

Chapter 9

CINEMATIC CLASS STRUGGLE AFTER THE DEPRESSION

This chapter examines the marked swings in attitude about American capitalism and class issues that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century – and how those swings affected what was shown on the nation’s movie screens. World War II attempted to unite the nation across class boundaries (and to a lesser extent, across racial and gender boundaries), but during the immediate postwar period, powerful capitalists in business and government sought to reconsolidate their interests by dividing the nation once again. They did so by exploiting the Red Scare, accusing labor organizers and leftist, socialist thinkers of being communist, and therefore, in the eyes of some people, un-American. By the 1960s, members of the counterculture were rebelling against the conformity and materialism of the 1950s, and voicing a strong critique of capitalist exploitation (as well as racism, sexism, and the war in Vietnam). By the 1980s, the pendulum had swung back in the other direction, and material wealth and greedy acquisitiveness were once again celebrated in dominant ideology and national culture. The early 1990s saw yet another backlash to American materialism due to the rise of slackers, young people who, like their 1960s precursors, sought to drop out of a capitalist system that they felt was corrupt and unjust. In the first years of the twenty-first century, recessions in the American economy loomed again, forcing more and more individuals to question the actual benefits of unchecked or deregulated capitalism. The various failures of and challenges to capitalism over the last 50 years have necessitated a strong ideological agenda to maintain capitalist supremacy, and most American movies have done their part to uphold the nation’s economic base and class structure.

From World War II to the Red Scare

Although the Roosevelt administration initiated a number of socialist-inspired acts and programs to reverse the slide of the Great Depression, the biggest spur to

the national condition occurred with the shift to a wartime economy. The need to speedily produce tanks, ships, planes, and other weaponry for American and Allied armed forces created an abundance of jobs. As men left their peacetime jobs and entered the war effort as soldiers and sailors, the need for industrial workers expanded so much that women were encouraged to enter the workforce in unprecedented numbers. By the early 1940s, unemployment in the United States was virtually non-existent. American unions also seemed to gather greater strength during these war years. Major unions, including IATSE, agreed to hold off strikes while the war was being waged, and since workers were in such demand, many unions were able to garner better pay and safer working conditions for their members. Yet, while the war years seemed to signal an end to worries about the viability of capitalism – especially with so much war propaganda promoting the triumph of “the American way” – some signs that there were doubts about the system still appeared. Wildcat strikes (not sanctioned by national unions) occurred regularly during the war, and some industrialists were accused of war profiteering, that is, overcharging the government for materials in this time of need.

By the end of the war, a growing number of pulp novels (roughly equivalent to dime novels of the early 1900s) and films were painting a picture of American life as grubby, dark, and filled with greed and selfishness. Sometimes grouped together as “hard-boiled” literature, the detective novels of Raymond Chandler and the bleak tales of James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich focused on characters who were willing to do anything for wealth and power – seduction, blackmail, even murder. While these written works had gained in popularity throughout the Depression, many of them first made it to the screen around the end of World War II, initiating an important cycle of films that French critics termed film noir, because of the films’ gritty night-time settings and even darker subject matter. Films like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and *Out of the Past* (1947) seemed to express doubts about what exactly American soldiers had been fighting to protect. The main characters in film noir can often be found leading lives of quiet desperation, feeling trapped in their economic situation, having failed to attain their version of the American Dream. The plots then revolve around the illegal and immoral schemes these characters make in order to achieve their dreams. However, true to the Production Code’s mandates, their actions lead not to freedom and wealth, but to an even greater sense of entrapment, paranoia, guilt, or death.

As might be suspected from that brief description, film noir is unrelentingly pessimistic about American culture and the American way of life. Some of these films provide a fairly explicit critique of capitalism, and this makes them similar to the social problem film that was also a trend in postwar Hollywood filmmaking (although there were few of these that dared treat capitalism itself as a social problem). Indeed, certain writers and directors specifically used film noir in order to communicate such a critique. Screenwriter Carl Foreman’s script for *Champion* (1949) uses an aggressive boxer (played by Kirk Douglas) as a metaphor for the cannibalistic competitiveness of capitalism, a competitiveness that leads to the boxer’s doom just as he wins the national title. In another example, screenwriter/

director Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) follows a man (John Garfield) so caught up in trying to get ahead in a money-driven society that he betrays his friends and family, acts that lead to tragedy.

Such cinematic critiques of the system began appearing after the war just as the major studios began a concerted effort to rein in the power of the unions. Although 1946 was one of the most profitable years in Hollywood's history, movie attendance began to plummet in the following years. Americans began moving to the suburbs and away from urban theaters, and television began to grow in popularity as a rival to film. Hollywood was also confronted with anti-trust rulings (the so-called Paramount Consent Decrees first issued in 1948) that caused more economic hardship for the studios. In response, Hollywood executives again began slashing payrolls and canceling contracts. More and more film workers began to be treated as independent contractors and not studio employees. They lost the security of ongoing employment, and had no guarantee of maximum hours or benefits. In response to these developments, a number of major strikes erupted during these years, strikes that sometimes escalated into pitched battles outside studio gates, complete with overturned cars, lead pipes, tear gas, and fire hoses.

The response by the studios (and big business in general) to such strikes was to accuse labor organizers of being communists. With the Cold War against the Soviet Union just beginning, the Red Scare – paranoia about communist infiltration – was growing to a fever pitch. Accusing dissatisfied American workers of communist sympathies had the effect of branding them as dangerous, international traitors who were trying to destroy America from within. At this time, the Congressional committee called HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) began to hold hearings to investigate whether communists were running rampant throughout the nation's industries, including Hollywood. Certain studio executives (such as Walt Disney and Louis B. Mayer) used the opportunity to name and defame union organizers who had challenged them. In 1947, when HUAC called 10 suspected screenwriters and directors to testify before them (including Polonsky, director of *Force of Evil*), many of them invoked their Constitutional rights and refused to answer the committee's questions about their political beliefs. Rather than respecting these rights, however, the committee indicted and imprisoned most of these men, who collectively became known as the Hollywood Ten.

Such actions threw Hollywood into a panic. Some actors and directors attempted to band together in support of the Hollywood Ten, but to little avail. Public sentiment against alleged communist infiltration had been whipped up so strongly that most Americans were willing to let essential American freedoms such as speech, thought, and assembly be curtailed. Individuals who had joined leftist, socialist, or communist groups during the years of the Great Depression were now considered traitors, rather than part of the American give-and-take, free-speech debate, political process. As noted in chapter 3, Jewish film workers and executives were especially worried, since a common anti-Semitic ideology of the era already equated communism with Jews. In order to distance themselves from possible accusations, Hollywood moguls met together and agreed not to hire anyone who was under even the slightest suspicion of being a communist. Under this system born of fear

and hysteria, even an unsubstantiated rumor was enough to bar someone from employment.

