Who Knew It Could Get Worse?
When Nixon Haunted the New Hollywood

by Jonathan Kirshner

How the specter of a much-hated president, who cast a long shadow even after his resignation, molded key films of a despairing decade, from *Dirty Harry* and *The Parallax View* to *Nashville*.

Is everything old new again? In 1968, Richard Nixon was elected President by the narrowest of margins, helped in part by the fact that disaffected liberals simply could not bring themselves to vote for the flawed Democratic Party nominee (Vice President Hubert Humphrey), and telling themselves there was no real difference between the two (boy, were they wrong). Thin-skinned and sensitive to slights, Nixon seethed with resentment toward coastal elites, railed against the media, promised a return to "law and order," and ran on a "Southern strategy" designed to capitalize on white resentment. He was a bigot and an anti-Semite ("Bob, *please* get the names of the Jews, you know, the big Jewish contributors of the Democrats," he would as President ask Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, "could we please investigate some of the cocksuckers?"); he was a pathological liar. During his last year in office, Nixon became increasingly erratic, slurring his speech at press conferences and derailing briefings by rambling on bizarrely about his enemies. Toward the end, the Secretary of Defense gave instructions that should orders from the White House call for a nuclear strike—well, check with him first.

What is astonishing, however, is that the parallels between Nixon and President Trump underscore how much farther still we have fallen. Say what you will about Nixon—one of the great American villains of the twentieth century—he was nevertheless eminently qualified for the nation's highest office: experienced, thoughtful, literate, generally polite in public settings, fluent in politics and policy, sophisticated in his command of international relations (if in practice blood-soaked and immoral), and, notably, whatever his failings, he was not an idiot. Nixon was a vulgar racist but he knew enough to keep such shameful qualities private (his supporters were shocked by the Nixon they heard on the tapes); he was an inveterate liar but did not traffic in the Orwellian lie (insisting that the facts were different from the plainly visible truth); it is very likely that Nixon wrote more books in his lifetime than Donald Trump has read.

The Nixon presidency? Suddenly, it seems almost quaint. But it was not. His election (and re-election) was, for many, millennially horrifying. This was especially so for participants in the New Hollywood. For these filmmakers, influenced by the European New Waves and the social upheavals of the 1960s, and empowered by the end of censorship and the decline of the studio system, the body blows of the Nixon presidency would inevitably inform the content of their movies. A tragic Shakespearean figure in both rise and decline, Nixon's spirit haunted American cinema throughout the Seventies. Any movie that talked about power, privacy, paranoia, institutional corruption, or the madness of the patriarch, no matter the setting, was inevitably talking about Nixon.

Not all of it was negative. Jack Lemmon picked up an Academy Award (Marlon Brando, Jack Nicholson, and Al Pacino were also nominated that year) for his performance in *Save the Tiger* (1973), in a role that offers the Seventies' most sympathetic Nixon stand-in. Harry Stoner is not really a crook, he's just a regular guy trying to keep his business afloat, and desperate times call for desperate measures, even extralegal ones. Not everyone was amused—Pauline Kael, in her review "The Businessman-Pimp as Hero," called the film "a moral hustle." Also aligned with Nixon, of course, was the reactionary, law-and-order affirmation of *Dirty Harry* (1971). Relocated from New York City to San Francisco—the epicenter of the counterculture—*Harry* is two-thirds of a great movie (roll the credits with the recovery of the body of the kidnapped girl) before it descends into a bizarre right-wing fantasy in which liberal politicians, Berkeley law professors, and an abetting media set free a mass murder on laughably incoherent legal grounds ("That man had rights!"), leaving only Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) to dispense justice with the business end of his .44 Magnum. Roger Ebert did not mince words—"The movie's moral position is fascist." Little wonder that Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster, Frank Sinatra, and Robert Mitchum wouldn't touch the role—they got the message. So did Nixon, who screened the picture at Camp David, reached out to Clint Eastwood, and appointed him to a six-year term on the National Council for the Arts.

