Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 19, 2020, pp. 242–247
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.19.23

The Limits of Auteurism: Case Studies in the Critically Constructed New Hollywood, by Nicholas Godfrey. Rutgers University Press, 2018, 268 pp.

Ryan Sherwood

At a time when even Martin Scorsese cannot offer a polite critique of the Marvel industrial complex without suffering the umbrage of his fellow Hollywood elites, it is bracing to read the words of an industry insider truly, unapologetically sounding off on what he perceives to be the failures of the American cinema. In a 1972 *Gallery* interview, Dennis Hopper—whose 1969 directorial debut, *Easy Rider*, supposedly galvanised the much-mythologised New Hollywood period—shared his grim assessment of his cohort's most celebrated work. The so-called "art films" of such directors as John Cassavetes, Bob Rafelson, and Peter Bogdanovich were, in Hopper's opinion, nothing of the sort, devoid of "things that haven't been done a million times before by directors like Howard Hawks, Joseph Mankiewicz, George Stevens, John Ford, and Henry Hathaway" (qtd. in Godfrey 211). Presuming to speak directly to his peers, Hopper insisted, "you're no longer inventing anything, you're no longer contributing to the evolution of your art" (211).

Hopper's sentiments, offered in the aftermath of the critical and commercial disaster of his ambitious *The Last Movie* (1971), are shared late into Nicholas Godfrey's *The Limits of Auteurism: Case Studies in the Critically Constructed New Hollywood*, and illuminate the bound-to-be-misconstrued implications of the book's title. Godfrey is hardly opposed to auteurism as a critical lens, nor is he wholly intent on dismantling the myth of individual genius in favour of an appreciation of cinema as a collaborative art. Rather, he essentially allies himself with Hopper in arguing that the supposed auteur-centrism of the New Hollywood was delimited by the predictable priorities of the studios and the conventional tastes of critics, despite an avowed commitment to championing aesthetic innovation. Acknowledging that unprecedented production circumstances indeed precipitated a Hollywood sea change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Godfrey nevertheless insists that the retrospective elevation of a few atypical works has prevented understanding of the limits put on creative expression throughout this period.

Though transparently a reworked doctoral dissertation, *The Limits of Auteurism* avoids the intellectual hermeticism often ascribed to such publications. The introduction (subtitled "Open Roads") immediately grapples with the familiar New Hollywood narrative as spun by Peter Biskind in his popular book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*—the story of America's youth achieving such market power as to spur the major studios to invest in the "generically unconventional",

acquire and distribute independently produced films, and grant an unprecedented amount of creative control to young, unproven directors (1). Godfrey declares his intention to deviate from the glut of "broad, totalizing histories" of this period, and from studies that elevate the same few canonical films and filmmakers (2). He promises a partial corrective to the dearth of "integrated formal/historical account[s]" focusing on "the characteristics that that distinguish New Hollywood films from the Classical Hollywood cinema that precede them" and questioning "the extent to which production conditions unique to the period shaped the aesthetic outcomes that now define retrospective categorisations of this body of films" (2). Combining formal analysis of a selection of celebrated and neglected films with a historiographic examination of production practices, marketing strategies, and reception, *The Limits of Auteurism* promises and largely delivers a thoughtful interrogation of the qualifications for New Hollywood canonisation.

Readers with a working knowledge of auteur theory will likely appreciate the first chapter's merciful omission of the concept's finer points, its genesis in post–Second World War French film criticism, and its importation to America by Andrew Sarris in the 1960s. Basically an extension of the introduction, this chapter (subtitled "Which New Hollywood?") performs the weighty task of contextualising the forthcoming inquiry within the extant body of writing on the New Hollywood era, most of which Godfrey believes has been hampered by "the lack of a universally accepted definition of which years the New Hollywood period spanned, which films it encompassed, or, indeed, if a New Hollywood ever existed at all" (10). The care with which various strata (academic, popular, highbrow, populist) and periods of criticism are delineated is much appreciated. This chapter is also valuable in constructing a provisional definition for something, the book contends, has no definition. Godfrey sketches the ground he means to cover—a New Hollywood beginning with *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and ending with *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977)—even as he raises doubts as to whether it existed as anything but a critical construct. Yet the most intriguing seed planted here—fortunately the one most fully developed in subsequent chapters—is the discrepancy between "the purported stylistic and thematic radicalism of the canonically enshrined New Hollywood films" and the fact that "very few of them accurately reflect the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s" or deviate from a white, male point of view (8).