The blacklist of those barred included thousands of film workers (actors, writers, directors, etc.) and destroyed the careers of many talented people. Many never worked in films again, some died from stress and humiliation, and some committed suicide. A few writers, such as *Champion's* Carl Foreman, were able to continue writing under false names (or fronts), while actors and directors were forced to move into theater or leave the profession altogether. The blacklist in Hollywood (and television) lasted into the 1960s, when the changing tenor of the times finally acknowledged the abuses of civil, human, and Constitutional rights caused by the Red Scare. But throughout the 1950s, the blacklist helped to keep Hollywood moguls powerful and local unions in check – anyone who attempted to organize or call a strike could be easily accused of communist sympathies. The major national unions were of no help, since they were just as fearful of losing their power base. Consequently, both the studios and IATSE fully cooperated with HUAC investigations and the formation and enforcement of various blacklists.

The fear of being branded a communist substantially affected the subject matter of film noir and effectively ended the social problem film altogether. Now, film noir detectives began searching for Soviet spies instead of tracking greedy murderers and blackmailers. And any film that tried to examine social conditions in the country was viewed as chancy and dangerous, unless it was understood to support the status quo of the blacklist era. For example, Elia Kazan was one of the foremost directors of social problem films in the late 1940s (including *Gentlemen's Agreement* [1947] and *Pinky* [1949]), before he cooperated with HUAC and named suspected communists. A few years later Kazan won an Oscar for directing *On the Waterfront* (1954), a film in which mobsters, trying to control a union of dock workers, are defeated by a single hero who testifies about them before a congressional committee. Many people understood the film to be a thinly veiled valorization of Kazan's own actions before HUAC, and even by the 1990s, many Hollywood insiders had not yet forgiven him. (When he received a special honorary Oscar in 1998, many in the audience refused to stand or even applaud.) More regularly, Hollywood films of the era ignored politics altogether, and went about celebrating materialism and the glories of capitalist excess.

One independent film of the era, *Salt of the Earth* (1953), actually dared to confront the problems of capitalist exploitation in a direct manner. Made by blacklisted filmmakers, and based on actual events, the film was financed by the Mine, Mill, and Smelters Union, which itself was kicked out of the national CIO labor union for supposed communist ties. The film follows a group of Mexican American workers who strike against a racist and exploitative mining company. Not only does the film champion the rights of the working man, it also addresses issues of gender. For example, when the men are imprisoned for striking, the women take to the picket lines, even over the objections of their men. In this way, the film dramatizes how sexism is a social concept that can be used to divide rather than unite the working class. The movie was outspokenly socialist in its sympathies. Right-wing vigilantes continually disrupted its filming and, when it was finally completed, dis-

tributors and exhibitors refused to handle it. In such conservative times, a movie critical of the capitalist system was tantamount to a treasonous betrayal of the United States itself.

From Opulence to Counterculture

The dissenting voice of *Salt of the Earth* was a lone cry in the wilderness. Throughout the 1950s, Hollywood more regularly produced escapist entertainment: historical epics, opulent musicals, and lush comedies. The content of most of these films unabashedly celebrates materialism and conspicuous consumption. Homes were bigger, cars were faster, and everything was newer and brighter. Also, the films themselves were sold as lavish and expensive productions, with the implication being that their bigger budgets made them better films. (The fact that many Hollywood epics of the era were produced overseas in order to exploit cheaper labor was not widely publicized.) Comedies and musicals like *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), *Sabrina* (1954), and *Funny Face* (1957) showcase an abundance of fashion, furniture, cars, and new consumer goods for audiences to appreciate, envy, and eventually purchase. The musical *Silk Stockings* (1957) makes an explicit comparison between American consumer capitalism (represented by Fred Astaire as a Hollywood producer) and the joyless, drab Soviet world (embodied by Cyd Charisse as a Russian agent). In the end, the Russian agent realizes she too wants what American capitalism has to offer – namely a husband (Astaire) who will buy her expensive evening gowns and the titular silk stockings.

Any criticism of American capitalism happened between the lines, in subtle and obscure ways. *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957) could disparage 1950s corporate lifestyles because the film was presented as a gaudy sex comedy. Director Douglas Sirk also provided a critique of upper- and middle-class repression in melodramas such as *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), and *Written on the Wind* (1956). Many other melodramas, including *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Picnic* (1955), and *The Apartment* (1960), also offered subtle critiques of class and/or the corporate lifestyle. These critiques reflected what was occurring in culture-at-large. American life in general was becoming increasingly conformist, with both blue-collar and white-collar men feeling trapped in their work routines. Wives and mothers, surrounded by new “time-saving” gadgets in the home, often felt bored and trapped in their suburban tract homes. People of color were tired of being stuck in low-paying jobs and renewed their fight against the racism that was keeping them from realizing their American Dreams. The younger generation in particular seemed to rebel against the confining structures of 1950s life. Not remembering the economic hardships of the Great Depression, teenagers and college students increasingly refused to ignore the unhappiness that lay beneath the veneer of their supposedly happy suburban lifestyle.

The growth of the Beat movement during this era signaled a dissatisfaction with the status quo. The Beats were writers and avant-garde filmmakers like Jack Kerouac,

Allen Ginsberg, Alfred Leslie, and Robert Frank, who, in their work, vocally disdained the crass materialism of 1950s America. They espoused the philosophy and practice of hitting the open road – traveling the nation almost like gypsies – in order to escape the conformity and phoniness of middle-class suburban lifestyles. The Beats' critique evolved and throughout the 1960s they were joined by other voices of dissent, including those of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and homosexuals. These large, loose social movements of people were often referred to collectively as the counterculture, because they all countered the dominant middle-class culture. Importantly, the counterculture also included people who protested against US involvement in the Vietnam war. Demonstrators pointed out the economic links between the Vietnam war and the national economy: maintaining involvement in warfare – whether it was World War II, the Cold War, or the Vietnam war – helped to keep the US economy flourishing. Ties between military and corporate interests, the so-called military-industrial complex, were seen as driving national economic policy, exploiting poor people both at home and abroad. The lives of both Vietnamese peasants and poor Americans (who, due to lack of options, made up a large portion of the armed forces) were understood as fodder for the machinations of the military-industrial complex, which was, in effect, turning human lives into economic gain. In response to such critiques, a large portion of the younger generation (and many others who agreed with these viewpoints) attempted to reject American capitalism and find new ways of living. Many openly espoused communist ideals, “dropping out” of the capitalist system and experimenting with new ways of organizing social structures, such as communal living and/or a return to agrarian lifestyles.