Jack Lemmon's character in *Save the Tiger* is one of many Nixon stand-ins from Seventies American cinema. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

It would be an exaggeration, then, to say that everybody in the film industry hated Nixon, but the New Hollywood sure did. Scratch any such Seventies film, and a nefarious Nixon stand-in won't be hard to find. James Mason as George Wheeler in John Huston's *The Mackintosh Man* (1973)—a corrupt, hypocritical, double-crossing anticommunist—might as well be wearing RN cufflinks. The same could be said for Howard Nightingale (Kirk Douglas, directing himself in 1975's *Posse*), a politically ambitious marshal whose campaign to restore "law and order" (bankrolled by the railroad trust) is designed to catapult him into the U.S. Senate. Still malevolent, but also the most tragic "Nixon" is Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) in *The Godfather Part II* (1974). As biographer Richard Reeves described Nixon in his book, *Alone in the White House*, Michael, too, is increasingly isolated, cut off from his allies (Nixon had to sacrifice his right- and left-hand men, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, in April 1973), and obsessed with seeking revenge against his enemies. Of course, this comparison can be pushed too far. Michael had Fredo killed; Nixon only tapped his brother's phone.

One could play "find the Nixon" in Seventies films indefinitely—and it does make for an amusing evening's entertainment. But the effect of the Nixon presidency on the New Hollywood was deeper, more profound, and even painful, as filmmakers wrestled with the implications of his election and presidency. In lieu of the traditional five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), participants in the New Hollywood processed the catastrophe with successive waves of films that first looked inward, expressing a deeply personal despair, before turning their cameras on Nixon's America and finding decay, paranoia, betrayal, and, after the fall, ruins.

"Law and Order" dispensed from the business end of a .44 Magnum by the title character (Clint Eastwood) in Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971), a film that impressed President Richard Nixon. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Despair

It is hard in retrospect to appreciate what Nixon represented—suffice it to say that he was the opposite of everything the New Hollywood stood for. Consider that in 1972 he ran for re-election by campaigning against "pot, permissiveness, protest, and pornography." Wining that contest in a landslide, Nixon's truncated second term was so dominated by the Watergate saga that it is easy to overlook the wreckage of his first term. Already a hated figure in 1968 (as a crusading anticommunist on the House Un-American Activities Committee in the Forties, he promised to expose the "red menace" in Hollywood), Nixon's path to the presidency was facilitated by the assassination of Bobby Kennedy—the candidate of the New Hollywood. RFK—young, hip, and handsome, against the Vietnam War, and committed to the Civil Rights Movement—was everything Nixon was not. And his death was shattering. The director John Frankenheimer, who drove Kennedy to the Ambassador Hotel that fateful day, did not soon recover; his personal crisis was a microcosm of how the hopes of the Sixties morphed into the despair of the Seventies—a phenomenon seen on screen, writ large, by documentaries that chronicled that short trip from the Woodstock and Altamont music festivals.

On Civil Rights and the Vietnam War, the picture could not have been bleaker. Nixon's Attorney General John Mitchell testified before Congress against the renewal of the Civil Rights Act; as for Vietnam, Nixon, a longtime hawk who nevertheless campaigned on vague promises to end the war, instead expanded and extended the conflict, invading Laos and Cambodia, and unleashing massive air assaults over Indo-China ("I call it my madman theory, Bob," he explained to Haldeman, "I want the North Vietnamese to believe I'm capable of *anything*.") Perhaps he was, but he couldn't win the war—Nixon just extended it for four more years, signing a "peace treaty" with terms he could have easily secured a few weeks after entering office. Along the way, his 1970 invasion of Cambodia sparked the massive protests that left four students dead, shot by National Guardsmen at Kent State University. Law and Order would indeed be restored. A month earlier, in reference to student protesters (who Nixon dismissed as "bums") California Governor Ronald Reagan had this to say—"If it takes a bloodbath, let's get it over with." Certainly that was the sentiment endorsed—and acted upon—by the unlikely alliance of businessmen and hard hats in John G. Avildsen's *Joe* (1970), which was released not long after the shootings.