The second chapter confronts that perspective in *Easy Rider*, a seminal New Hollywood film and one which Godfrey approaches with ambivalence. Initiating the book's investigation into several films that sought to replicate *Easy Rider*'s success, Godfrey here considers production history, formal analysis, and critical reception in attempting to establish how Hopper's film earned and sustained its reputation as a revolutionary work. The film's countercultural appeal is largely credited to the years Hopper and co-writer/co-star Peter Fonda spent under the wing of B-movie maestro Roger Corman—years spent "exploring the links among exploitation films, motorcycles, psychedelics, sex, violence, and rock 'n' roll soundtracks" (21). Far from dismissive of Hopper's directorial savvy, Godfrey details clashes with producers and notes the reliance on low-overhead location-shooting that allowed for an improvisatory style, abjuring total authorial control.

Yet although Hopper's arthouse aspirations—his desire to Americanise the formal innovations of Michelangelo Antonioni—receive serious consideration, a formal analysis supports the rejection of *Easy Rider* as being aesthetically ground-breaking. Godfrey's well-supported argument is that Hopper's gestures toward avant-gardism—notably the highly stylised travelogue montage sequences and acid trip interlude—do not fundamentally disrupt his film's adherence to

the tenets of Classical Hollywood narrative. Too, the deployment of loaded cultural symbols and confused treatment of every character other than the white male protagonists seem calculated to produce a political Rorschach test rather than a pointed radical critique. The inclusion of negative first-run reviews, as well as retrospective criticism by filmmakers James Benning and L.M. Kit Carson, extend and deepen this critique. Elsewhere, however, the attempt to chart *Easy Rider*'s complex legacy introduces a slight, persistent flaw: the occasional overuse of vague pundit-beloved phrases like "the popular imagination" (20) and "collective cinematic memory" (24), which dilute the intellectual impact of the meticulous historiography.

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts: "Variations on a Theme: Five Easy Riders"; "Politicizing Genre"; and "The Limits of Auteurism". The first part, comprising three chapters that chart *Easy Rider*'s immediate influence on a cycle of youth-oriented films, is at its most compelling when connecting the relative success of each work to a tangle of production and marketing decisions. The third chapter adduces *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970) as an exemplar of New Hollywood narrative "obfuscation", peeling back this critical buzzword to examine the specific elements of Carole Eastman's screenplay and Rafelson's direction that eschew convention (46). (The long-underappreciated Eastman here receives a laudatory career overview, though her legacy as one of the New Hollywood's few female screenwriters is never reconciled with this particular film's alleged misogyny.) According to Godfrey, positive reviews and mediocre earnings were the unsurprising consequences of the Hollywood road movie following *Easy Rider* into "a space outside traditional, goal-based narrative" without courting the sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll market (57).

The fourth chapter delivers the book's most impressive unification of historiography and formal analysis, grappling with the once-maligned, since-rehabilitated existential anti–road movie *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman, 1971). Here, Godfrey details a troubled production (budget constraints necessitating the location shooting techniques pioneered by *Easy Rider*), Hellman's bold interpretation of Rudy Wurlitzer's screenplay, the film's eventual disavowal by its own studio, and a botched marketing campaign that misrepresented the film's genre elements. Though "subversive" is a justifiably mistrusted critical cliché, this chapter makes a convincing case for *Two-Lane Blacktop* as a genuinely aberrant work, not only in its preference for alienating French New Wave inflections over generic thrills, but in its subtle evasion of New Hollywood's rampant sexism. In the fifth chapter, the chase movie *Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Sarafian, 1971) is proposed as *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s mirror image, "perhaps the most shamelessly commercial attempt to repackage and resell the *Easy Rider* formula", embracing "a more concrete generic framework" and "emphasizing the thrills of its relentless high-speed car chases" (86). Rather than condescend to the film's commercial ambition, Godfrey examines the intriguing overlaps between bare-bones commercialism and avant-garde abstraction, highlighting John A. Alonzo's panoramic cinematography and lead actor Barry Newman's intriguingly "inert" screen presence (99).