Hollywood did a poor job of responding to the concerns of the counterculture, if and when it acknowledged them at all. Hollywood studios (as they always had) promoted capitalism and the status quo, and countercultural audiences had little interest in seeing multimillion-dollar blockbusters like *Doctor Dolittle* (1967) or *The Happiest Millionaire* (1967). Many members of the counterculture turned to independent and avant-garde films for more enlightened and enlightening cinema. The so-called New American Cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s had grown out of Beat filmmaking and new advances in 16 mm film production. Filmmakers like Lionel Rogosin (*On the Bowery* [1956]) and Shirley Clarke (*The Cool World* [1963]) made intimate documentaries that explored social issues in America. John Cassavetes explored working-class lives and issues in hand-made fictional films such as *Shadows* (1957), *Faces* (1968), and *A Woman under the Influence* (1974). An occasional actor and director in Hollywood, Cassavetes always returned to low-budget independent filmmaking to make the kinds of films he wanted to make – those that explored issues that Hollywood films would not touch.

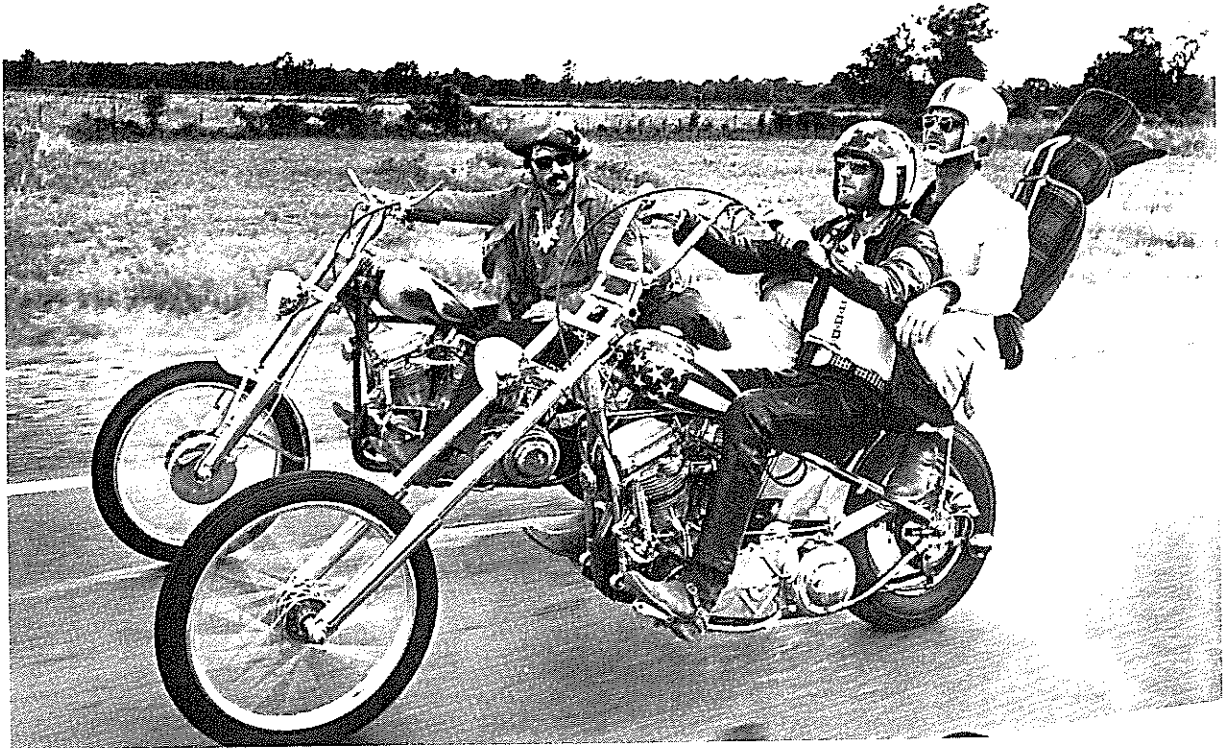
Countercultural audiences also turned to collective documentary filmmaking groups such as Newsreel for information about topics that corporate-owned news organizations failed to cover. For entertainment, the urban counterculture turned increasingly to foreign cinema and underground film. Underground film was a loosely defined avant-garde movement that often rejected (or made fun of) conventional Hollywood subject matter and style. And just like the filmmakers of the

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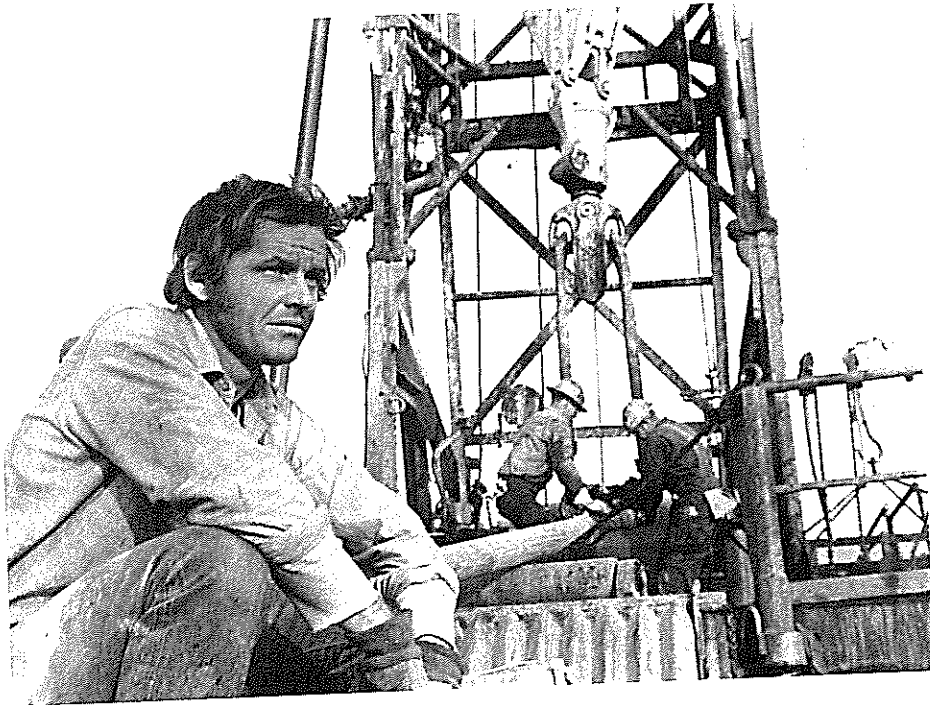
American Cinema, these avant-garde filmmakers often worked in collective, communal, and improvisational ways. The films of pop artist Andy Warhol, made in collaboration with his friends and acquaintances, specifically lampooned the Hollywood myth that anyone could become a star. By literally taking dispossessed people off the street (including hustlers, drug addicts, and drag queens) and putting them into films as "superstars," Warhol's group satirized Hollywood's version of the Horatio Alger myth. Director John Waters, who made outrageous fictional movies in the tradition of underground film, also cast a variety of marginalized people to star in his gleeful satires of middle-class pretension and competitiveness (*Flamingos* [1972]), *Female Trouble* [1975], *Desperate Living* [1977]). Furthermore, in trying to counteract the prevailing concept of cinema as a business (one controlled solely by capitalist interests), both the New American Cinema and underground filmmakers explored new methods of distribution and exhibition. Rather than battling to be shown in mainstream theaters, their films were typically exhibited at film festivals, midnight screenings, or even big parties and concerts. With younger people turning away from Hollywood films in droves, and older audiences opting to stay home and watch television, the major studios faced a steady recession toward the end of the 1960s. Throughout the decade, many of them were bought out by large corporate conglomerates that continually hired and fired studio executives in the hope of finding someone who could hit upon a winning box office formula. Younger filmmakers – many of whom considered themselves to be part of the counterculture – suddenly found they were in positions of power in Hollywood, and some films of the era did begin to address countercultural issues, albeit in highly mediated forms. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Graduate* (1967), for example, sided with young outsiders battling against conformity and the established order of capitalist America. Both films also used stylistic techniques that were experimental by Hollywood standards (such as jump cuts, handheld cameras, and zoom lenses). In 1969, one low-budget independent film wedded the Beat philosophy of hitting the road to a countercultural critique of America. *Easy Rider* (1969) tells the story of two young men on the fringes of society (played by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper) who go on the road "in search of America." Their motorcycle journey brings them into contact with a cross-section of late 1960s America: hippy communes, farmers, the police, drug dealers, small town Americans, prostitutes, and rednecks. In the end, having failed to find any real truth or meaning in their search for America, they are brutally shot to death by two men in a pick-up truck, men who see the youthful travelers as un-American and ultimately less than human. While the film was obviously very different from typical Hollywood fare, Columbia decided to distribute it, and it became one of the year's biggest box office successes.