Two films that capture this turn-of-the-Seventies despair are the Bob Rafelson–Jack Nicholson collaborations *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), both shot by Laszlo Kovacs. *Five Easy Pieces*, remembered most fondly for an exuberantly rebellious diner order ("Hold the chicken"), is, actually, a story of failure, self-loathing, and flight. (As Bobby (Nicholson) observes, for all his panache in the diner, that effort, too, was a failure—he didn't get his toast.) *Five Easy Pieces* tells the story of a once-promising musician who finds he can't fit in anywhere—not with the working-class oil riggers in LA, or the ascetic intellectuals of the Pacific Northwest. His shabby treatment of Rayette (Karen Black) is indeed pretty awful, but it is a function, more than anything, of his *self*-loathing, a point driven home with devastating finality in the rebuke by Catherine (Susan Anspach) that serves as the film's true denouement. Bobby will flee, once again, but he is running out of skins to shed. Screenwriter Carole Eastman originally envisioned Nicholson's character meeting his end in a car crash, but Rafelson rejected that as "too suicidal." The ending as shot, however, is not very far from that conclusion: stripped of his wallet, his coat—of all his possessions—Bobby hops a ride on a rig headed to Alaska, where it's "colder than hell." There is no place for him in Nixon's America.

The King of Marvin Gardens is, remarkably, even more pessimistic. One of the landmark works of the New Hollywood, it is a nuanced and multilayered film with much to say about race, gender, America, and all that (in repeat viewings Ellen Burstyn's performance looms increasingly large), but at its core it is a story of faded dreams, a lament for what might have been. In that regard, the choice of Atlantic City works well (Rafelson thought the location was essential). A thriving resort town in the first half of the twentieth century—the "American Century"—the city had fallen on very hard times by the 1970s, and it shows on screen. Featured prominently in the back-

Classical pianist Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) working the oil fields in Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

ground are once-grand hotels like the Traymore (presidents used to stay there), and the Marlborough-Blenheim (where many of the film's interiors were shot), both of which would be razed not long after the production wrapped. Nicholson's restrained performance is one of the finest of his career, and when he tells his brother (Bruce Dern) "We've all done our time, Jason," it speaks volumes of the life he might have lived. Inevitably, the two brothers' dreams of "Blue Hawaii" come crashing down, and the story ends as it began, with David retreating to his loner's existence in gray Philadelphia.

Decay

The New Hollywood beat up its characters more than a good bit (trafficking as it did in damaged protagonists and unhappy endings), but as the Nixon years continued, its participants also turned an increasingly critical eye onto what America was becoming. One manifestation of this was revisionism, leading to a raft of films that explored genres closely associated with heroic American myths, like the Western (*The Wild Bunch, Little Big Man*), and the private eye movie (*Chinatown, Night Moves*), to reassess their meaning. Also ripe for the picking was the war film. Mike Nichols's *Catch-22* (1970) was particularly daring in this regard. Even seen in the best possible light, the Vietnam War was a morally ambiguous undertaking. But *Catch-22* revisited the ultimate "good" war, and presented it as just another senseless conflict. Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1970) also withheld any prospect of heroism from its narrative by avoiding any engagement with the enemy or offering the slightest of noble goals to be achieved (other than cheating to win a football game). Nominally about the Korean War, "to me it was Vietnam," Altman said. Indeed, the film avoided mentioning Korea at all; instead, "all the political attitudes in the film were about Nixon and Vietnam."

What did the age of Nixon suggest about America? Hiding behind the white picket fences of respectable society, the New Hollywood saw hypocrisy and corruption. *Klute* (1971) is an exemplar of this. A character study and a suspense film, nevertheless, a key moment occurs early in the narrative, when Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda), with good reason, castigates the "Goddamn hypocrite squares" whose polite veneers mask the sexual variations they practice in private and condemn in public. It is no accident that the sadistic deviant at the heart of the mystery is revealed to be a top executive of a firm based in clean, civilized, small-town Pennsylvania. Goddamn hypocrite squares, indeed.