The sixth and seventh chapters abandon familiar ground to examine two films that have been decidedly excluded from the New Hollywood canon: *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (Sidney J. Furie, 1970) and *Adam at 6 A.M.* (Robert Scheerer, 1970). The near-total neglect of these works, despite thematic and stylistic similarities to many celebrated New Hollywood classics, is offered as evidence of how film canons retroactively distort critical trends and tendencies. (Godfrey does a strong job of conveying the style and substance of these films to readers who are not likely to

have seen them.) Despite *Little Fauss*'s slick repackaging of *Easy Rider*'s youth-cult sensibility, bungled marketing and the extreme deconstruction of lead actor Robert Redford's star persona kept it from making much of an impression on critics or audiences, according to Godfrey. Similarly, a disastrous distribution strategy is faulted for the box office disaster of *Adam at 6 A.M.*, a self-reflexive spin on the themes of intergenerational and regional animus shared by some of the era's most successful films. Though admittedly focused on a small sample of works, these chapters make a convincing case for the relative inconsequentiality of trendy themes and stylistic techniques in the face of hidebound distribution practices and notions of movie stars' bankability.

In Part Two, comprising the eighth and ninth chapters, the New Hollywood's post–*Easy Rider* road movie cycle—understood as inherently liberal by many early-1970s critics—is compared to the vigilante urban cop movie, commonly pigeonholed as conservative or even fascist. The argument here is that *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) and *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), making use of similar genre tropes and visions of urban decay, actually have much in common with *Easy Rider* and its progeny; a close look at certain formal traits, production circumstances, and critical habits illuminate the reasons behind these films' heavy politicisation. In the case of *Dirty Harry*, most of the political baggage came from the prior films of director Siegel, whose genre-film-heavy career "straddles the point of transition from Old Hollywood to New and the associated rise of auteurist sentiment", and from star Clint Eastwood, veteran of the outmoded, ideologically overloaded western genre (131). Whereas Siegel's film more often than not adheres to genre conventions (many of which were undergoing a radical re-signification in the early 1970s thanks to the burgeoning Blaxploitation cycle), Friedkin explodes them, according to Godfrey. *The French Connection*'s more complex treatment of genre expectations, narrative, star power, and setting is detailed in a lengthy close reading and in a comparison of the two films' promotional trailers. This section's conclusion is that critics' preference for *The French Connection* over *Dirty Harry* perfectly illuminates the stylistic and thematic earmarks required for New Hollywood canonisation.

Part Three reintroduces the theme of critics' reluctance to embrace true aesthetic upheaval despite their occasional celebration of films that supposedly flouted generic convention. *The Last Movie* and *The Hired Hand* (Peter Fonda, 1971), the respective subjects of the tenth and eleventh chapters, both suffered critical and commercial failure, and are taken here as the death knells of the putative Hollywood revolution initiated by *Easy Rider*. In the case of *The Last Movie*, an "explicitly political", purposefully incoherent docu-fictional neo-western, exaggerated reports of an unhinged production as well as ambivalent promotion perhaps contributed to its savaging by critics (171). Yet Godfrey does not underplay the film's self-conscious distancing strategies and commitment to undermining *Easy Rider*'s misogyny and reflections of cultural imperialism. According to Godfrey, "[i]t is difficult to imagine another film backed by a major Hollywood studio that so completely embraces incoherence and so mercilessly picks at the conditions of its production and its status as a commodified artwork" (174). Taking Pauline Kael's review as its main example, this chapter dissects the "hierarchy of taste" that prevented critics from extending to Hopper the same intellectual rigour they extended to contemporaneous European directors—Jean-Luc Godard, for one (179). The potential shakeup of *The Last Movie*—and, arguably, of the whole New Hollywood period—was delimited by "preconceived notions of the kind of product a Hollywood film should be" (183).