As its ending implies, *Easy Rider* is a pessimistic film, and its critique of American culture extends to the youth movement as well as to the nation's more established institutions. For a brief moment, the film's success ushered in some films that examined American culture in serious and/or satiric ways. Films such as *Five Easy Pieces* (1970, directed by Bob Rafelson), *Harold and Maude* (1972, directed by Hal Ashby), and *Mean Streets* (1973, directed by Martin Scorsese) all attempted



Easy Rider (1969) was a pessimistic account of the American Dream gone sour.
Easy Rider, copyright © 1969, Columbia

to show both the emptiness of American capitalism and the tragic consequences facing lower-class people who still chased after the American Dream of material success. Having knowledge of film history, some of these filmmakers used old Hollywood genres and styles to express their sentiments. For example, Robert Altman reworked the Western in *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971), showing how American corporate greed was the true villain of the old West, and not “bloodthirsty redskins.” Similarly, Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (1971) employed stylistic techniques associated with Western director John Ford in order to depict the gradual economic death of a small Texas town. Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) used film noir conventions to explore the social and sexual corruption of the wealthy and powerful. Martin Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) reworked the domestic melodrama to tell the story of a widowed working-class mother trying to survive. And Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975) is a revisionist musical that exposes – among other things – the desperation of working-class people trying to “make it big” in the country music industry.



Five Easy Pieces (1970) starred Jack Nicholson as a man plagued by the emptiness of American capitalist culture. *Five Easy Pieces*, copyright © 1970, BBS/Columbia

Many of these sophisticated and self-conscious films about American culture (and the relation of Hollywood to that same culture) were made by filmmakers who collectively became known as the Film School Brats. They were the first generation of American filmmakers who had gone to film school, where they were exposed to ideas about how Hollywood film relates to American culture-at-large. At first, some of these young filmmakers were interested not only in making more leftist, politically engaged films, but also in trying to change how Hollywood itself was structured. For example, producer Bert Schneider left his job at Columbia to help form the independent company BBS, and proceeded to aid the careers of various countercultural and politically radical artists. BBS produced *Easy Rider* and Schneider himself helped finance the making of *Hearts and Minds* (1974), a documentary that condemned US involvement in Vietnam. Francis Ford Coppola, one of the first Film School Brats to get directorial work at the major studios, decided to break away from the Hollywood system by starting American Zoetrope in 1969. Putting its headquarters in San Francisco instead of Los Angeles, American Zoetrope was initially envisioned as a filmmaking commune – with people contributing to a film in a variety of capacities rather than according to the traditional Hollywood division of labor. BBS, Zoetrope, and other independent companies at the time hoped for a restructuring of how American cinema was made – one that would foster creativity and no longer be beholden to market interests. However, such hopes would be mostly unfulfilled.

Box: Class on Television

Arguably, American television has historically presented more images of working-class Americans than has Hollywood film. From TV's earliest days, with series such as *The Goldbergs* (1949–56), *The Life of Riley* (1953–8), and perhaps most famously *The Honeymooners* (1955–6), network television consistently showed what life was like for struggling working-class people. In the early 1950s, television often aired original theatrical productions that dealt with working-class lives. One of these, *Marty* (1953), was so critically and popularly acclaimed that it was remade as a theatrical film which won the Oscar for Best Picture of 1955. The proliferation of these working-class images may have had something to do with preconceptions of who was watching TV during those early years. Series producers, network executives, and corporate sponsors often thought of their audiences as from the lower classes (much as early American filmmakers did). They assumed that people with higher incomes went to the theater, the museums, or the movies, while working-class people watched television because it was more affordable. After the initial monetary outlay for the set, television was to all intents and purposes free entertainment. Consequently, programming that reflected working-class lives would theoretically win more viewers for the sponsors' advertisements.

However, as the 1950s progressed, network television provided more and more images of middle-class life. The famous situation comedies of the era (such as *Father Knows Best* [1954–60], *Leave it to Beaver* [1957–63], and *The Donna Reed Show* [1958–66]) helped to construct an image of America comprised of white suburban families, and consequently those shows captured that type of audience for advertisers as well. By the mid-1960s, the most popular shows on TV were rural sitcoms such

as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–8), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71), *Gomer Pyle USMC* (1964–9), and *Green Acres* (1965–71). However, the people watching those shows were soon deemed by networks the "wrong kind" of audience, since advertising studies decided that they had less disposable income than more educated, urban audiences. Sponsors thus turned to shows that appealed to higher-income viewers, even if that meant a smaller overall audience, since those viewers had more spending money. By the early 1970s, almost all of the rural sitcoms had been cancelled.