***M*A*S*H* (1970), said its director Robert Altman, was all "about Nixon and Vietnam."**

It is not just big business that was found rotting from within in Nixon's America—once venerable institutions, public and private, are also purposeless and in utter disrepair. Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail* (1973, written by Robert Towne) exposes not simply the hypocrisy of the U.S. Navy (which for petty theft will sentence a young sailor to an obscenely long prison term), but its utter listlessness—an ambience that pervades the film, which includes an utterly joyless visit to a less than thriving bordello. Not surprisingly, the Navy refused to offer any support to the film, which required Ashby to cast his absentee ballot for McGovern from location in Toronto. But the ennui of *The Last Detail* transcends its shoulder-shrug critique of the military, just as Arthur Hiller's *The Hospital* (1971), written and produced by Paddy Chayefsky) has much more on its mind than health care. Certainly a hospital so dysfunctional that deaths attributable to a serial killer are barely noticeable does suggest a failure of its management, but both *The Last Detail* and *The Hospital* reach for larger points about a loss of faith in once trusted institutions. In Nixon's America, it is more important to play the game than to win it—and what does it mean to win, anyway? This is the gut punch of a question that concludes *The Candidate* (1972). "What do we do now?" asks newly elected Senator Bill McKay (Robert Redford) of his campaign manager (Peter Boyle), at what should be his moment of triumph. Although he has won his long-shot senatorial campaign, the once-idealistic McKay compromised every principle he had along the way.

An overlooked irony of the New Hollywood is that much of its bitter cynicism was rooted not in a renunciation of the American dream, but in the disappointed patriotism of those who believed in what America was supposed to stand for, and what they hoped it might still represent. After Lieutenant William Calley was sentenced to life in prison by a court-martial jury of six military officers for his pivotal role in the slaughter of unarmed civilians at My Lai, Nixon ordered Calley released from prison pending appeal. Amid speculation that he might intervene still further on Calley's behalf, Sam Peckinpah sent a telegram to the President: "I must beg you...to consider the moral issues involved." Nixon did not. The President commuted Calley's sentence after he had served three years of house arrest. Peckinpah, a former Marine, stewed over the issue for years. "Nixon's pardoning Calley was so distasteful to me that it really makes me want to puke," he told one interviewer. That bitter taste undoubtedly informed his revisionist Western *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* (1973, a film steeped in the notion that there is no distinction between law and lawlessness) except that the law is backed by the power of the state, and enforced by corrupt politicians. As one reviewer noted, the outlaw Billy (Kris Kristofferson) is "preposterously likeable"; his pursuers are dishonorable thugs. But Billy is bad for business, and therefore must be killed.

"What they do with the tapes is their business." Gene Hackman as surveillance expert Harry Caul in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Paranoia

The Nixon presidency, especially as it entered its second term, is closely (and correctly) associated with the rise of the paranoid thriller, which was informed of course by the emerging Watergate scandal, but also by revelations about unsavory CIA schemes that suggested a vast, secretive criminal enterprise operating in the name of the American interest.

"Watergate" was commonly misunderstood even in its time; forty-five years later, those misconceptions have only increased. Dismissed, then and now, as small beer ("a third-rate robbery," said Nixon's press secretary Ron Ziegler) and as an extension of normal politics (other presidents tape-recorded conversations), it was neither. The break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters by criminals with White House ties did not threaten the Nixon Administration in and of itself. What posed a mortal danger was that an investigation into that curious crime might expose the fully panoply of what Attorney General (and former Nixon campaign manager) John Mitchell referred to as "The White House Horrors"—a vast web of illegal operations orchestrated by the administration and financed by dirty money. That is why Nixon authorized large cash payments of hush money to the burglars, among other crimes he would commit along the way. And the tapes mattered, crucially, not as a function of their ethics, but because they could determine, definitively, whether the President was lying about what he knew and what he did. (Spoiler alert: he was.)

Not surprisingly, themes of surveillance, distrust, dishonesty, and conspiracy were irresistible. After Arthur Bremer shot presidential candidate George Wallace, Nixon proposed planting left-wing paraphernalia in Bremer's apartment. When the Pentagon Papers were leaked to *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (Nixon thought the culprits were "some group of fucking Jews"), he demanded (in the presence of Attorney General Mitchell and Henry Kissinger) that operatives break into the Brookings Institution for clues. ("Don't discuss it here. You talk to [Howard] Hunt. I want the break-in.") When Howard Hunt's wife, who died in a plane crash, was found to have been in possession of $10,000 in cash (she was a key distributor of hush money) and flight insurance with no named benefactor, even in those pre-Internet days conspiracy theories spread rapidly. How could they not? It became fair to ask: what wasn't this White House capable of?

Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) is *not* about Watergate (it was conceived in the late 1960s), but as Mark Feeney noted in *Nixon at the Movies*, no other film "is so *atmospherically* Nixonian." Protagonist Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is socially awkward, paranoid, and ultimately destroyed by his own tape recordings, but he is not the Nixon of the piece. That honor falls to Bernie Moran (Alan Garfield): seething, ruthless, and amoral, the self-proclaimed "best bugger on the East Coast," his humble origins have left him with a chip on his shoulder and the suspicion that elites with fine pedigrees are looking down on him. But look beyond the chilling Moran. What makes *The Conversation* an inherently Watergate-y film are its multiple layers of plotting, conspiracy, and betrayal that are almost impossible to untangle. "Forget it Harry, it's just a trick"—this is the advice offered by the appealing, sensitive Meredith (Elizabeth MacRae). "You're not supposed to feel anything about it; you're just supposed to do it." Practicing what she preached, she takes Harry to bed, and then makes off with his precious tapes. Trust no one.

Call girl Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) castigates her clients as "Goddamn hypocrite squares" in Alan J. Pakula's detective thriller/character drama *Klute* (1971). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Three Days of the Condor (1975), *All the President's Men* (1976), and *The Parallax View* (1974) are perhaps the holy trinity of the Nixon-inflected paranoid thriller genre. Reading the screenplay of *Condor*, Faye Dunaway later recalled, "The story that unfolded as I read seemed to capture the mood of the country in the aftermath of Watergate." *All the President's Men*, as Steven Soderbergh notes, manages to pull off the trick of generating edge-of-the-seat suspense even though the entire audience knows how the story will end. (Watching Redford, as Woodward, leave the underground garage after speaking to "Deep Throat," and hearing the distant sound of squealing tires, is a clinic in anxiety-provoking filmmaking.) As for *Parallax*, it was entirely in the paranoia business, no doubt abetted by the Senate Watergate hearings that were in progress during the production (cast and crew members followed the proceedings on the TV in Warren Beatty's trailer). "If the picture works," director Alan Pakula offered, "the audience will trust the person sitting next to them a little less at the end of the film."

The erosion of trust goes hand in hand with the anticipation of increasing duplicity and, finally, paranoia—another bequest of Nixon to America, and in turn to the themes of many Seventies films. Sydney Pollack wanted *Condor* to illustrate "how destructive suspicion really is, because it's the opposite of trust which is the basis of society and all relationships." Thus Joe Turner (Redford) is pointedly introduced at the start of the film as someone who "actually trusts a few people." Yet, by the end of the film, in a quiet, powerful moment in a smoke-filled railway station, "he distrusts his lover." It is one thing to see enemies everywhere, as Nixon did. It is another to be unable to tell them apart from your friends, another characteristic of the Nixon White House.

Betrayal

What distinguished Nixon and his men was not simply that they were ruthless, calculating schemers—those attributes are pretty common in high-stakes politics—it was that they did not trust *one another*. Nixon's management style encouraged this; he fostered rivalries between his closest advisors, pitting one against another (Kissinger, who had to rent an airplane hangar to store his surplus ego, was assigned two rivals). The executive branch became a mind-bending house of mirrors as the president's men planted spies in the staffs of their rivals, recorded each other's conversations, and set forth cascades of lies to cover their tracks. Many became reluctant to talk on the telephone. As the Watergate scandal metastasized, they feared, with good reason, being "thrown to the wolves"—that is, sacrificed to save others. John Dean realized he was lined up to be the fall guy, and jumped before he could be pushed. It was his hours of dramatic testimony, and Nixon calling him a liar, that made the tapes so important.