Conversely, the revisionist western *The Hired Hand* flopped with critics, not because of any dive into arty abstraction, but, as Godfrey argues, because its low-key approach to a woman-centric domestic story merely defamiliarised rather than toppled the youth-cult conventions that were now seen as clichés. Godfrey's analysis foregrounds the unconventional screenplay by Alan Sharp and the performance of Verna Bloom—representative of "a new unglamorous school of female depiction"—as well as Peter Fonda's artful directorial flourishes (200). While Godfrey finds the film, with its heavy use of cross-fades and its unique (though unmarketable) soundtrack, predictive of the transcendental style of Terence Malick, critics fixating on Fonda's countercultural persona merely found it to be "druggy" (191). The widespread dismissal of Fonda's self-casting as an attempt to recapture his *Easy Rider* glory is taken here as further evidence that this film cycle was moribund by 1971.

The book concludes with an overview of critical eulogies for the youth-cult film cycle, whose appeal to its intended audience is generally seen to have died by 1973. Overall, Godfrey's analysis of how production and marketing minutiae affected the respective critical and commercial successes of the post–*Easy Rider* youth-cult films is meticulous and convincing, as is his detour into critical trends regarding the intersection of politics, genre, and star persona. The book's major argument—that retrospective celebrations of the New Hollywood period as one of unfettered creative expression are, in fact, highly selective in their choice of representative films and responses—has substantial implications far beyond its particular ambit.

Some questions do remain, however. While Godfrey can hardly be faulted for not predicting *The Last Movie*'s lavish 2018 Criterion Blu-ray release, the book's rather severe understanding of the demarcation between canonised and uncanonised films never quite acknowledges the extent to which contemporary home media and streaming services reduce the likelihood of any film truly remaining forgotten. Similarly, the arguments regarding critical consensus seem to beg for some consideration of the Internet's (supposed) democratisation of access and expertise. Yet these few frayed edges hardly vitiate the book's intellectually rigorous examination of its selected patch of film history.

References

Adam at 6 A.M. Directed by Robert Scheerer, National General Pictures, 1970.

Biskind, Peter. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. Bloomsbury, 1999.

Bonnie and Clyde. Directed by Arthur Penn, Warner Bros./Seven Arts, 1967.

Dirty Harry. Directed by Don Siegel, Warner Bros., 1971.

Easy Rider. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Columbia Pictures, 1969.

Five Easy Pieces. Directed by Bob Rafelson, Columbia Pictures, 1970.

The French Connection. Directed by William Friedkin, 20th Century Fox, 1971.

The Hired Hand. Directed by Peter Fonda, Universal, 1971.

Kael, Pauline. "Movies in Movies." *Deeper into Movies*, Little, Brown, 1973, pp. 293–300.

The Last Movie. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Universal, 1971.

Little Fauss and Big Halsy. Directed by Sidney J. Furie, Paramount, 1970.

Sarris, Andrew. *The American cinema: Directors and directions, 1929–1968*. 1968. Da Capo Press, 1996.

Star Wars. Directed by George Lucas, Twentieth Century Fox, 1977.

Two-Lane Blacktop. Directed by Monte Hellman, Universal, 1971.

Vanishing Point. Directed by Richard C. Sarafian, 20th Century Fox, 1971.

Suggested Citation

Sherwood, Ryan. "*The Limits of Auteurism: Case Studies in the Critically Constructed New Hollywood*, by Nicholas Godfrey." Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 19, 2020, pp. 242–247, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.19.23.

Ryan Sherwood is a PhD candidate in English Literature and Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His work deals primarily with issues of authorship and medium specificity. His forthcoming dissertation explores questions of television authorship outside the showrunner-as-auteur model.