That did not mean a total end to representations of working-class characters, as the new relevance of "quality television" allowed for a number of dramatic and comedy series (like *All in the Family* [1971–9]) that reflected more realistic social issues. For example, *The Waltons* (1972–81) was a nostalgic family drama set during the Great Depression. Other shows followed the exploits of poor black families (*Good Times* [1974–9], *Sanford and Son* [1972–7]), or – in keeping with the American Dream – upwardly mobile black families (*The Jeffersons* [1975–85]). Shows about the lower classes almost disappeared during the Reagan era, though, in favor of shows about wealthy families. Dramas like *Dallas* (1978–91), *Dynasty* (1981–9), and *Falcon Crest* (1981–90) were matched by sitcoms such as *Family Ties* (1982–9), *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), and *Growing Pains* (1985–92). Yet, by the end of the 1980s, a number of shows seemed to signal a backlash against these high-income family programs. *Married with Children* (1987–97) was initially entitled *Not the Cosby Show*, and its working-class characters consistently lampooned middle-class taste. *Roseanne* (1988–97), about a working-class family struggling to make ends meet, was one of the most popular



The Honeymooners was a very popular 1950s television sitcom that centered on a working-class bus driver (Jackie Gleason, center), his wife Alice (Audrey Meadows), and his friend Norton (Art Carney).
The Honeymooners, copyright © 1952–1957, CBS-TV

shows of the 1990s. Even *The Simpsons* (1989–) presents a less-than-upwardly-mobile family and the forces that work against them, specifically the corrupt nuclear power plant owner, Mr Burns. As cable,

home video, and the Internet continue to siphon away higher-income audiences, broadcast networks may continue this trend of once again appealing to a working-class constituency.

New Hollywood and the Resurrection of the Horatio Alger Myth

By the mid-1970s, many of the dreams and aspirations of the counterculture had either been assimilated into a more mainstream, middle-class consciousness, or faded away altogether. Some people felt that the work of the 1960s had been accomplished – the United States did get out of Vietnam in 1975 and there was a growing acceptance of racial and ethnic diversity. Other people grew disillusioned and cynical – President Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace in 1974 after his role in the Watergate scandal came to light, and the economy began to slump once again. People became more insular and isolated as the communal counterculture dissolved. The younger generation got older and was drawn into the realities of the work world, whether it was blue-collar or white-collar. People were slightly more aware of economic disparity in America, but any hopes for a revolution (or even serious reform) that would overturn or regulate capitalism had been effectively dashed. And as the 1970s became the 1980s, what little bit of interest in working-class issues there was began to evaporate. The popular culture of the 1980s celebrated personal success measured via acquired wealth. The new yuppies (young urban professionals) of the decade were a symbol of upward mobility – they flaunted their homes, cars, clothing, and jewelry as old-fashioned capitalist status symbols. Films in America went from being subtly critical of the dominant ideology to gung-ho celebrations of white patriarchal capitalism, often expressed through the era's most successful filmmaking formula, the nostalgic Hollywood blockbuster.

The shift from countercultural tendencies to support of the dominant ideology can easily be seen in the continuing careers of the Film School Brats. Many of these filmmakers quickly fell into patterns comparable to the classical Hollywood studio system. While American Zoetrope was conceived as a communal effort, for example, Coppola soon took over as the reigning mogul. Also, unlike those working in underground or avant-garde cinemas, independent fictional filmmakers were still interested in making money. Indeed, while independent filmmakers often try to do things differently from the major studios, they still work within the general industrial system. Warner Brothers, for example, had originally financed the founding of American Zoetrope, making the supposedly revolutionary group dependent on Hollywood money from the outset. Zoetrope would close and reopen repeatedly over the next decades as various studios gave or withdrew support. In consequence, most of this new generation of filmmakers increasingly abandoned radical experimentation in subject matter and technique and tried to make commercial hits.

The huge success of many of these films (such as *The Godfather* [1972], *Jaws* [1975], and *Star Wars* [1977]) signaled a resurrection of escapist moviegoing and pulled Hollywood out of its financial slump. The structure of this New Hollywood – whose most visible figures were creative producer-directors such as Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Francis Ford Coppola – allowed most of the Hollywood studios to maintain their power within the industry via distribution and marketing. The success of these first few nostalgic Hollywood blockbusters encouraged filmmakers

to make more movies like them. Thus they gave rise to myriad sequels and copy-cat films, all of which purported to be "good old-fashioned entertainment." Such a return to conventional genres and formulas quickly eliminated any criticism of capitalism or economic disparity. Instead, in the mid-1970s, as part of the nostalgic impetus, the Horatio Alger myth was dusted off and repackaged. Films like *Rocky* (1976) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) used vaguely realist styles to retell stories of the American Dream. In both films (and many others like them), a working-class man makes a better life for himself through sheer determination and hard work, with little-to-no discussion of the institutionalized factors that, in the real world, work to inhibit such mobility.

Interestingly, both *Rocky* and *Saturday Night Fever* center on Italian American protagonists. By linking their class status to their national/ethnic identity, the films affirm that the Horatio Alger myth can and does work for all Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity. In this way, American popular culture promotes free market capitalism as the answer to racial inequality (and not as a cause or byproduct of it). It is now not unusual for Hollywood to tell Horatio Alger stories about people of color, in films like *Trading Places* (1983) or *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006). However, such films also tend to disguise class issues as racial/ethnic ones. This is a noticeable trend in films made since the mid-1970s, as Hollywood films repeatedly construct stereotypical images of American poverty as endemic to racial/ethnic communities. While certainly racism has contributed to poverty in those communities, what is often missing from Hollywood films is consistent representation of poor white characters. The effects of this are multiple. On the one hand, it allows racists the chance to rationalize poverty as being the fault of those affected by it, and not the result of racism institutionalized in capitalist practice. On the other, it keeps a consideration of class hidden beneath racial and racist imagery. For example, a few years before *Rocky* and *Saturday Night Fever*, blaxploitation films had regularly pointed out economic discrimination faced by African Americans. *Superfly* (1972), for example, pivots on the fact that money is needed to escape ghetto life. However, rather than being understood as a movie about class (as it might have been if the story focused on white characters), the film was instead mostly understood as being about race. Interestingly, the gangster film formula used in *Superfly* almost always focuses on a non-white protagonist. Thus, the discourse on capitalism occurring in these films is obscured because the discourse on race or ethnicity is so much easier to recognize.

When Hollywood does use white characters to discuss class issues in America, the films tend to focus on poor rural whites, people who are often dismissed with the epithet white trash. This can be seen occurring in late 1970s comedies and dramas about the New South. The New South was a term used to describe the results of the economic resurgence that occurred during this era in the Southern half of the nation. This resurgence took place primarily because Northern businesses were moving there in search of less state regulation and fewer organized unions, developments which created a new working class of poor white Southerners. Low comedies such as *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), *Convoy* (1978), *Every Which Way But Loose* (1978), and *Take This Job and Shove It* (1981) showed white working-class men of

the New South battling the establishment (represented by bosses, politicians, and the police) in order to maintain their livelihood and masculine dignity. As usual in Hollywood films, though, it is not the system itself that is to blame for the hardships these men encounter, but rather a few corrupt individuals who abuse it for personal gain.