In *Three Days of the Condor*, the assassin Joubert (Max von Sydow) tells Turner how he might meet his end: "Someone you know, maybe even trust...will smile, a becoming smile...and offer to give you a lift." Nixon's memoirs, published three years later, express eerily similar sentiments—"I was prepared to believe that others, even people close to me, would turn against me." This most unspeakable betrayal, of a friend by a friend, was another common theme in Seventies films, especially in the wake of Watergate. Robert Altman's radically revisionist noir *The Long Goodbye* (1973) was about such a betrayal, and almost nothing else: "My intention was that the greatest crime that could be committed against Philip Marlowe," explained Altman, "is that his friend broke faith with him." This motivated the film's controversial ending, and Altman agreed to take on the film only if no change would be made to that conclusion. Along similar lines, Sydney Pollack's *The Yakuza* (1974) and Sam Peckinpah's *The Killer Elite* (1975) are films about men who must, at great personal cost, set right the damage done by longtime friends they trusted without reservation or hesitation, only to be stabbed in the back. (Trying to explain a character's motivation to one actor, Peckinpah shouted, "He's Nixon; you hate him!") Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) pushes the theme of betrayal among intimates as far as it can go, in a film where the audience's loyalty swings dramatically from one character to the other as the story unfolds, with each movement revealing new, deeper layers of betrayal by one lifelong friend against another. First we are with Mikey (Peter Falk), and then we are with Nicky (John Cassavetes), who then wins back his friend's loyalty only to toss his gains in the street with an act of seat-squirming humiliation. Ultimately, we are left alone, uncertain of the very concepts of friendship and trust.

Friendship and trust are empty phrases, indeed, in the deeply Nixonian *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), which revels in the melancholy irony of its title. In Peter Yates's film there is not even a fig leaf of respectability that separates the ethics of the cops from those of the criminals. Collaborating murderers go unpunished, and Eddie (Robert Mitchum, in one of his greatest performances) meets his fate not because he was more honorable than his adversaries, but because others were better and faster at being dishonorable. It was entirely fitting that the author of the novel, George Higgins, could write the postresignation essay "The Friends of Richard Nixon" for *Esquire*, which summarized the President thus: "It was not only that Richard Nixon was petty, ungenerous, somewhat bigoted, and monumentally cynical. It is that he was a liar and a deceiver, a man who did not keep his word."

"Deep Throat says our lives are in danger." Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford star as investigative *Washington Post* journalists in *All the President's Men* (1976). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Ruins

Nixon was eventually chased from office, resigning in 1974 one step ahead of certain impeachment. But victory had a hollow ring, especially after Gerald Ford's pardon, and it was a grim chore to sort through the wreckage of what the Nixon years had wrought. In Robert Altman's *California Split* (1974), released, fittingly, the day before the President resigned, compulsive gambler Bill Denny (George Segal) has finally won his fortune at the poker table. But he finds himself oddly despondent. Following the biggest win of his life, he tells his brother-in-arms, Charlie Waters (Elliot Gould), that there was "no special feeling." Altman considered this "the whole point" of the movie, which is akin to the "now what?" denouement of *The Candidate*.

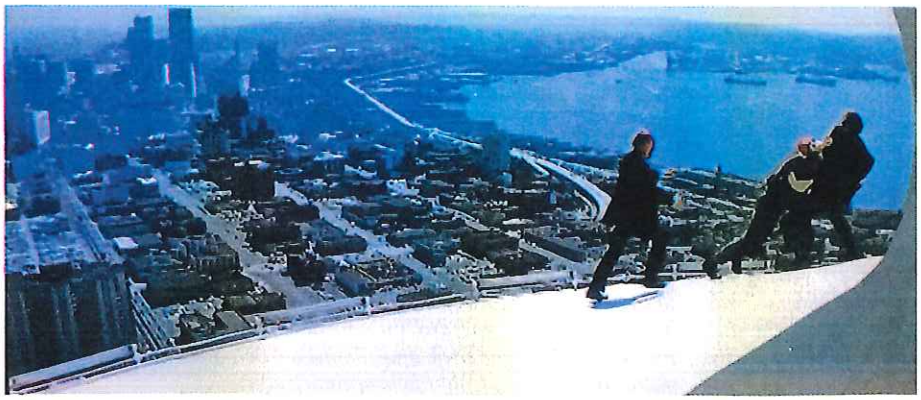
What *was* left of America after Nixon? The New Hollywood painted a grim picture. In *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), a space alien (David Bowie) comes to America in search of water, only to drown in the vacuous materialism of an exhausted, purposeless society (Buck Henry and Rip Torn turn in impressive performances). Michael Ritchie checked in with another elegy for America, *Smile* (1975), at the heart of which is Big Bob (Bruce Dern), hanging on to what's left of his status as a middling-successful middle-aged suburbanite. (As Ritchie put it, *Smile* sees "very little hope for the Big Bobs of the world.") In the downbeat 1975 policier *Hustle* (pessimistic even by Seventies film standards), Robert Aldrich routinely stops the action to let characters deliver modest soliloquies on how things used to be.

