first time. In a disguised confession (Judah must still have some feelings of guilt), Judah recounts the murder of his mistress, and how he has "forgotten" about it and moved on happy with his storybook life. He leaves the room with his wife, the beautiful Claire Bloom, planning their future together. Cliff is left alone with his thoughts. The film concludes with a montage of key scenes in the movie with a voiceover by a **Jewish existential philosopher**, who suggests that in the modern age we are the product of our own choices, that we are all responsible for making our own happiness in our own way, and that small pleasures like family (the little girls at the wedding party, the radiant bride and groom) and work (watching old movies and making them) will have to suffice in the absence of great spiritual meaning in life. One thinks of John Huston in his prime.



Mia Farrow: the jerk gets the Girl in "Crimes and Misdemeanors"



Martin Landau and Woody Allen in the final scene

Judah says at the end of the film that if you want to find **meaning or salvation in life** with characters happy once they find what they want or ennobled through suffering, then you should watch a “Hollywood movie”; what he and Cliff are talking about is **reality**, the way the world really is, where the idiots prosper (Lester of course), the innocent are often punished, and the guilty go scot free (i.e., Judah, who will not be punished for the murder of his mistress). We may not like it, but that is the way things are. Allen can’t resist ending one of his best films with a little slam against Hollywood.