Probably the most serious and well-regarded film of this New South trend was *Norma Rae* (1979). Based on a true story, this film tells the story of a young Southern woman (played by Sally Field, who won an Oscar in the part) who works in a textile factory. Norma Rae becomes politicized when a union tries to organize the local workers. Filmed on location, *Norma Rae* uses a strongly realist style in order to expose the harshness of factory working conditions and the low standard of living the workers must endure. Like *Salt of the Earth*, *Norma Rae* also dramatizes how fear and distrust among different social minorities can and does keep the working class divided. For example, the white Baptist workers must learn to overcome their distrust of the Jewish union organizer, and the film shows that both black and white workers are needed to make the union strong. The film especially emphasizes that labor struggles involve women as well as men, and that traditional notions of "a woman's place" can weaken collective working-class strength. Sometimes such racial/ethnic/gender strife is encouraged by those in power. In *Norma Rae*, the executives at the cotton mill try to derail unionizing efforts by spreading rumors that a union would take jobs away from white laborers and give them to black workers. (This is still a common ploy of racist politicians who frighten poor white Americans into voting for them by convincing them that they will protect their jobs from being "stolen" by undeserving non-white people.) The movie thus emphasizes how racism and other social "isms" can be and have been exploited to keep citizens of the lower classes from finding a common cause.

Norma Rae, along with a handful of other films (*The China Syndrome* [1979], *Silkwood* [1983]), proved to be the last gasp of a more socially concerned, class-conscious era of Hollywood cinema. Instead, nostalgic Hollywood blockbusters, including films that revived the Horatio Alger myth, proved to be the most popular films of the 1980s and 1990s. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and a myriad other adventure films focused on the chase for valuable treasures. Ostentatious wealth and "good" greed were on display once again in films like *Arthur* (1981), *Class* (1981), and *Risky Business* (1983). *Flashdance* (1983) and *Working Girl* (1988) were typical Horatio Alger narratives, this time about working-class women finding romance with their bosses while making their career dreams come true. The popular film *Footloose* (1984) took place in an economically depressed working-class town, yet the film seems to blame one conservative preacher for the town's problems. Furthermore, the solution to the town's economic woes seems to be consumerism – the teenage hero encourages people to buy records, clothes, and other things in defiance of the preacher's dictates. However, where these people find money in their budgets to acquire these things is left purposely vague.

These films and many others of the era reflected a shift toward conspicuous materialism in the nation's culture, a shift that was also reflected by the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. An actor during the classical Hollywood era,



Based on a true story, *Norma Rae* (1979) starred Sally Field as a working woman who fought for unionization at a Southern textiles plant.

Norma Rae, copyright © 1979, 20th Century-Fox

Reagan promoted the American Dream relentlessly, and implied that anyone who found problems in American society was being unpatriotic. The Reagan presidency began during a severe recession, and the White House's economic strategy to cope with the recession was quickly dubbed Reaganomics. This plan basically revolved around the idea that spending lots of money would stimulate the economy, as in *Footloose*. Federally, the national debt soared as the government practiced heavy deficit spending. The deficit also grew due to increased tax cuts, which went mainly to the wealthy and to big corporations, under the theory that financial health for the richest would eventually "trickle down" to the middle and lower classes. Big businesses and corporations were also deregulated through a series of new laws and initiatives that removed federal guidelines on trade, pollution, and corporate mergers. Across culture-at-large, Reaganomics encouraged individuals to indulge in conspicuous consumption, and contributed to the rise of the yuppie. A number of common catch phrases of the era, such as "greed is good" or "the person who

dies with the most toys wins," revalued ostentatious materialism. Throughout the decade, the gap between the richest and poorest Americans continued to grow.

Just as the 1930s had Frank Capra as its predominant cinematic proponent of the American Dream, the 1980s had writer-director John Hughes. Aiming mainly at younger audiences (whom the studios had calculated were the viewers with the most "disposable income"), Hughes created hip, wisecracking comedy/dramas that upheld notions of rugged individualism and class mobility for a new generation. Films like *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987) showed working-class teenagers lifting themselves out of their situation and finding acceptance and happiness. While sometimes mentioning that being rich and having lots of nice things did not necessarily make someone happy, or characterizing upper-class teens as snobs, Hughes's films celebrated the pleasures of consumerism. Molly Ringwald's character in *Pretty in Pink* may learn that the poor boy who has a crush on her has some inner worth – but she still chooses the rich boy at the end of the film. The rich best friend in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) may have issues with his father, but the film also invites viewers to desire his father's Ferrari.

In contrast to John Hughes's output are the films of writer-director John Sayles. Unlike most of the Film School Brats, who started with independent ideals and gradually succumbed to the demands of the box office, Sayles began writing low-budget horror films and used his minor successes (and production experience) to move into more personal and socially conscious independent filmmaking. His first directorial effort, *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), examined how a group of former 1960s leftists maintained (or did not maintain) their radical ideals. (This film predates the bigger-budgeted, less-politicized Hollywood version of the same story, *The Big Chill* [1981].) Other Sayles films, such as *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *Matewan* (1987), *Eight Men Out* (1988), *City of Hope* (1991), *Lone Star* (1996), *Limbo* (1999), *Sunshine State* (2002), and *Honeydripper* (2007), continued to focus on class (as well as race, gender, and sexuality). Interestingly, Sayles's scripts are often structured around multiple protagonists, giving equal weight to many characters' viewpoints and desires. This structure runs counter to both the conventional individual hero of classical Hollywood narrative form and the capitalist promulgation of rugged individualism. His films depict a complex world in which the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality interact and interrelate. As such, they are a more accurate description of America on film than are most formulaic Hollywood movies.

Although the country's growing deficit threatened a new recession at the end of the 1980s, capitalism was further promoted as "winning" major ideological victories. Chiefly, Reagan's strategy of spending more on weapons than the Soviet Union did seemed to hasten its collapse, and capitalism was touted as having "beaten" communism. Nevertheless, the deficit was making some people worry that the latest generation would spend their lives paying off the debts incurred by their parents' generation. Images of "downwardly mobile" young adults or slackers became prevalent during the early 1990s in films like *Singles* (1992), *Reality Bites* (1994), and, appropriately, *Slacker* (1991). Disillusioned with the rampant materialism of the 1980s, slackers showed their abandonment of the American Dream by holding



Titanic (1997) is a film filled with class issues that are swept aside in favor of an epic love story and computer-generated special effects.