Even after he was gone, Nixon still haunted the screen, often showing up in the most unexpected places. In *Network* (1976), when TV executive Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway) promises the affiliates they will be "number one," she raises her arms in Nixon's unmistakable "double-V" gesture. Late in that film, the Nixoning of America is made perfectly clear, as executives talk of murdering a TV personality as the only sure way to get him off the air. "I hope you're not recording this [conversation]," one participant jokes, but Sidney Lumet's lingering camera suggests that is a real possibility. When the president of the network admonishes, "We're talking about a capital crime," his concern is solely for what the Watergate conspirators called plausible deniability—"The network can't be implicated."

Was this what America had become? Writing about *Nashville* (1975), *New York Times* political columnist Tom Wicker described the film as a "cascade of minutely detailed vulgarity, greed, deceit, cruelty, barely contained hysteria, and the frantic lack of root and grace into which American life has been driven." Taking place during the (fictional) 1976 presidential campaign, Altman's film grieves for what might have been, most notably with Barbara Baxley's long, impassioned, improvised monologue about the "Kennedy boys," whose assassinations left us with Nixon. That fateful trip from Kennedy to Nixon—what was, and what might have been—also deeply informs Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (1975), which at one time had the working title "An End to Wishing," a reference to what had become of America. "With the assassination of both Kennedys and the arrival of the Nixon tribe on the scene, we all went into a kind of induced stupor," Penn stated when his film was released. "And I think that these people in *Night Moves* are some of the mourners of the Kennedy generation."

How did it come to this? With *Shampoo* (1975), Warren Beatty, its producer/star (and co-screenwriter with Robert Towne), offered one explanation. Beatty was an admirer of Robert Kennedy (as was the film's director, Hal Ashby, who wrote his mother an abbreviated letter in the middle of the night after Bobby was shot—"I won't continue writing about all this as it pains me much too much to go on...I'll write when I'm better able to contain this sadness in my heart"). One of Penn's mourners, Beatty saw the election of Nixon as "the end of a lot of dreams," and in 1972 he worked hard to get McGovern elected. (McGovern would later describe him as "one of the three or four most important figures in the campaign.") Bringing it all back home, *Shampoo* was set on election eve, 1968. As illustrated by the movie's two contrasting parties (crucial scenes, both written by Beatty), for that razor-thin loss the movie doesn't blame Nixon, who was what he was, or Nixon's supporters, who wanted what they wanted, but rather rests that burden squarely on the shoulders of those who *should* have opposed Nixon, but couldn't be bothered to see the difference between one candidate and the other. (Beatty's character George, for example, does not vote.)

It was the failure of those who should have known better that gave us Nixon—a figure of once unimaginable malevolence whose presidency was even more damaging than his fiercest opponents expected. It was a lesson we did not learn, and today one feels nostalgic for the lines that even Nixon would not cross. ■



"No evidence of a conspiracy." A political assassination on the Space Needle in Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

DANIEL TALBOT, 1926–2017

Cineaste notes with great sadness the death on December 29, 2017 of Dan Talbot—owner of the legendary New Yorker repertory film theater (1960–1973), the Cinema Studio (1977–1990), the Metro (1982–2003), the Lincoln Plaza Cinemas (1981–2018), and founder of New Yorker Films (1965–2009). During his earlier career in publishing, Dan edited *Film: An Anthology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), one of the first anthologies collecting key essays on the cinema. He will, of course, be best remembered, along with his widow Toby, for their work in film distribution and exhibition, which played a crucial role in the growth of art-house cinema in America throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The Sixties, in particular, as Phillip Lopate has written, was the "heroic age of moviegoing."