Titanic, dir. James Cameron, copyright © 1997, 20th Century-Fox and Paramount

non-demanding jobs instead of pursuing careers, listening to grunge music instead of pre-packaged pop songs, and wearing used clothing instead of the latest expensive fashions. However, by the mid-1990s, computers and the Internet were fueling another burst of economic growth. Slackers who had “goofed around” with computers were suddenly “dot-com millionaires.” By the end of the Clinton presidency, the federal government was working with a budget surplus rather than a deficit. And as the millennium approached, the few cinematic representations of class struggle that made it to the screen seemed to take place, as usual, in other countries and/or in other eras. *Titanic* (1997), the most economically successful film of all time (as of this writing), places class division safely in the 1910s – and even then downplays any potential exploration of the topic in favor of epic Hollywood romance and special effects disaster scenes. Indeed, the story itself is even framed by a search for a valuable diamond necklace, a narrative device that seems to imply that acquiring wealth is the only reason why anyone today would even care about the sinking of the *Titanic* in the first place.

Case Study: *Bulworth* (1998)

Bulworth presents one of the most outspoken critiques of American capitalism that has ever been made in a Hollywood feature film. The movie was a personal project of Hollywood film legend Warren Beatty, who conceived the story, co-wrote the screenplay, co-produced the film, and directed it himself. Beatty's status in Hollywood helped him to get the film made, and he was even able to get 20th Century-Fox to distribute it fairly widely. Beatty had become a star in the 1960s, and he should be considered part of the Hollywood counterculture that briefly tried to change mainstream filmmaking in that era. He starred in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *McCabe and Mrs Miller*, and later directed and starred in *Reds* (1981), a film about American socialist John Reed. Beatty's film *Bulworth* uses dark humor and satire to expose the socio-political and cultural links between class and race, and demonstrates how racism is often used to mask or mute class issues. The film also voices a forceful critique of contemporary American corporate capitalism (including the media), specifically underlining how its influence has corrupted the democratic process itself.

Beatty stars in the film as Senator Jay Bulworth, a cynical politician battling to win a Democratic primary in California. The film quickly reveals that Bulworth has lost an enormous amount of money in a bad stock market decision, and in order to provide for his daughter, he takes out a ten million dollar life insurance policy – and then hires an assassin to kill him. Thinking that nothing matters any more, the Senator begins to say whatever he feels like saying, instead of the carefully planned speeches and comments prepared by his re-election staff. The story shifts when Bulworth starts to enjoy voicing his honest opinions, and the rest of the film shows him trying to put a stop on the hit while pursuing his new and shockingly forthright outlook. In various interviews and debates, the Senator points out how corporate interests contribute to political campaigns in order to get politicians to take

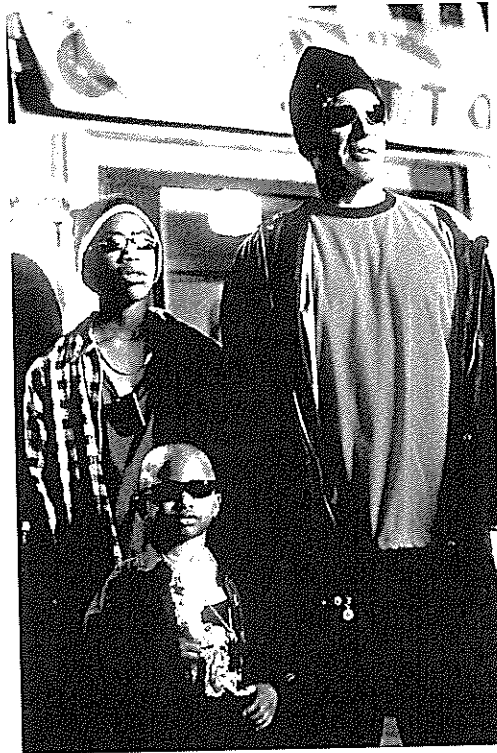
their side on issues such as welfare, the environment, and free trade. The film focuses most directly on health-care reform, and the attempts by large insurance companies to keep the federal government from nationalizing health care, a development that would effectively reduce the profits earned by various health-related industries. The Senator himself, before his transformation, had been guilty of accepting favors from the insurance companies in return for votes against nationalized health care.

However, *Bulworth* is not an experimental or underground film, and so various elements are used to soften its critique. While it criticizes "big insurance," no specific company is named in the film, and although the insurance companies are implicated in the tragic finale of the picture, the actual extent of their involvement is also not directly shown. The tone of the film is comedic, which possibly blunts some of the political barbs. Beatty portrays the Senator as a bumbling fool, trying to talk with food in his mouth, or falling into a fountain. Beatty also makes Bulworth look ridiculous when he starts to adopt black urban culture as his personal style. Furthermore, Bulworth's actions, and his political statements, are supposedly tied to his nervous breakdown, which again might allow some viewers to merely dismiss his remarks as nonsense. Lastly (and importantly), although the film strongly criticizes the privilege and power of white male wealth and privilege, the picture itself revolves around yet another white heterosexual upper-middle-class able-bodied male as a potential leader and visionary – with the oppressed to follow as disciples. This is most strongly felt in the presence of Beatty's co-star Halle Berry, playing a lower-class inner-city African American female who starts as Bulworth's antagonist but becomes his willing follower.

Nonetheless, even with these structural drawbacks, *Bulworth* consistently attempts to stay true to its political commitment. Even the film's final credit listing eradicates

Conclusion: Corporate Hollywood and Labor Today

Although the film industry today has changed a great deal from the classical Hollywood studio system, the differences are mostly in degree and not in kind. Just as Hollywood was dependent on major banking institutions during the 1930s,



These shots of *Bulworth* (1998) show star Warren Beatty as a wealthy senator in crisis and a champion for the urban ghetto population.

Bulworth, dir. Warren Beatty, copyright © 1998, 20th Century-Fox. Photos: Sidney Baldwin

“class divisions” between stars and bit players by listing every speaking actor in alphabetical order. In the final scene of the film, a black street philosopher, played by socialist theorist Amiri Baraka, turns his gaze to the camera and says to the audience, “You got to be the spirit, not just a ghost.” Ending the film this way exhorts the viewer to take responsibility, become conscious of the issues that corporate capitalism would rather obscure, and enact some form of resistance. However, almost exemplifying Senator Bulworth’s contention that the corporate-owned telecommunications industry attempts to squelch honest

and hard-hitting discussions of political issues, *Bulworth* was released by 20th Century-Fox with very little fanfare. Studio representatives claimed that the film was hard to sell. This was no doubt true, since the film is specifically criticizing Hollywood’s practice of turning issues into easily packaged products. Distributed in the summer of 1998, *Bulworth* garnered many positive critical reviews, but was quickly lost amid the onslaught of the major nostalgic Hollywood blockbusters of the season, films such as *Godzilla*, *Armageddon*, and *Doctor Dolittle*.

so today it is dependent upon its corporate conglomerate ownership. Practices of vertical integration, saturation booking and advertising, synergy, and cross-promotion all help keep the Hollywood industry stabilized and dominant. The development of new distribution technologies has also increased Hollywood’s control over American film. With the rise of cable TV, home video, and most recently

the Internet, Hollywood executives are finding and controlling new exhibition outlets for their products. And while the studios and producers make more and more money through these new outlets, little-to-no compensation is being offered to the myriad other people who worked on these films. The Writers Guild of America and the Screen Actors Guild have had to strike or threaten strikes in order to get their share of these new profit revenues. Other, less powerful workers' groups are still mostly excluded from these ongoing royalties. New technologies have also affected film labor through the increased reliance on computer generated imagery (CGI). While CGI has created a number of new jobs in optical effects, it also eliminates the need to hire numerous extras, set builders, and costume makers. Today, any given Hollywood action blockbuster (such as *Titanic*, *The Mummy* [2000], or *The Lord of the Rings* [2001]) can computer generate armies of extras that can be used and reused without having to be paid.