Dan was a longtime friend of *Cineaste*, as well as a contributor, a subscriber, and a donor. Dan's memoir of his life in film, "Fragments from the Dream World: Reminiscences of a Film Distributor and Exhibitor," appeared in our Spring 2017 issue. Former New Yorker Films employee Cynthia Rowell's article, "The New Yorker Stories: Dan Talbot's Life in Film, appears on our Website. Dan's article, "Fact and Fantasy in the Making of *Point of Order*" (*Cineaste*, Summer 2006), is a behind-the-scenes account of the making of that classic documentary on the 1954 Army–McCarthy hearings, and a reminiscence of his turbulent relationship with co-director Emile de Antonio. We also highly recommend Toby Talbot's 2009 book, *The New Yorker Theater and Other Scenes from a Life at the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

Armando Iannucci on *The Death of Stalin*: It's Every Comrade for Himself

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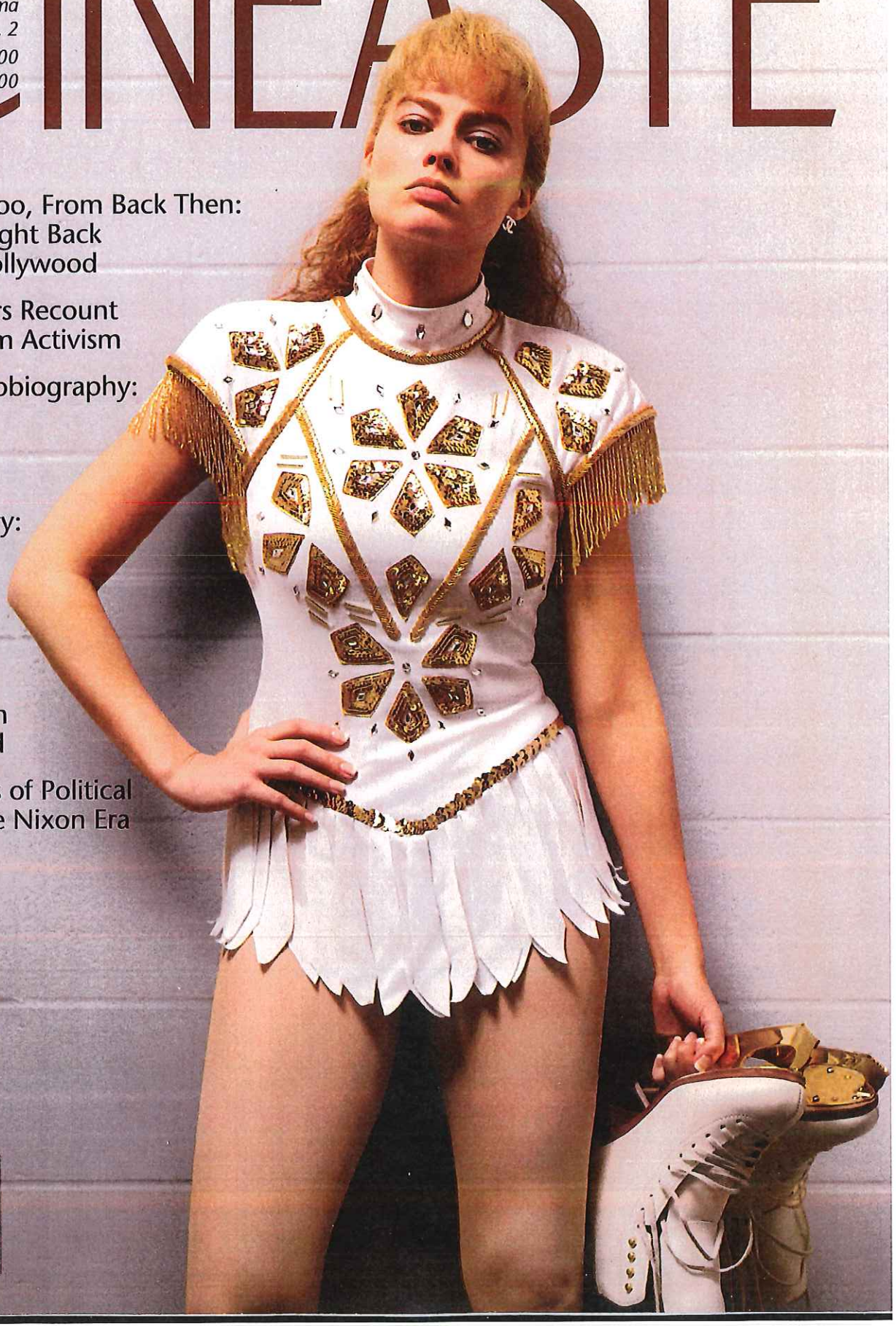

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