The major Hollywood corporations still reign over the industry through their domination of distribution. While some independent production companies do attempt to champion quirky or offbeat films, the filmmakers that want to make the most money know they must distribute through Hollywood channels – which means they must fashion their films according to the typical Hollywood formulas. Furthermore, independent film companies are increasingly being absorbed into the Hollywood majors, and it is often hard to tell an independent film from a Hollywood one. Technically, George Lucas is an independent filmmaker, but his Lucasfilm Company functions much like Paramount or Disney, making commercial motion pictures, with George Lucas himself unquestionably in charge as the studio mogul. This type of independent production also creates problems for organized labor. No longer tied to individual studios, film workers now function as free agents, signing new contracts from project to project. Independent producers are expected to agree to union demands for set wages and work hours, but in fact, many productions purposely avoid hiring unionized employees in order to cut costs. Another major strategy for cutting costs has been to shoot films outside Hollywood in areas where unions have less strength. The ascendance of such runaway productions since the 1950s has exploited film workers abroad, people who get paid less for more hours and are expected to do more hazardous labor. For example, while *Titanic* vaguely addresses issues of class division, the climactic sinking of the ship was shot in waters off the coast of Mexico, where local extras were forced to stay in water for hours in the middle of the night, and a number were injured.

The hegemonic negotiation of capitalism in America continues to respond to and ameliorate disturbances in our national economy. For example, the “dot-com” boom of the 1990s failed to live up to its hype, and major corporations failed or were downsized. Many people found themselves unemployed. Mismanagement and greed, which flourished under federal policies of deregulation, in many cases contributed to these corporate failures. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America also slowed the economy, as many Americans scaled back their spending habits. The administration of George W. Bush responded much as the Reagan

administration had: with tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, as well as an increase in deficit spending. Although some Americans expressed anger at the revelations of shady dealings of corrupt corporations such as Enron, a potentially larger protest of national economic policy was supplanted by a wave of patriotism after 9/11.

Certain films did attempt to address some of the era's economic issues. *The Insider* (1999), about the powerful tobacco industry, and *Erin Brockovich* (2000), about a corrupt public utilities corporation, were based on true stories and won multiple Oscars. *North Country* (2005) and *Michael Clayton* (2007) continued this trend, making heroes out of characters fighting corporate corruption. Several recent documentaries have also tackled the effects of deregulated multinational corporations on the average American worker and consumer. *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) explores the behind-the-scenes hubris and villainy that led to that company's collapse. Michael Moore's *Sicko* (2007) is about the health-care industry and how it often fails the people it is allegedly designed to serve. *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006) is an eye-opening film that suggests that backroom dealings between the oil industry, the automobile industry, and the politicians they control have kept America from innovating safer, cheaper, and less-polluting forms of transportation. More generally, *The Corporation* (2004) examines the legal and social history of the corporation itself as a business model, revealing that corporations often have the same rights as (or even greater ones than) do actual human beings.

Yet, for the most part, American popular culture has continued its obsession with wealth and materialism. Rather than discussing lack of access to health care, the loss of worker pension programs, or the still-sizeable unemployment figures, American citizens have increasingly focused on the comings and goings of ultra-rich celebrities. While some figures (such as Paris Hilton) came from long-wealthy families, others (such as Britney Spears) were newly rich, and thus provided a new generation of Horatio Alger figures. Many Americans not only followed the daily exploits of these celebrities, but also strove to follow in their footsteps by chasing after immediate economic success and fame through lotteries, gambling, and/or reality TV series such as *American Idol* (2002–) or *Deal or No Deal* (2005–). Such dreams not only revive the Horatio Alger myth but rework the notion of rugged individualism – with less emphasis on the hard work one has to do to succeed, but still emphasizing individual gain rather than a shared struggle against systemic economic disparity.

Hollywood films have also responded to this growing trend. Reflecting the connections between gender and class in this era, a number of chick flicks focus on a Cinderella-figure entering the urban high life. While films like *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *The Prince and Me* (2004), and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), and TV shows like *Ugly Betty* (2006–), often assert that one's inner integrity is more important than material wealth, the films are also marketed to audiences as a chance to see what living the lush life is like. Chick flicks, though, are not the only indicators of this new "quick-fix" Horatio Alger era, as the Adam Sandler remake of *Mr Deeds* (2002) and the aptly named *Cinderella Man* (2005) attest. Major Hollywood

blockbusters continue to revolve around literal treasure hunts, as in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (2003, 2006, 2007), or the *National Treasure* films (2004, 2007).

Although President Bush claimed the post-9/11 recession had ended by 2004, many parts of the American economy did not bounce back. The strongest sector was the housing market, as real estate values soared and new mortgage practices allowed more people the opportunity to buy a home. But by the end of the Bush presidency, the housing market bubble was collapsing, taking with it a number of banks that had approved of risky loans, and new fears of recession loomed. As of this writing, it is too soon to tell what impact these developments will have on American filmmaking. However, the nation has survived depressions and recessions, cycles of boom and bust, and will probably do so in the future. The related myths, formulas, and formations of capitalist ideology, which Hollywood and other aspects of pop culture have promulgated throughout the last century, will undoubtedly continue to be pressed into service. Hollywood will continue to validate the American Dream.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Can you think of any recent Hollywood films that make a hero or heroine out of a very rich or a very poor person? If so, do the films celebrate the upper or lower classes, or do they espouse the superiority of being middle-class?
- 2 Name some other films where class intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, and/or ability. Do the films actually deal with class issues, or are economic issues "hidden" by ideas or concerns about race, ethnicity, gender, and/or ability?
- 3 How truly "free" is our nation if all of its media artifacts are produced and/or regulated by a handful of business conglomerates? What does "free speech" mean in our contemporary culture? Do some people have more "free speech" than others?

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Further Screening

Force of Evil (1948)
Salt of the Earth (1953)
On the Waterfront (1954)
Silk Stockings (1957)
Easy Rider (1969)
A Woman under the Influence (1974)
Rocky (1976)

Norma Rae (1979)
Silkwood (1983)
Matewan (1987)
Sunshine State (2002)
8 Mile (2002)
North Country (2005)